

The Audio Beat



Now, finally, let's turn to those companies that got it right -- in some cases spectacularly so. For the sake of organization rather than as an indicator of absolute quality, let's take the systems in order of size -- at least the size of the speakers used -- and that means starting with the diminutive yet captivating **Crystal Cable** Minissimo (€10000/pair including stands). Five years after the appearance of the remarkable glass Arabesque, a speaker that looked like it shouldn't work but clearly, demonstrably did, Crystal Cable have advanced their cabinet concept a stage further. The faceted construction seen on the original designs, whether the glass of the larger floorstander, or the aluminum plates of the Arabesque Mini, demands extraordinary precision to produce, with huge amounts of time invested in the construction of each pair of cabinets. In an attempt to reduce the entry price of the Arabesque range, the company looked at alternative approaches to cabinet construction, approaches that could maintain the critical cabinet footprint but reduce the man-hours invested in each speaker. The solution was to machine the cabinets from solid material, a costly but ultimately much more cost effective solution than the faceted, face-to-face construction. The cost was further offset by the options the approach offered, in terms of materials and overall control. The Minissimo cabinet is carved from metal-loaded resin matrix, allowing much greater control over the mechanical characteristics of the material itself, while CNC machining allows total control over both the overall shape of the cabinets and the wall thickness at any given point. The end result is a smooth form factor that perfectly embodies the Arabesque concept while also promising superior resonant performance -- all in a product that undercuts the price of the existing Mini by quite a margin.

But that's not the whole story. Crystal Cable has also been working hard on the crossover in the Minissimo and has come up with a new topology that they claim delivers superior time and phase characteristics. Dubbed the Natural Science crossover topology, I have heard what it can do for the Mini, so I'm confident that it is a major contributor to the impressively musical sound of the Minissimo. Indeed, this was one of the most consistently enjoyable rooms at the show, never disappointing despite multiple return visits. Part of that is down to the minimalist presentation, with just one pair of diminutive, bright-orange speakers on show (yep, the new materials have also opened the way to colored cabinets) highlighting both the speakers' stylish shape and their easy, relaxed yet naturally involving musical presentation. With no giant rack of components to distract attention or mess up the sound, you could simply sit back and enjoy the speakers and the music they were playing. The Minissimo builds significantly on the effortless phrasing that characterized the Mini, allowing music a real sense of shape, the performance to breathe convincingly. The total lack of intrusive cabinet "sound" suggests that the new manufacturing approach is paying dividends, while the natural sense of rhythmic pace and order further suggests that Crystal Cable are really onto something with their Natural Science crossover. Seamless integration and naturally rich tonality added to the beautifully balanced presentation, belying the speakers' diminutive dimensions -- although the unforced dynamics and sheer clarity also owe a lot to the driving system.