

EQUIPMENT REPORT



Crystal Cable Absolute Dream Speaker Cable, Interconnect, and Power Cords

Absolutely Wonderful

Jonathan Valin

Nowadays, what I look for in a cable is pretty simple to sum up: higher resolution of those low-level details that bring instruments and vocalists (and the space they are playing in) to life; a neutral tonal balance, which doesn't favor the bass or the treble (i.e., isn't particularly dark, or bright, or both at the same time); high transparency to the sources ahead of and behind the wire so that differences in recording/mastering quality, digital and analog replay, amplification, and transduction are marked; freed-up dynamics with no sense that the wire (or the network box it may be plugged into) is sitting on the energies of the music, either at low levels or high ones; and the complete absence of RFI, hum, and other spurious noises, which some wires seem to tune in like antennae (and others don't). It is also nice—particularly for a reviewer, who is prone to plug and unplug his wires a helluva lot more often than the average civilian—if a wire is both sturdy, relatively light, and highly flexible, rather than fragile, bulky, and stiff. The last thing I need is something I have to wrestle with every time I change review gear—or that begins to break down after a half-dozen or so swaps.

Like I said, what I want in cables and interconnects is easy to summarize; achieving it—all of it—is a different matter. I haven't heard a cable yet that does all of the things I'm looking for equally

well, although (sonically, at least) Synergistic Galileo comes closest. And now—with some differences in emphasis that I'll get to by and bye—so does Crystal Cable's Absolute Dream.

Despite my aversion to cable reviewing, I took Crystal Cables' top-line wire and power cords on for two reasons: sentimentality (Siltech, Crystal Cable's partner, was my first indisputable glimpse of "better" in a cable and interconnect) and, well, charm.

The charm part was entirely the work of CEO of Crystal Cable, Gabi van der Kley-Rijnveld. The TAS crew and I had dinner with Gabi and her husband Edwin in Munich last year during the M.O.C. trade show, and in the course of the meal I got to know a good deal more about Ms. vdK-R, whom I'd only met in passing at previous trade shows.

A child prodigy—the first I've ever had the chance to talk to—Gabi spent her youth and young adulthood traveling the world, living the busy life of a professional concert pianist, before retiring to the Netherlands to become a teacher. (One of her first pupils was Siltech founder/CEO Edwin van der Kley-Rijnveld and...well, you can guess the rest of the story.) Though she never intended to become a businessman, life with Edwin and her own musical training (upon which Edwin grew more and more dependent for the voicing of his cables) gradually changed



her mind. Crystal Cable was the outcome. While Edwin still does the technical design work, it is Gabi's ear and sense of style that distinguishes Crystal products from Edwin's own Siltech ones.

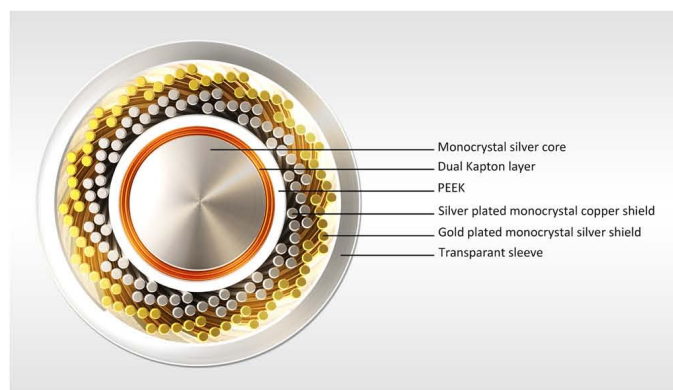
In my dinner conversation with her, Gabi proved to be as musically knowledgeable a person as I've encountered in the high end. When it comes to the sound of the real thing, a lot of people talk the talk. Gabi not only talks it; she has played it in concert and recital halls all over the world. To make a long story short, by the end of dinner I was thoroughly smitten. Reviewing Absolute Dream from Crystal Cable, the company that Gabi runs and Edwin designs for, was my chance to pay homage to both—to the past and the present.

In one respect Crystal Cable Absolute Dream is quite a pleasant departure from what I've grown used to over the past decade. Though complexly engineered by the redoubtable Mr. van der Kley-Rijnveld (about which, more in a moment), Absolute Dream cables and interconnects are not complex-looking. They have none of the bulk or doo-dads that previous cables I've reviewed have come equipped with. There are no "vacuum dielectrics" that end up making cables and interconnects as thick as corn snakes and about as inflexible and prone to snap in two at the connector ends as bread sticks; there are no massive junction boxes with leads so short you have to seat the cable box on a riser behind the speaker or component just to connect it to inputs or outputs; there are no active-biasing boxes that have to be plugged into separate power sources, creating a maze of crisscrossing wires that can, under the right (or would that be, wrong) circumstances, cause ground loops or screaming high-frequency noise or dead shorts. Nope, the Dreams are surprisingly thin (less than the thickness of your little finger) and easily manageable. In the "sturdy, light, and flexible" category they earn an A+.

They also earn an A+ in the looks department, although in this case their beauty is literally more than skin deep. Edwin van der Kley-Rijnveld has a long history with precious-metal cables; indeed, he was a pioneer in this regard. Absolute Dream is the culmination of his decades of research.

Literally at the core of the Dreams is a single conductor made from monocrystal silver—one of the first of its kind in an audio cable. A good deal of research has been done on how the impurities (typically iron) in precious metals create hysteresis effects (phase and time shifts) that subtly alter the signals passing through them. It is also a fact that the inevitable spaces between the molecular crystals in the lattice structures of metals have similar hysteresis effects, which grow worse as those spaces are filled over time with iron oxides caused by corrosion.

For a while, van der Kley-Rijnveld sought to solve both of these problems by using the purest silver metal (which has fewer iron contaminants than copper) for his conductors and filling the spaces between the molecular silver crystals in his wires with gold, which doesn't oxidize. But relatively recently metallurgists developed a way to create metals that are essentially one large crystal with no internal spaces to fill. Unfortunately, the process used to create these monocrystal metals was slow and prohibitively expensive until the development of new, less costly (though nothing like cheap) manufacturing procedures made



Break-In

The bane of cable reviewing (and buying) is the fact that wire—any wire—takes time to “break in.” For a reviewer, this means that for several weeks and sometimes months you’re listening to a moving target—a component that you can’t be sure you’ve got a true fix on, because it seems to change its sound daily.

In this regard, Crystal’s Absolute Dream was no exception. When I first got it I thought it was too light in balance then, a week or two later, too robust. Somewhere during the good four months or so I’ve been listening to it, it settled down to “just right”—to sounding like that transparent window on the recording (and the recording process) I’ve described in this review. My point is that, if you’re fortunate enough to be able to spring for this stuff, be aware that it’ll take some time to sound its absolute best. As is usually the case, it is the bass octaves that come in last. But they do come in, firming up, gaining color and control, power and extension. (This is particularly true of the Absolute Dream power cords, which, it seemed to me, took even more time to come into their own than the signal-bearing wires. Nonetheless, they now sound marvelous—the perfect match to the cables and interconnects.) **JV**

commercial use feasible. (Technically and sonically, monocrystal metals were always superior; they just cost too much to market.)

In Absolute Dream, the monocrystal silver core conductor is shielded with helically wound Kapton and Teflon dielectrics. (Kapton, of course, is the selfsame stuff that loudspeaker-manufacturers use for voice-coil formers.) The core is further shielded by two braided layers of silver-plated monocrystal copper and gold-plated monocrystal silver. Four of these coaxes are twisted into the dual braided layers of each cable—two signal-bearing coaxes and two for use in Crystal’s patented “Bridge technology.”

I’ll be honest: While I can follow the construction of Absolute Dream this far, its “Bridge system” eludes me. It has something to do with lowering resistance to minimize signal loss, filtering ultra-high-frequency noise to prevent amplifier oscillation, and doubling up the return path of the cable to neutralize ground leakage. Like every other part of Absolute Dream, its purpose is to lower noise, enhance low-level resolution, and improve imaging, but I’d be lying if I said I understood how it does these things.

In keeping with Absolute Dream’s all-in construction, the van der Kley-Rijnvelds chose to terminate their cable with extremely expensive Furutech Alpha connectors, which use OCC rhodium-plated conductors housed in a gorgeous carbon-fiber/eutectic (yeah, I had to look it up, too—it means “a material of greatest fusibility, i.e., with a melting point lower than that of any other alloy of the same materials”), non-magnetic-copper housing. All lead connections are made via silver solder and crimping.

As I said earlier, to look at a length of Absolute Dream cable,

interconnect, or power cord (all of which share these same extraordinary parts and construction), one would never guess that it is so rigorously and complexly engineered. It looks more like a strand of gold/silver jewelry than audio wire. But then that was Gabi’s intention: to hide the engineering beneath something beautiful to see, exceptionally light and flexible to handle, and sonically without peer.

Let’s talk about those sonics.

Here is what Absolute Dream can do: Coupled with the most discerning speakers and electronics (for which see my review of the Audio Research Reference 250 monoblocks, Reference Phono Two SE phonostage, and Reference 5 SE linestage in this issue), it can not only resolve those micro-details that make instruments and performers very nearly visible; it can do this same trick with things the eye *can’t* see—it can fill the space of your room, from wall to wall to wall, with the sound of the studio or hall in which the recording was made, all the while making the speakers themselves vanish (in so far as they are capable of vanishing) within this three-dimensional ambient field.

Now, lots of wire can reproduce “ambience.” And the Dreams’ exceptionalism in this regard depends entirely on what you take that word to mean. If by “ambience” you mean a *consistent* darkening or brightening of the air in your room—a “black” scrim-like curtain, say, hung between your speakers—then the Dreams aren’t going to be for you. They don’t “color” anything, not even air. Instead, the Dreams reproduce an ambient field the way the best planars often do: not by adding a grainy texture or dark hue to the soundfield but by seemingly expanding the volume of air in your room and charging it with energy (as if a fan were blowing it in your direction), so that in a subtle (but fully audible and unmistakable way) it is still air—colorless, grainless—only no longer the *still* air of your room, but rather the *moving* air of the studio/hall in which the performance was recorded, lit by the energy of instruments and heard by the microphones. It turns the motionlessness of ambient air into motion-filled “miked” air—if that makes sense—while also altering the dimensions of your room by seemingly moving backwalls further back and sidewalls further to the sides in imitation of the volume of the recording venue.

I have no idea if I’m clearly conveying the point I want to make here. But, to put this more simply, Absolute Dream (like Synergistic Galileo) is capable of such colorless neutrality, limpid clarity, and extremely fine resolution of extremely low-level detail (such as the “sound” of air charged with musical energy as heard through microphones) that it is that veritable transparent window on the recording we all claim we’re looking for.

Obviously, Absolute Dream is very low in distortion. You hear this in the sheer abundance of detail it reveals at low levels and high ones—the whispery little vibrato that a singer like Melody Gardot adds to the tail ends of certain notes as she runs out of one breath before taking another; the way that *pizzicatos* are passed across the stage from string section to string section during Bartok’s *Music For Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, like wind rattling tree limbs; the hilariously explosive *sforzando* crash with which the piano answers that capering trumpet in the last movement of Shostakovich’s marvelous First Piano Concerto (and the piano’s own great caper, as it breaks into that droll Liszt-like dance right before the close); or, as I note in my ARC

review in this issue (there will be other cross-references because, after all, a cable or interconnect is always working in concert with whatever it connects), the way the timbre of Lou Reed's voice on "White Heat/White Light" from *Rock and Roll Animal* is magically transformed from generic Lou Reed to that of a still-very-young man, fueled by the excitement of the moment and the enthusiasm of the crowd and the energy of that great pickup band of his; or, for you transparency freaks, the way miking schemes (close/distant, spare/multi) and engineering (compressed/uncompressed, fiddled-with/pure) markedly change on great recordings from different labels, and the way the characteristic acoustic differences among the halls themselves—the alto note of Kingsway, for instance—are captured by that miking and engineering. It is the Dream's incredibly low noise floor that permits this astonishingly high resolution, dynamic freedom at low levels and high, and clear-as-glass transparency to sources.

But you don't just hear the Absolute Dream's low noise floor in the timbral, dynamic, and spatial details these cables retrieve from every kind of music; you hear it in the dead silences *between* cuts. The Dream's immunity to RFI, EMI, and hum—of which there is a superabundance in my 160-year-old house and RFI-rich neighborhood—is at least as good as that of my reference Synergistic Galileo (and you may recall that Galileo's freedom from hum and noise was one of its most impressive virtues). Even with the volume control left way up after one of my—what is it Paul Seydor says?—"head-banging" sessions with Lou Reed or David Byrne, background silences remain very nearly dead-quiet with Absolute Dream in the system. (And this is with a phono source.)

If you're waiting for the other shoe to drop, you're going to be disappointed. I don't really hear a downside to Absolute Dream. Ergonomically, it is superior to Galileo; sonically, it is fully competitive, although (save for the incredible amount of detail the two retrieve) they do not sound the same.

In timbre, the Absolute Dream is a bit less "bottom-up-sounding," (to quote Raidho's Michael Borresen yet again) than Galileo. Now, the difference I'm talking about is every slight, but it is there to be heard. Maybe it is because the Galileo is a little more generous, bloomy, and deep-reaching in the bottom bass, and the Absolute Dream a little tighter and more controlled—kind of like the difference between tubes and solid-state. I could argue that the Dream is the more neutral and transparent of the pair, but that would be misleading because Galileo is not "colored" sounding and is

anything but opaque. I could argue that the Galileo is denser in tone color, but that wouldn't be right, either, as the Dream is capable of swooningly gorgeous string, wind, piano, and vocal timbre (if they're on the recording). Even as a transparency-to-sources kind of listener I don't know which I'd pick.

Happily I don't have to pick. Crystal Cable Absolute Dream cable, interconnect, and power cords (all three of which have exactly the same virtues) now joins Synergistic Research Galileo cable, interconnect, and power cords (ditto) as my references. *That's* how good I think they (all) are. **tas**



SPECS & PRICING

Price: Absolute Dream speaker cable, \$28,100/2m pair; interconnect, \$13,100/1m pair; power cords, \$7200 apiece

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