



CRYSTAL CABLE MICRO LINE

Reviewer: Ken Micallef

Digital Source: McIntosh MVP 861, McCormack UDP1, Linn Unidisk 1.1 [all on loan]

Analog Source: Kuzma Stabi/Kuzma Stogi turntable/arm combo

Preamp: Shindo Monbrison

Amp: BAT VK-75 (equipped with Tungsol, Raytheon VT-231s, RCA 5692s)

Speakers: *Ars Aures Mini Sensorial* [in for review]

Cables: *Stealth PGS-XL and 3D ICs, 3MLT Hybrid speaker cables* [in for review]; *Auditorium A23 speaker cables, Crystal Cable Micro and speaker cables* [in for review]

Stands: Salamander 5.0 rack, 2" Mapleshade platforms (8" x 15" x 2"), Blue Circle custom amp stand (for BAT)

Powerline conditioning: BPT Model BP-3.5 Signature Ultra Isolator for digital components and turntable, JPS Labs Kaptovator, Shunyata Black Mamba and Anaconda Vx Powersnakes; *Crystal Cable Micro and Reference power cords* [in for review]

Sundry accessories: Mapleshade Surefoot and Heavyfoot brass points and IsoBlocks; (8) RPG ProFoam damping panels/ceiling treatment, Mapleshade Ionoclast for static cling, HALO-O Tube Dampers

Room size: 24' x 12' with 10-13' sloped ceiling, short-wall setup

Review component retail: CrystalConnect Micro \$599 (1m); CrystalConnect Piccolo \$399 (1m); CrystalSpeak Micro \$1,950 (2m) & \$2,600 (3m); CrystalSpeak \$2,875 (2m) & \$3,295 (3m); CrystalPower \$650 (1m) & \$849 (1.5m); CrystalPower Reference \$1,299 (1m) & \$1,689 (1.5m)

Cable stakes

Followers of cable fashion usually fall into three or four camps: those who regard interconnects and speaker cables as tone controls; those who value their megabuck must-never-touch-the-floor cables as integral parts of the signal chain; those seeking ultimate neutrality in a cable; and finally, the perpetual naysayers who never saw (or heard) an after market cable they liked and furthermore, who consider anyone who takes cables (or their inherent differences) seriously as demented, duped and ignorant boobs throwing money to the wind. I for one fall somewhere among the first three camps and laugh until my belly is raw at the fourth. Simply put -- and take offense if necessary -- cables do make a difference. Believe it! Whether it's a \$68/pair of Kimber PBJs or some megabuck NASA trickle-down-technology Powersnakes or plain old zip cord, if you put 'em in your rig you will hear a difference, be it good, bad or ugly. Perhaps the final cable is the one that simply gets out of the way and lets the signal come through untainted by any particular coloration in the frequency range. But then some cables seem to be system-dependent, changing their tune slightly from rig to rig. Others, such as Cardas Golden Reference or Nordost Quattro Fil, fly off the audio resellers' websites as soon as they are listed, suggesting that they must be performing similar tricks in all systems. Holland's Crystal Cable is a relative newcomer to the cable game but if the published reviews are any indication, these tiny-cables-that-could will soon be as popular as any product in the already over-populated cable company category. Before their sound is even considered, one of the initial joys of the Crystal Cable line is their lightweight and flexible design. Barely larger than a guitar string and terminated with smartly conceived and executed RCAs, spades and bananas, Crystal Cable offers thoroughly user-friendly hardware that makes a reviewer's job a breeze. But I am jumping ahead of myself...

Hey Joe, where ya going with that cable in your hand?

After the all-clear from Srajan, I spoke with Crystal Cable importer Joe Shanaphy who promptly delivered a full complement of cables and power cords several days later. Each set of cables came enclosed in a plush black velvet bag embossed with the silver Crystal Cable logo. Very classy. I was beginning to get audio goose bumps at their appearance alone: velvet, sleek, creamy and as dark as espresso. And I hadn't even taken them out of the bag.



Once I did, I was further surprised to find that each pouch held a small jewel box. Where were the cables? I opened one box and there they were, a pair of silvery ICs wrapped in a tight circle small enough to fit into the palm of my hand. I have dealt with cables of small diameter before but here was an entirely new approach - some fresh thinking indeed. The ICs and speaker cables share a nearly string-thin diameter (1.5 - 2.9mm) and the ICs feature Crystal Cable's proprietary RCAs ("inspired by Furutech" states the website) which seemed fragile to the touch but performed very well and were a joy to use on the rather lightweight jacks of my Shindo Monbrison preamp. The equally thin speaker cables also displayed novel thinking, terminated as they were with an exquisite screw-down WBT banana plug that was new to me. The bananas slid into the speaker and amp terminals with ease, guided by an outer plastic post that helped stabilize the banana mechanism while the red, white and blue plastic screw-down nubs responded well to the touch and enabled a perfect, impossible-to-over-tighten fit. The CrystalPower power cords shared Crystal Cable's tiny wire technology. Surely this was a mistake? Don't PCs have to be manly and large of girth to adequately carry clean juice to the audio caboose? Read on...



As for specs, I direct the reader to Marja Vanderloo & Henk Boot's May 2004 review of Crystal Cable's Reference ICs, speaker cables and power cords as well as Joe Shanaphy's white paper posted on the CrystalCable-USA.com site. The cable models may differ but the basic characteristics of construction and design remain the same. Suffice to say that Crystal Cable's conductor of choice is annealed gold-injected silver. During the construction process, the raw metal conductor is covered by a triple-layer of helically wrapped ultra-thin Kapton film before a 99.99% pure silver braid shield is applied. After adding a transparent outer Teflon jacket, your basic Crystal Cable is ready for its termination of choice. A cool feature of the Crystal Cable is an in-line splitter which allows for a user-changeable choice of single or biwire configurations. Finally, the Crystal Cables that I reviewed are not as cosmetically current as the latest models which include "small round billets which look like tiny silver hockey pucks," explains Joe Shanaphy. "They have the Crystal Cable logo on one side and the model on the other."

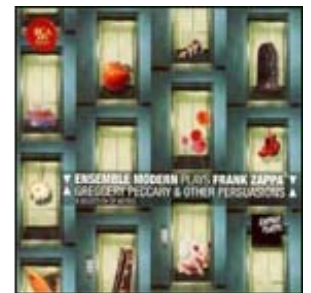
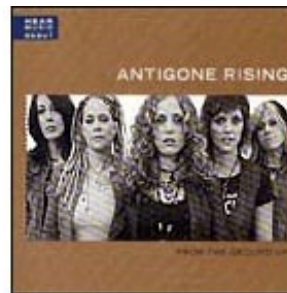
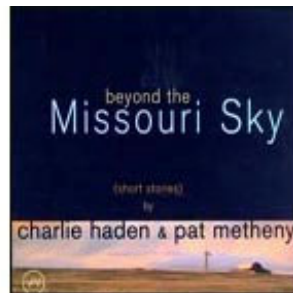
Without that billet identifier, the only way I could tell the cables apart was to remove them from their well-labeled jewel boxes and then attach a rubber band around the Micro ICs so I knew what was what (the speaker cables came with different terminations, no problem to tell *them* apart).

Ultimate resolution or natural ebb and flow?

My speaker cables of choice these days are the \$899 Auditorium 23 speaker cables. They do a variety of things right and in the final analysis, simply allow the music to flow organically and fuss-free. I never notice a particular area of the frequency range or think, "Wow! These speaker cables are great!" Instead, they simply let me relax into the music. ICs that evoke a similar feeling of naturalness and flow are the \$900 Stealth Audio PGS-XLs (in for review), which, while certainly presenting music in a rather golden-hued fashion -- i.e. they are warm, forgiving and present a huge if not immaculately detailed soundstage -- share the Auditorium 23's wide-open and uncomplicated presentation. I don't think I could live with the PGS-XLs long term.



They do not offer the last iota of information and resolution I crave but they do a superb job of relaying the essence of every musical performance, persnickety concerns about detail and imaging be damned. With some recordings, bass can sound ill-defined and there is little blackness between the instruments. The PGS-XLs seem to merge instruments together mid-soundstage into a large, very pleasing whole. I began my Crystal Cable journey with a CD I have come to love of late: Jorge Drexler's *Eco* [Warner Music Latina 6222-2]. Drexler is an Uruguayan singer, the first Uruguayan to win an Academy Award for his composition "The Motorcycle Diaries", which was performed by Antonio Banderas and Carlos Santana on the recent 77th Academy Awards. Born in 1964 in Montevideo where he studied medicine and eventually became a doctor, Drexler has also recorded a handful of albums, *Eco* being the most recent. It was recorded in Spain with some of their finest musicians. Drexler's rich, romantic and wonderfully melodic music is a combination of Uruguayan traditional, bossa nova, pop, jazz and electronic music. His voice is soulful and intimate yet never falls into schmaltz or cliché. Well-recorded with mostly acoustic instruments, *Eco* sounds fresh and relaxed, like that post-rain shower tingle on a sweltering summer day. Through my complement of cords, *Eco* sounded spicy and strong, comprised of one massive sweet spot about five feet wide and just as tall and deep. Like swimming in a pool of sound, *Eco* music pumped me up and powered me down from bubbly folk tunes and funky ethnic grooves to irresistible jazz waltzes. I was very happy with the sound, even with minor reviewer's quibbles nagging at the back of my brain. Other CDs used for evaluation included Pat Metheny & Charlie Haden's *Beyond the Missouri Sky* [Verve 314 537 130] and *Ensemble Modern plays Frank Zappa Gregory Peccary & Other Persuasions* [BMG RCA Red Seal 82876-59842].



Transparency reigns

Rather than replace everything at once, I waded into the Crystal Cables waters slowly, wondering if incremental changes would reap big rewards. I began by replacing the run of PGS-XLs between CD player and preamp with the Crystal Cable Connect Micro ICs. The sound improved on practically every level. Focus, transparency, speed for sure (these cables are very fast) and soundstage depth and layering all increased. Notes were bathed in decay, with long trails into the sunset. I could definitely hear deeper into the mix and the sound was incredibly delicate in a certain way, perhaps due to a lowered noise floor and the increased transparency and sense of air that filled the music. Bass was still deep but decidedly better focused. What was previously rather murky was now tight and even growling. The tone of acoustic instruments improved as did overall dynamics. Quite a change! A lighter sound permeated the presentation but also one more forceful. Replacing the ICs between pre and power amp wrought similar effects if not as dramatic but the overall sound became more relaxed and whole, most likely due to cable synergy. There seemed to be less struggle occurring, enabling the music to relax a bit more, and overall to become fuller-sounding than with a single pair in line. Top-to-bottom coherence was dramatically improved and I could hear deep, deep into the mix. Pristine is a good way to describe the overall sound - clear as a bell and with the ability to discern the differences and personality of every disc I played. Color me impressed! Adding the CrystalSpeak to the system changed the sound once again. There was a not so subtle shift of perspective, an increased dose of the IC's speed, transparency and focused, neutral sound. Bass was tightened but also somehow lightened. There was slightly more transparency and detail and the midrange became more open and faster, with note values increasing in decay. The Auditorium 23 cables lent a darker, weightier perspective to the music but lacked the Speak's pristine transparency and crisp focus. The sound was not as fleshy and swaggering as with the 23s, but the Speak cables were more refined, with attention lavished on the upper midrange and treble. I missed the Auditorium's bold and slightly wetter approach but was totally taken with the Speak's incredible retrieval of macro and micro detail.

Overall, the Connect Micro and Speak cables created a very open, dynamic sound with exceptional resolution, transparency and speed. This cable is largely neutral and uncolored but full of life. Zing went this string for sure! The sound was brilliant, almost pointillist, but never analytical or cold. I missed the low-end boogie factor of the Auditorium 23 cables but this reviewer values low end thump'n'thrust over ultimate precision and neutrality. The Crystal Cables delivered excellent bass if it was in the recording to begin with and defined it with spot-on tonality, but I missed a certain fat-bottomed warmth that is my peculiar fancy. On the Metheny/Haden disc, the Crystal Cables followed Haden's logical solos perfectly, tracing out booming low register notes, flashy runs and graceful whole notes with dead-on accuracy and a portrayal of instrumental speed I have never heard before from this record. Ensemble Modern plays Frank Zappa is a circus chorale of electric bass, and jazz drums.



There's zigzagging vibraphone and chipmunk-like brass figures, all of which came through with a comic's delivery through the Crystal Cables. The music was fast and furious just as Zappa intended. Again, the cable's neutrality and low noise floor helped me easily focus on individual instruments whizzing through the mix.

CrystalConnect Piccolo, CrystalSpeak Micro

Changing out the Connect Micro ICs for the Piccolo ICs removed some of the magic but the essential sound was similar. I felt that the soundstage became smaller, not unlike the effect we get when replacing all our heavy-duty fat power cords with stock Belden cords (try this test if you think cables don't make a difference!). That might be a little harsh but after the glorious music the CrystalConnect Micros rendered, I was a little nonplussed with the Piccolos. There was only slightly less resolution and transparency and tonality was similar but I felt that the dynamic range had somehow been shut down by a good 20%. But, we are talking perhaps 75% of performance of the previous ICs for a considerable drop in price. Bottom line: both set of Crystal Cables ICs performed with similar results, marked by excellent speed, good tonality and a see-through, very open and large soundstage. But then and as before -- shiver me timbers -- when I added the Micro speaker cables, synergy again took hold and the sound became fuller, with better bass definition and control and smoother top-to-bottom coherence. Are the Piccolos designed to work with the Micro speaker cables? I don't know. They sure seemed to work better together than with the Speak cables. The sound was less constricted and more natural. Overall, my favorite of the whole group were the CrystalConnect Micro interconnects. These are truly an achievement in interconnect design and in my experience unparalleled for the price, competing easily with cables I've owned that cost twice as much. The CrystalSpeak cables also contributed to a sense of magic and undeniable system synergy, creating immaculate precision, depth and speed, with a delicate, refined portrayal of the music that was intoxicating and revealed every disc's singular personality.

CrystalPower and CrystalPower Reference

For some reason, call me biased or perhaps still of the thinking that girth equals power. I had doubts that the Crystal Cable power cords would pull off their same impressive tricks in the power delivery and purification arena. Perhaps they would better my choice of power cord on digital components and preamp where I use rather old Shunyata Black Mambas but I seriously doubted they could best the JPS Labs Kaptovator I use on my power amp. This is perhaps an unfair comparison except that both companies use similar Kapton materials to insulate their conductors and prices are similar. The CrystalPower Reference costs \$1,299/1m & \$1,689/1.5m while the JPS Labs Kaptovator/2m was originally priced at \$1,499. Prices are the same for the basic CrystalPower/1m and the now discontinued Black Mamba/2m: \$650.



Right out of the gate, an all-Crystal Cable system was a brilliant-sounding event: the sound was very dynamic, fast as all heck, resolving and ear-tingling. Playing *From the Ground Up* from New Jersey country folk rockers Antigone Rising [Lava 93805-2], I felt like I was in a live concert. Bass drum socked me low and mean in the old Gulliver, guitars curled around my ears with sheen and precision, vocals were very dynamic and pure; everything was present and in the moment. Detail and imaging was almost hyper-real, with toms popping out of the mix as if I was strapped into headphones at the control board. Ditto results for the Drexler and Metheny discs. Both sounding more present and alive than I was used to hearing. Crisp and as brilliant as a high gloss finish, the music flew out of the speakers with speed to die for. Bass was also first-rate when bass was on the disc but the glory was in the midrange and treble which were simply supercharged and lustrous. The notes decaying far, far back into the soundstage was the best I have heard in my system. The Crystal Cable power cords along with the ICs and speaker cables were doing something special. The music sounded louder, more whole and definitely more energized. The noise floor was apparently so much lower than before that details and roundness of tone had audibly improved.

I had been using the Crystal Cable power cord on the CD player for a while and for some reason figured the Crystal Cable would handily beat the Shunyata Black Mamba (the results so far leaned in its favor), so I was most curious to see what would happen when I replaced the CrystalPower Reference with my JPS Labs Kaptovator. Here would be a test worthy of gladiators! With the Kaptovator back, overall weight and bass impact improved measurably as did the soundstage, which became much bigger, more tactile and lush. Imaging was not as good though. The Crystal Cables apparently lowered the noise floor more than the Kaptovator. Instruments were not as refined as before either, but overall I preferred the Kaptovator to the CrystalPower Reference. There was simply more warmth, power and oomph. There was more meat on them than thar bones.

Beauty, transparency, immediacy, energy - all these terms go a long way in describing the house sound of Crystal Cables. As I sequentially added their ICs, speaker cables and power cords to my system, the degree of resolution and transparency rose exponentially. I bet that a test bench printout would show these Dutch cables to have incredible noise-lowering properties and specs since the differences I heard were not subtle. Even with only one pair of CrystalConnect Micros in the system, I could hear more music, more of what went down on the master tape or hard drive. As the Crystal Cables infiltrated my rig further, they performed their magic throughout. All they lacked was the last degree of bass warmth this bass freak craves and finds absolutely necessary. But if you are looking for unerring transparency, resolution and musicality, I highly recommend Crystal Cable's mid-line products, especially the CrystalConnect Micros and Crystal Speak Micros. Trust me, this is no tulip craze. It's the real deal.

Ken Micallef, 6moons.com, May 2005

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