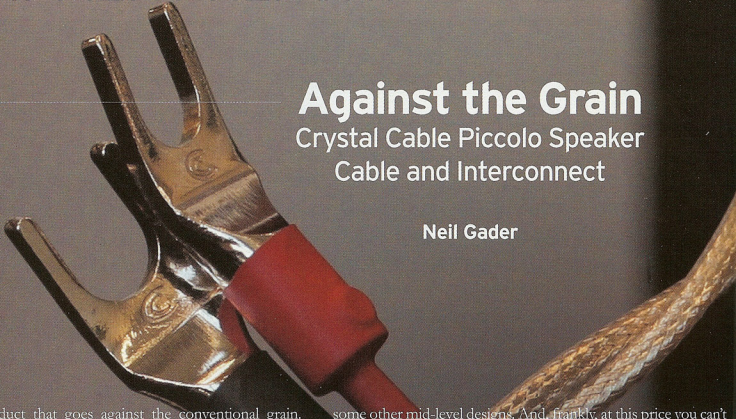


EQUIPMENT REPORT

Against the Grain Crystal Cable Piccolo Speaker Cable and Interconnect

Neil Gader



I love a product that goes against the conventional grain. Crystal Cable is one such line. Rather than resembling various species of large rain forest snakes or wearing the garish livery of a jockey at the Breeder's Cup, Crystal's cables have veered in the opposite direction. It's dangerously un-PC to characterize Crystal Cable Piccolo interconnect and speaker cable in gender-specific terms, but there is something almost feminine about their slender profile and jewel-like finish. In fact, they look more *styled* than engineered—more like a Piaget or Porsche Design. But this beauty is more than skin deep. With its ultra-thin silver conductors, Crystal incorporates gold infusions to fill molecular gaps between conductors. There's also double Kapton foil jacketing to vanquish magnetic fields.¹ These cables are not only extremely flexible, they are also easy to route. And innovative—the splitter at each end of the speaker wire permits an easy substitution of terminations, or a change to bi-wire if so desired.

Don't be fooled by Piccolo's crash diet appearance, because it plays like wire that's been popping nutritional supplements. Its character is refined with a hint of warmth, coupled with accurate timbres and a smooth, continuous midrange. During "Hallelujah" [*Hymns of the 49th Parallel*, Nonesuch], kd lang's vocal is expressive, palpable, naturalistic, and articulate. Her voice is highly present and firmly grounded on the soundstage. At the frequency extremes the bass is well defined tonally but gently rolled off, leaving the lowest piano octave sounding a bit light. At the other extreme, high frequencies are extended, although upper harmonics lack some of the body and vitality of the pricier stuff. On a track like "My Romance" from *Cobb's Corner* [Chesky SACD], I heard a bit of upper treble darkness in the softened transients as the trumpet lets loose in an unexpurgated dynamic display. There's also a slight loss of air rising off the cymbals; still and all, it's a welcome subtraction compared to the peaky etchiness of

some other mid-level designs. And, frankly, at this price you can't really expect the effortlessly revealing and Rubenesque top end of the cable elite. I also noted how much the cables opened up as more and more run-in time accrued—how the silvery edge of the upper register of Anne-Sophie Mutter's violin [*Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto*, DG-SACD] was replaced by a rosier bloom. I wouldn't doubt for a minute that further performance gains are forthcoming.

Overall, I find the Piccolo tends to flatten the soundstage to a degree, although it is still able to convey a reasonable impression of front-to-back dimensionality. Imaging precision could use some improvement, however. During Jennifer Warnes' "Song of Bernadette" [*Famous Blue Raincoat*, Shout], images were less grounded and more ephemeral than I'm accustomed to. Their spatial relationship with each other could have been better articulated.

What makes the Crystal Cable Piccolo so appealing to my ears is that it places its faith in the totality of the musical experience, rather than addressing sound as a collection of sonic talking points. It favors balance and steers clear of the hype. And as cabling goes, it's the closest thing you're going to get to a wireless setup without losing the wire. If there ever was a case to be made for big things coming in little packages the Crystal Cable Piccolo is it. **TAS**

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Price: CrystalConnect Piccolo interconnect, \$465/1m pair (\$385 add'l meter-pr.); CrystalSpeak Piccolo speaker cable, \$1310/2m pair (\$540 add'l meter-pr.)

¹Kapton polyimide film by DuPont is an electrical insulation material used in the aerospace and semiconductor industry, among others.