

Crystal Cable Absolute Dream Interconnects, Speaker Cables and Power Cords

by Chris Thomas, November 30, 2012

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Music in the home is such a personal thing, with virtually limitless possible equipment combinations. When you factor in both listening rooms and individual tastes, then add to this the hugely variable qualities of installation, you can see that the only real grounds for judgment are whether you do or don't enjoy your listening. Nothing else really matters, meaning that an exact science this hobby is not. But being an audiophile comes with the accepted fact that, at some point or points, you are very likely going to want to improve your system so you can hopefully enjoy it even more. In fact, the one thing that is not in short supply is advice. I, and many others, spend considerable time listening to lots of audio "stuff" in an attempt (perhaps vain) to draw some sort of conclusions that will inform you, so that you in turn can then draw *your own* conclusions. It's all part of the fun (at least it is for me), but I am acutely aware that I get the enjoyment of playing without the responsibility of paying, a not

insignificant point. Perhaps even more to the point, what I hear in my system will inevitably differ from what you hear in yours.

Setup -- the way a system is put together -- will have a massive impact on the performance achieved by any component under review, whether I'm doing the listening with my system or you are with yours. So, over the past several years, I have concentrated, not only on the equipment, but also on developing a systematic approach to its installation. Along with Roy Gregory and through many, many hours of discussion, experimentation and listening, we have developed a general strategy that lays out the most consistently successful way of building a system. There are a few inevitable do's and don'ts, but by and large our strategy is based on the idea that really good systems, at all price points, must be built from the ground up. Roy has written about this philosophy in greater depth, which means that



I don't have to go into detail now, but we both believe with a passion that you should start at the wall socket and continue through the support system and cabling. Get this right and the equipment you choose will give its best: ignore it and you will never hear what your system is capable of. Implement this approach and I can't guarantee you'll like the results. After all, you might well be hearing for the first time what your electronics and speakers actually sound like. But at least you'll also be able to hear what really happens when you change a component or make an upgrade.

One of the main conclusions of this approach is the conviction that these system foundations (AC supply, signal cables and supports) should be considered as components in their own right, treated to just as much care and attention as the electronics or speakers, and never dismissed as mere accessories. This is especially true of the cables, which must be considered as a system in themselves, not just an afterthought. They might not be as sexy as that new shiny box with the machined knobs that you are itching to turn, but in many ways they are even more important.

Crystal Cable is making quite a splash with both its cables and speakers. Based in Arnhem in the Netherlands, it's the companion brand to Siltech, the combined company being run by the husband-and-wife team Edwin and Gabi van der Kleij-Rijnveld. Meeting them and seeing how these two potentially competitive brands exist so harmoniously together in the same factory and suite of offices was the fascinating focus of a trip earlier this year. Roy Gregory documented the trip beautifully in an earlier article (though I notice he left out the bit

about the two bottles of Shafer One Point Five he provided at dinner on the second evening). Gabi is a trained concert pianist and understands music on both technical and emotional levels like few others I have met in this industry, and I think it's safe to assume that the sound of the Crystal Cable interconnects, speaker cables and loudspeakers are heavily influenced by her ideas and tastes in both music and sound.

Precious metal

One of the reasons for the visit was to see and hear Crystal Cable's latest, top-of-the-range cables, Absolute Dream. A few weeks after I returned home, a large and rather heavy box arrived, containing enough of this amazing stuff to rewire my entire system. Like all of the Crystal cables, this new offering is available in a wide range of configurations, including interconnects, speaker cables, mains cables, digital

cables, and USB and FireWire cables, all employing the same materials and construction, though the digital cables employ slightly different construction choices. It is also a true monocrystal design in more ways than one.

While monocrystal copper cables have been about for a while, originally introduced by Furutech, this is one of the first instances in which any company has produced monocrystal silver conductors.

"Monocrystal" really means just what it says. Normal crystalline metals are formed from multiple crystals, with barriers in between. These junctions can introduce discontinuities and nonlinearities in the material. Get down to the molecular level and things get even more complex, with the spherical molecules leaving spaces





in the structure that can result in oxidization or other contaminants. It was eliminating these gaps that led Siltech/Crystal Cable to introduce their silver/gold alloy cables, in which those gaps were filled with gold. But the chance to eliminate the far bigger problem of intercrystal barriers was too good to miss, and the eventual availability of monocrystal silver material has made it a reality, the Absolute Dream taking the concept to its ultimate conclusion. The unique, silver monocrystal solid-core conductor is insulated with a twin layer of Kapton wrapped in PEEK and shielded by a pair of braids, the inner one of silver-plated monocrystal copper strands, the outer gold-plated monocrystal silver strands. Finally, conductors are given a transparent outer layer before four of them are wound together to create the finished cable.



The Absolute Dream cables exude a subtle but unmistakably expensive-looking golden glow, the soft sheen of the screens showing through the transparent outer sheath. Each lead also carries a chromed metal barrel section, though these are not filters but identification parts. As one might expect from such a premium product line, the connectors are critical, and Crystal Cable worked with Furutech to adapt the latter's carbon plugs to suit the Absolute Dream. They use Alpha OCC Rhodium-plated connector surfaces and carbon-fiber, non-magnetic stainless, eutectic copper alloy housings. Crystal had also identified the physical aspects of connecting a cable as key to performance

and has paid great attention to strain relief and the way that this interface changes the electrical properties of the cable. Internally they use silver solder and crimp techniques as the ideal way to minimize losses at this critical point.

I saw this in action at the factory. While I can offer no independent assessment of the connectors, I must say that they certainly look the part, complementing what can only be described as the luxury look and feel of the cable perfectly.

So, nothing has been left to chance. The complex issues of metallurgy, construction and termination have all been considered and dealt with, from optimized construction to specially modified connectors, making Absolute Dream the kind of ambitious project that fully justifies its name. There are very few audio cables on the planet that can claim to be genuine clean-sheet designs, but this is one of them. Time to see if the sonic returns match the engineering investment.

The secret life of an audio snake charmer

Interestingly, Crystal Cable say that the cables are nondirectional, and no markers are found on them. I used them in the "reading direction" on the barrels, but it will be important that, once used this way, they are always installed in this direction. From the first moment I inserted a pair of Absolute Dream speaker cables into a system I knew very well, I understood that I was experiencing a different "view" of the music. Now, normally I wouldn't listen to just a single cable, but completely rewiring the system was going to take a couple of hours to do properly and would also require a complete power down and a whole load of redressing, realigning and the general fiddling about that such changes bring. That wasn't something I wanted to begin at 9:00 PM, so I earmarked the following morning for the task, but I just could not resist the opportunity to break my own rule on cables and sneak a quick listen to the Absolute Dream, the speaker cables being the easiest and quickest to swap out.

It has been my remarkably good fortune to have enjoyed a system fully equipped with Nordost's amazing Odin from front to back. This cable is so sharply focussed and musically cohesive that it becomes mesmeric. You just forget about it, so totally competent is it that you forget it's there -- confident in the fact that it will not only extract just about every crumb of information available



but also that it will preserve the signal with a sense of timing, rhythm and speed so spot on that you very soon take it completely for granted. (I have often thought it strange that the very best audio equipment is that which vanishes from thought the fastest.) But the loom needs to remain unbroken to maintain this status quo. Substitute another cable within the chain and it can be painful, as the weakest link sings the loudest tune. Similarly, break a loom of another high-end cable with a length of Odin and the cohesive musical chemistry can also go awry.

Knowing all this, I still just had to have a glimpse of the Absolute Dream before I went to bed that night, reasoning that it would also give the gold-glowing Crystal cable more time to settle physically, ready for the big changeover that was due the following morning. Let's just say that, at this very early stage, I was rather wide-eyed and probably stayed up later than I should have. What will this stuff be like when I get the full loom installed? This was the question in my head as I drifted off that night.

Jobs like this are never as straightforward as you would hope, due to a lack of space, support layout and a host of other small but irritating system-housekeeping details. The changeover took about twice the anticipated time, plus a bit more. I was using the four-box dCS Paganini CD player and the superb Vitus 025 integrated amplifier, although, lurking in the background and ready to consume the remainder of my allotted number of Absolute Dream cables in a single greedy, expensive gulp were the Berning Pre One and a pair of Quadrature Z amplifiers. Work out how many cables, in total, this little lot accounts for, then add the mains lead that carries the power from the wall to the QRT QB8 power-distribution block and you will see why the installation, along with accompanying dressing, took so much time. The system is also fully equipped with Stillpoints resonance control devices (no



small thing in itself!) that add further structural consistency. Once installed, the system needed to settle, the cables to bed in and burn in, both considerable intangibles that further confuse the task of cable reviewing. I had no real idea how long this might take (Crystal Cable suggest at least 100 hours), but the answer was at least a week before I first felt that the system was working completely harmoniously. In part that reflects the physical and electrical adaptation of the system and in part my own adaptation to the changes. Never forget that you yourself are the most active and variable element in the system equation.

It was a fractious wait, but with everything finally starting to sing I sat down for my first serious listening session. The first few bars of music warned me of the enormous power that the Absolute Dream brings. Yes, there was formidable weight and strength, but there was another level of deep-seated driving punch, sinuous movement and sheer top-to-bottom muscularity that were actually quite shocking. I began to wonder how the stand-mount speakers I'd been listening to for a

few months were managing to generate such a copious amount of extra bass. The blinding speed and almost impossible lightness of touch that the Odin specializes in were replaced with a dose of wide-bandwidth energy and scale that was both eye-watering and, in its own way, fascinating and most definitely very intriguing in its musical promise.

The speakers that sat at the end of the system for the first few weeks were Raidho's excellent C1.1. This is, in the right system, a great little speaker -- one of the best stand-mounts around. With these speakers driven by both the Vitus integrated and the Berning preamp/power amp combo, I was very much enjoying the music, but there was something niggling away at me. The presentation wasn't quite flowing the way I felt



(and subconsciously knew) it should, almost as if there was a slight disturbance or discontinuity in the timing. A lens doesn't need to be more than a fraction out of focus before you notice it, and good though the sound was, this whole system lacked that seductive sense of rhythmic togetherness and sheer speed that I had grown so used to with the Nordost Odin. That the Absolute Dream had more power and weight was not a debate. That it took the C1.1 into areas of low-frequency extension that the Odin did not explore was obvious. But, when it came to sheer flow, shape and tempo, I was finding things just a bit stilted. As far as resolution, tonal color and instrumental and vocal separation went, the Absolute Dream was truly incredible, but the Odin loom sat the music more easily on and off the beat, with a more seductive sway and flowing feeling of movement. Now, it hadn't escaped my attention that the Raidho speakers are wired internally with Nordost's Odin cable, and Roy and I both thought this could be a contributing factor. So Roy kindly arranged for the loan of a pair of Crystal's own Arabesque Minis -- and you can probably guess what they are wired with.

The Arabesque Mini arrives

This was the first chance I'd had to hear the Crystal Arabesque Minis at home. I had previously heard them at Roy's, although in that instance they were wired with Odin rather than Absolute Dream. If you had asked me a couple of years ago how important synergy is when putting a music system together, I would probably have said "something around 80 percent." I now think I might have sold it a bit short. The Absolute Dream, feeding a pair of Crystal speakers, makes a powerful -- no, make that a *watertight* -- case for synergy. Simply putting together someone's idea of the best that the audio business has to offer, in whatever price range, is never, ever going to do it. We listen to systems, not individual electronics, and my experience tells me that the higher the potential

of any piece of equipment, the easier it is to inhibit its performance when inserting it into an arbitrarily assembled audio system.

But when you listen to Absolute Dream through the Crystal speakers, you simply cannot ignore the fact that the musical relationship between the two is nothing short of amazing and together they make such a powerful musical statement that it makes a mockery of speaking about items of equipment in isolation. Calling any individual component "the best," as if it operates in a bubble, or inferring that any piece of equipment is some sort of panacea for all audio ills just doesn't work.



It might make good advertising copy, but it has little value in the real world. This is especially true where the relationship between amplifier, cables and loudspeakers is concerned. To do so indicates a real lack of understanding as to how audio components work in real systems -- and outside the measuring lab. With the dCS Paganini and the Berning Pre One/Quadrature Z combination installed on a Stillpoints rack and feet, I enjoyed the best small speaker system I have ever heard -- precisely because the synergy among the components is so good.

This is what music at home should be about, but it so seldom is. Could I have used another CD player? Yes, very probably and perhaps other amplifier combinations would have performed just as well, but



I have to say again that the amplifier/speaker relationship is the most crucial to consider, and this particular liaison between Berning and Crystal Cable was very successful. Does this mean that the Berning amps are the best in the world? To some maybe, but not to me. I prefer not to think like that. What it does mean is that Crystal have shown remarkable consistency in their choices and in doing so have come up with something very special. The Bernings perform brilliantly with many speakers and cable looms, but with the Mini and the Absolute Dream they form a very special threesome, a particularly beautiful relationship.

The Absolute Dream always projects the music out of the speaker cabinet and into the room, but never as effortlessly as it does with the Arabesque Mini. It gives it a life and focuses its dynamic expression in the space before you, inviting you to step into the soundstage and have a look around. Nothing is hidden from view; nothing is confused or jumbled. It is powerful, but it is also human. It has all the resolution and delicacy you expect from high-end audio, but it is also endlessly subtle and has a beautiful and delicate control over musical nuance that extends right across its bandwidth. It brings a sense of fluid, rhythmic movement and dynamic power, poised against a pitch-black background that can be startlingly intense and explosive. When a big transient comes along, there is no sense of acceleration to minimize the impact. It leaves its mark on your sensibilities, believe me.

The sense of scale, too, is quite remarkable, and for those who seek mighty soundstages and depth, the Absolute Dreams deliver a presentation as good as I have ever heard in this regard. When you have this level of musical scale and resolution coupled with such deep perspectives, you can really start to take advantage of all the great things that very explicit, high-quality small speakers bring. You might not associate sheer physicality with such small transducers, yet the Absolute Dream does not overwhelm the speakers. Its mighty power is used to create an incredibly solid foundation beneath the music, in turn delivering a sense of freedom and cohesive flow, coupled to almost shocking dynamic range and transients that will pull you to the edge of your seat with excitement -- and there is very little audio equipment that can manage that! Just listen to any well-recorded piece of music

with a decent horn section if you need convincing. Few if any systems that I've heard or had at home have matched the sheer musical power and expression of the Berning/Crystal Cable combination, which, given how long I've been doing this, is high praise indeed. I thought I'd gotten a grasp of system setup and synergy, but the Absolute Dreams simultaneously confirmed just how right I'd gotten the theory and the degree to which I've underestimated its potential impact and importance.

The super cable for all systems has still to be invented, and I doubt that it ever will be. Is the Absolute Dream the "best" cable I've ever used? Yes, sometimes. The answer depends completely on the system and the circumstances. If I owned the Raidho C1.1s, then I'd choose Odin. But with the Arabesque Minis, the Absolute Dreams are the clear winner. These are the finest of fine lines that separate the best of the best, a part of the rarefied atmosphere that as a reviewer I get to inhabit, the one where a pair of Arabesque Minis are only a phone call away. As an exercise in what's possible, the results are truly musically startling.

With the Diablo

While waiting for the Arabesque Minis to arrive I ran the Absolute Dreams for a couple of weeks through a pair of Focal Diablo Utopia speakers. Overall, the results might not have scaled the dizzy heights of the all-Crystal combination, but in many ways they are actually more telling -- and arguably more useful. I have always admired the Diablo's sense of driving power and structured scale, plus of course the treble courtesy of that excellent tweeter, but hooking them up with the Absolute Dream cabling was like strapping on a set of booster rockets and firing them into orbit. Now the speed through the system felt much more linear and precise. It was not a subtle thing at all. When the rhythmic balance of a system is upset the tiniest amount, the whole thing just sits wrong, and those delicious transitions of pace and delicate subtleties of musical phrasing, push and progression get lost, the whole performance essentially destroyed, regardless of how superb every instrument or voice sounds in isolation. Which is exactly why some of us are so very, very keen on reducing the chances of this through the use of integrated cable looms from the same manufacturer and our almost obsessive devotion to equipment synergy.



Through the Diablo I felt I could really hear what the Absolute Dream were all about. I kept thinking of the words “power,” “strength” and “presence.” Yes, the Crystals did major on a sensational (in the truest sense of that term) feeling of weight and character. Each instrument can be writ large with a detailed structure that I personally have never experienced before. But they also had the ability to grab your imagination and draw you deeper and deeper into the performance. Their scale and general impact were also delicate in the extreme, allowing the system to display the full range of weight and subtlety. They really did drive the music out of the speakers and into the room. No small thing this -- and they are, to my knowledge, one of a very small handful of cables that are capable of this level of projection. Even more impressive was that they did so even at very low listening levels, able to snap the full bandwidth into perfectly refined focus, an ability that is quite rare and very likely unique.

Such is their impact and musical presence that they will highlight any, and I do mean *any*, weaknesses in your system when it comes to energy management and equipment support. To hear what the Absolute Dreams can really do, you’ll need a full suite of Stillpoints or something similar to keep spurious energy in check. The Crystal cables deliver so much musical energy and do it so effortlessly that excess energy or smearing generated within the system itself become all too painfully obvious.

By the time the Crystal speakers arrived I had those Diablos singing like never before. Taming the energy

halo with four Stillpoints Ultra footers between the stands and the speakers themselves opened the Focals more fully to the range of the Absolute Dream’s musical capabilities. During repeated listening sessions I had grown to realize that the genius of these Crystal cables was their ability to apply their power to increasing my understanding and enjoyment of the music by opening my ears to new possibilities within it. I loved their sense of precision and the way that captured the musical shape of any instrument. Listen to how they let a grand piano breathe. There is



no compression or muddling. No honky-tonk clanging effect as the right hand moves upward and no harmonic jumble as each key is struck. Instead there is purity and cleanliness through the whole presentation that allows you to enjoy the full color palette of tonality and ringing sustain. This they manage while also capturing the full sense of physical presence that such a large, energetic, radiating instrument has. The Absolute Dream also seems to me to have better control of the pure pitch of a piano than many other looms

I have heard, but I know that I am particularly sensitive to this. Notes and chords seem strong and explicit and the intervals between them are so much more acutely expressed than with most cables. In terms of tonality, they show instruments without emphasis or any trace of artificial harshness and this also extends to vocals that have a warmth, clarity and closeness that is truly captivating. This absence of harmonic “grunge” makes the Absolute Dream one of the very, very few looms I have heard that gets the relationship between the fundamental and the harmonic absolutely right.



Title contender?

The Crystal Cable Absolute Dreams are very, very expensive -- a full loom is almost crazily so. Even at this level there are no guarantees and system synergy can't bite you if you don't give it due consideration. Ultimately, there may be no "best" cables, but there is also a very, very select group of serious contenders, and amongst those the Absolute Dreams are very serious indeed. They'll never disappoint and in the right situation they'll achieve something truly sublime. Only a fortunate few will ever be able to afford to enjoy them in all their glory, and I feel very lucky to have spent so much time included in that number. These are aspirational products with

potentially inspirational performance. In many ways they exist to show what can be achieved and just how much difference "mere wire" can make. They are musically sensational and show just how drab and musically inanimate, just how much of a musical chokehold, many high-end cables really apply.

Living with really great products always teaches you something. The Absolute Dreams revised my views on synergy and delivered an object lesson in what's actually possible -- as opposed to what so many of us accept. They remind us that it is okay to dream -- and it's for that that I love them.

Prices: Interconnects, \$15,000 per meter pair; speaker cables, \$33,000 per two-meter biwire pair; power cords, \$13,750 per two-meter length.

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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Associated Equipment

Digital: dCS Paganini four-chassis system, Lindemann 825 CD player.

Preamplifier: David Berning ZOTL Pre One.

Power amplifier: David Berning Quadrature Z mono amps.

Integrated amplifier: Vitus Audio SIA-025.

Speakers: Crystal Cable Arabesque Mini, Focal Diablo Utopia, Kiso HB-1, Lindemann BL-10, Raidho C1.1.

Interconnects: Nordost Odin, Vitus Audio Andromeda.

Speaker cables: Nordost Odin, Vitus Audio Andromeda.

Power conditioners: Quantum QX2 and QX4.

Power cords: Nordost Odin.

Equipment rack, platforms, and support products: Stillpoints ESS five-tier rack, Stillpoints component stands and cones.