

Crystal Cable Dreamline Plus cables

by Alan Sircom

We were very, very taken by Crystal Cable Absolute Dream. *Hi-Fi+* was not alone in this.

This entirely mono-crystal cable might be on the 'punishing' side of expensive, but it has received universally high praise from the press and the end users alike. Reports of just how much Absolute Dream has been sold since its launch in 2012 are astounding; we are talking kilometres of cable supplied to audio's astronauts.

However, Absolute Dream's hefty price tags put it out of reach for all but a tiny fraction of the audiophile community, and what's needed is a cable system that delivers most of that awesome performance without the awesome investment. This is where Crystal Cable Dreamline Plus comes in.

What makes Absolute Dream so good is its pure mono-crystal silver core, with layers of Kapton and PEEK as dielectrics and its twin shields; one of silver-plated mono-crystal copper, and one of gold-plated mono-crystal silver. This forms a single conductor of Absolute Dream. It also forms a single conductor of Dreamline Plus. The difference is where Absolute Dream used four conductors twisted together to form each individual cable, Dreamline Plus uses just two conductors. This immediately halves the cost in terms of amount of conductor per metre of cable, but should also slightly simplify the manufacturing process.

It's worth pointing out that the mono-crystal involved in the making of both cables is fairly metallurgically impressive. Previous conductor incarnations have relied on a process where molecules of gold are injected into the crystalline structure of the silver conductor, which means between individual crystals within the conductor itself. This acted to prevent oxidation, which meant the cable retained consistency in sound over time and was claimed to reduce 'micro-distortion' in the process. This represented the pinnacle of construction until relatively recently, but now the process allows conductors to be formed of a single large crystal (hence the name), so there are no gaps between crystal that need to be filled. Naturally,

the improvements in shielding and dielectric that also rely on state-of-the-art materials science help, but it's this mono-crystal structure that really sets the very best apart from the merely good.

Crystal Cable understands that the cable is merely part of the package, in the same way Tiffany's understands the importance of those blue boxes. Dreamline Plus is supplied in sublime presentation cases, the likes of which are rarely seen in audio. To some, this may seem like meaningless fluff and unnecessary expense, because an audio cable should be heard, not shown. But, we ignore pride of ownership at our peril, and at this grade of audio product, there's nothing wrong with being a little more Tiffany and a little less like a bait shop. For a similar reason, Crystal Cable places an identifier lozenge on the cable itself. This is not a network box and is not some form of resonance control, but instead is a way to place a serial number on a cable, and it looks good.

Crystal Cable products require some run in (typically 100 hours, but more is better) and are not intrinsically directional. Crystal contends the cable acquires direction as it burns in, which makes it difficult to use burn-in machines as a short- ▶





► cut. I didn't find these cables any more or less fussy about direction than their bigger, older brothers, which suggests the direction 'imprinting' process is not fundamental to the sound. I also had the opportunity to hear the cables before, during, and after the run-in process this time (the Absolute Dream came to me after another reviewer, and had more than enough miles on the clock) and the changes are noticeable, but it's pretty damn excellent from cold. It's more a subtle re-ordering of the performance, rather than a path from 'ugh!' to 'aah!'. Although there's no 'ugh' in Dreamline Plus at all.

The obvious question is fairly simple: if there's 50% of the conductor, do we get 50% of the sound? Would the reduction process just lower the performance of a world-class cable to that of simply a very good cable? There are a lot of very good cables around, but there aren't many rivals to Absolute Dream out there. Would Dreamline Plus lose its way?

In fact, what you get is closer to 80-90% of the performance of Absolute Dream for about half the price. You still get the complete lack of grain, the insight, and the sense of musical structure that Absolute Dream offers. You still get that uncanny ability to step beyond the audio system and into the music itself, and the way it can separate a piece of music into its constituent components while also maintaining the whole performance as a complete and contiguous musical entity. That is something that's impossible to express without sounding pretentious, but is one of those 'you have to be there' experiences that needs no explanation in the flesh. And, flying right back to 'Pseudos Corner', you aren't just hearing the music, you are hearing the intent of the music.

What really good audio does for the reviewer is make you recall that quote attributed to everyone from Elvis Costello to Frank Zappa, "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture." We have a poor vocabulary when it comes

to expressing how good music sounds on great audio, and the better the audio, the triter the words used to describe the experience. Crystal's Absolute Dream makes you realise just how significant the connections between components can be, because when it all comes together, the system just sings. You need an intrinsically neutral system to show just how well it sings, but it really comes to life.

In a way, it's hard to see what you lose between the Dreamline Plus and Absolute Dream. You don't lose anything in the bass, nothing of the coherence, and that tenor-to-soprano clarity and refinement that Absolute Dream does so well is reproduced here to similarly outstanding levels. There are a couple of slight differences between the two in absolute terms; the soundstage is not quite so exceptionally open with Dreamline Plus (it merely has 'more open than almost all the competition' instead of the 'who moved the walls?' properties of Absolute Dream). Also, the Absolute Dream ►

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Conductor: Mono-crystal silver core, Kapton and PEEK dielectric, gold-plated silver and silver plated copper monocrystal braid. Two conductors per cable.

Prices: CrystalSpeak Dreamline Plus loudspeaker cable £11,285/2m pair
CrystalConnect Dreamline Plus interconnect cable £5,940 (phono) £5,345 (XLR)/1m pair
CrystalPower Dreamline Plus power cord £2,970/1m

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► cable brings out the best in every recording and every system, where Dreamline Plus has more of a sense of making every recording and every system sound good. Dreamline Plus doesn't impose a character on the sound, however. It simply makes your music sound more entertaining and satisfying. If this is the biggest difference between Absolute Dream and Dreamline Plus, it's no sacrifice.

Where the extra benefit of Absolute Dream makes its presence felt is in dynamic range. Both have that outstanding sense of dynamic shading (I'm loathe to call this 'micro-dynamics'); the ability to pick out finger noise on classical guitar, but make it add to the sound of the performance rather than sit on top of the performance. But it's in all-out dynamic range where Dreamline Plus just begins to pall. In truth, I had to compare directly with a length of balanced Absolute Dream to Dreamline Plus to really notice this, I had to work at it and there was a lot of head-scratching going on before this became repeatedly identifiable, but if you are playing the Overture to Wagner's Tannhauser, played by von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic [EMI Classics CD], the sweeps of the music get that bit more powerful with Absolute Dream.

I'm sure that the closer the system gets to the pinnacle of performance, so the difference between Dreamline Plus

and Absolute Dream becomes more marked, but I'd need to speak to an architect, rob several banks, and substantially re-evaluate my system before I got to hearing those differences with greater regularity.

The top cable's place at the top table is assured, but what is striking is just how much of that performance relates to the conductors, rather than the number of conductors. Crystal Cable Dreamline Plus halves the number of those complex, wonderful conductors but loses almost nothing in the process. Yes, if your system is expensive enough to be measured in terms of percentage of national debt, then its performance threshold will make the move to Absolute Dream an obvious one. But, for the rest of us, the sheer subtlety and grace of Dreamline Plus will set a benchmark for cables few will ever exceed. +