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Crystal Cable CrystalConnect Dreamline Interconnects and CrystalSpeak Dreamline Speaker Cables

by Marc Mickelson

It takes most new audio companies a considerable amount of time to reach the point where their products constitute a recognizable brand, so it is especially curious that Crystal Cable has gone from unknown to well known in a scant few years. Crystal Cable even has a few things working against it in this regard. First, it's a company that makes cables, a segment of the audio industry that has grown like a swarm of gnats in summer. Second, it's headquartered in Holland, which puts it out of the purview of the North American consumer base. Third, its name is direct but unevocative. There is no mystery as to what Crystal Cable makes and sells, and this brings us back to the disadvantage of making cables to begin with.

But Crystal Cable has a few things working for it as well, including a close relationship with Siltech, one of the audio world's premiere makers of interconnects, speaker cables, power cords and now even speakers. Crystal Cable's indefatigable CEO, Gabi van der Kley, is also a definite asset. She seems omnipresent at trade shows, and she's friendly to a fault. Crystal Cable appears to have a hefty advertising budget, which allows it to place regular ads in print and online publications, including a couple of SoundStage! Network sites. Finally, there is the look of the cables themselves. The company's name shows its influence in the shimmering appearance of the insulation used, and the cables' lack of bulky thickness makes them flexible and easy to route around electronics.

We've published a few reviews of Crystal Cable products, including a pair by yours truly. These covered Crystal Cable's Ultra interconnects, speaker cables and power cords, the company's previous best of the best. All that changed early this year, when Crystal Cable introduced Dreamline, the company's cost-no-object cable line and the subject of this review. When I saw the Dreamline cables at CES, I immediately noticed how much they looked like the Ultra cables I wrote about and had been using since. The



Review Summary

Sound "They are basically neutral and transparent, acting as direct conduits between components, but they also have a personality, with some small tendencies that are always pleasing but do stray from the idea of contributing the least to the sound." "The first of these is a relaxed way of portraying musical detail, with no leading-edge crispness or sense of excess decay." "There is [also] ample midrange color, a sweetness that gives vocals additional roundness and presence."

Features For Dreamline, "Crystal Cable developed conductors with more refined metallurgy: a 'distortion-free, high-purity alloy' that's 'a breakthrough in our high-tech silver-gold metallurgy formulation.'" "To fill the gaps between the microscopic crystals that make up the conductors and thereby address a deficiency -- small distortions that occur

connectors were different, but the cable itself looked very similar.

Ultra comprises two twisted runs of the wire that Crystal Cable uses for its Reference line, which is one step down. This doubling of the Ultra conductors couldn't happen with Dreamline, so Crystal Cable developed conductors with more refined metallurgy: a "distortion-free, high-purity alloy" that's "a breakthrough in our high-tech silver-gold metallurgy formulation." To fill the gaps between the microscopic crystals that make up the conductors and thereby address a deficiency -- small distortions that occur when current flows through -- in pure-silver and pure-copper conductors, Crystal Cable adds 24K gold to high-purity silver to improve micro-conductivity. With Dreamline, the company makes a few additions, adding 24K-gold wires to the cable's silver braid. A new multilayer insulation of Kapton, PEEK Teflon and air is layered around the conductors.

Connectors are WBT NextGen RCAs custom made for Dreamline, Neutrik XLRs, and proprietary rhodium-plated copper-silver banana plugs and spades. A frosted-acrylic ornament on each length of cable gives the company and product name along with the product's serial number. I imagine it could also provide some damping to the cable itself.

None of the Crystal Cable interconnects or speaker cables is thick and unwieldy -- thin and supple is more like it. The Dreamline cables are the company's most unyielding, but they are still easier to run from input to output than essentially any cables I've used - - other than those from Crystal Cable. They are also attractive, displaying a pearlescent shimmer. Even with their thinness, they look expensive.

And they *are* expensive: \$6250 USD per meter pair of interconnects and \$3900 for each additional meter, \$13,000 per two-meter pair of speaker cables with \$4650 for each additional meter. There are also power cords, which seem downright reasonable at \$3875, until you realize that this is for a one-meter cord, half the standard length, and you'll have to shell out \$2325 for each additional meter. High-priced cables draw the ire of a certain group of audiophiles, but I'll remind these people that value in this realm is in the ears of the beholder, not *a priori* theories of right and wrong.

System

The Dreamline interconnects and speaker cables were used along with my stable of reference products and a few additions that you'll be reading about soon. Speakers were Wilson Audio Alexandria X-2 Series 2s and MAXX 2s, with Raidho Ayra 3.0s filling in most recently. Amps were Lamm ML3 Signature and M1.2 Reference monoblocks, Zanden 9600 monoblocks, and an Audio Research Reference 110 stereo amp. Preamps were an Audio Research Reference 3, a Zanden Model 3000, a CAT SL1 Legend and an Aurum Acoustics CDP, which doubles as a CD player. Electronics rested on products from Harmonic Resolution Systems -- a pair of M3 platforms -- or Silent Running Audio -- a Craz 4 Reference isoRack, a pair of Virginia-Class platforms for the Lamm ML3 Signature amps, and a pair of Ohio Class XL Plus² platforms for the Lamm M1.2 amps.

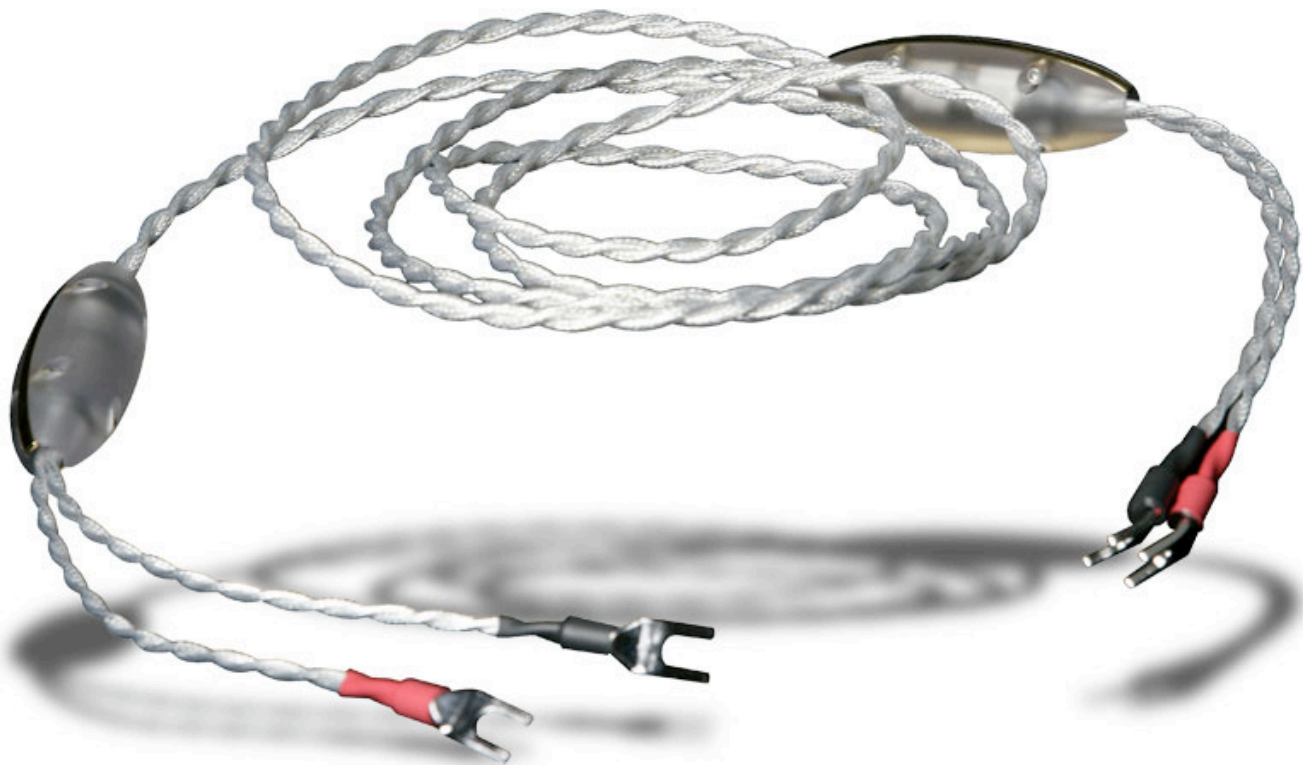
Digital sources were a Zanden Model 2000P/Model 5000S transport/DAC combination, an Ayre C-5xe universal player, and the Aurum CDP. LPs spun on a TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable with Graham Phantom B-44 and Tri-Planar Mk VII UII tonearms, on which were mounted Dynavector XV-1s stereo and mono cartridges. Phono stages were an Audio Research PH7, a Lamm LP2 Deluxe and the Aurum CDP's internal number. Phono cables were an AudioQuest LeoPard and the one that is hard wired to the Tri-Planar tonearm.

Power was handled by a Shunyata Research Hydra V-Ray and a passel of Shunyata Anaconda and Python power cords -- both Alpha and Vx versions -- or an Essential Sound Products Essence Reference power distributor and a number of Essence Reference power cords. Interconnects and speaker cables for comparison were AudioQuest William E. Low Signature along with Crystal Cable Ultra.

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Use "When I reviewed the Crystal Cable Ultra cables, I found them to sound very good right from the start. In contrast, the Dreamline cables needed plenty of play time to sound their best, and they are still improving after a few months of playing.... Over the course of a couple of dozen hours, their incisiveness increased and so did their solidity, the entire presentation firming up to a welcome degree. Keep this in mind as you audition these cables -- and be sure to be patient!"

Value "Perhaps because of all the time I spent with the Ultra interconnects and speaker cables, relying on their neutrality to help me suss out what review products are doing, I think I actually prefer them to the Dreamline cables. That they cost quite a bit less money is worth considering as well."



When I reviewed the Crystal Cable Ultra cables, I found them to sound very good right from the start. In contrast, the Dreamline cables needed plenty of play time to sound their best, and they are still improving after a few months of playing. Right out of their presentation-quality boxes, they sound soft and unfocused -- in other words, completely different from other cables that need some breaking in, which sound bright, hard and overly crisp. Over the course of a couple of dozen hours, their incisiveness increased and so did their solidity, the entire presentation firming up to a welcome degree. Keep this in mind as you audition these cables -- and be sure to be patient!

Dreamlining

We all have our ideas regarding what interconnects and speaker cables should contribute to an audio system in sonic terms, though most believe that the best audio cables are those that contribute the least. Of course, what "contribute the least" means is completely subjective, with one person's idea of "least" differing from another's. "Least" can mean an overly lean sound to some sets of ears, and great density to another, the difference coming down to what different people consider to be the essence of music, its collection of fundamentals that can help make reproduced music sound like the real thing to some degree.

With all this in mind, I think there are things about the Dreamline interconnects' and speaker cables' performance that will make many people believe that they capture the essence of music. They are basically neutral and transparent, acting as conduits between components, but they also have a personality, with some small tendencies that are always pleasing but do stray from the idea of contributing the least to the sound.

The directness with which the Dreamline cables transfer the musical signal is obvious, giving instruments of all kinds a sense of unfettered purity that's compelling. Like many listeners, I am sure, I go through phases during which I am obsessed with one type of music or even one musician's work. For the past few months it has been classic Blue Note jazz, this spurred on by the abundant Music Matters and Classic Records reissues of great Blue Note albums. Get these while you can! Both can sell out quickly, and while Classic Records does reissue certain titles, Music Matters does not, so once those LPs are gone, you'll have to fight for them with your checkbook on eBay.

I knew that pianist Duke Pearson was one of Blue Note's best producers, but I was unfamiliar with his musical output. Then I received *Tender Feelin's* (Blue Note/Classic Records 4035) in mono and was hipped to Pearson's gentle style. He reminds me of Vince Guaraldi, who is somehow sunny and introspective all at once. *Tender Feelin's* comes alive with the Dreamline cables, the trio of musicians being distinct in space but unified in musical output, the fine detail of Pearson's light touch unconditionally resolved. Switching to a Blue Note CD, like Freddie Redd's *Shades of Redd* (Blue Note 50999 5 14375 2 7), brought on a fundamental change in tonality and physicality, everything sounding lighter, brighter and leaner. The Dreamline cables made this all plain, the LP not merely edging out the CD sonically but annihilating it.

But this was not transparency for its own sake, leading to a pale, thin representation of great music. The Dreamline cables didn't tip into the clinical realm, mostly because of those "small tendencies" I mentioned. The first of these is a relaxed way of portraying

musical detail, with no leading-edge crispness or sense of excess decay. These are *absolutely not* bright-sounding cables, which can lead to the maladies I just mentioned. Instead, they have the sort of neutrality I've attributed to the Lamm electronics I've used for years as a reference -- a naturalness that doesn't obscure or emphasize.

Perhaps in conjunction with this, there is ample midrange color, a sweetness that gives vocals additional roundness and presence. More music from Blue Note, but this time a contemporary recording. I heard an interview with singer-songwriter Amos Lee on NPR, during which he played a song live on the air. That prompted me to buy his latest album, *Last Days at the Lodge* (Blue Note 50999 2 06289 1 8), which just happens to also be on Blue Note Records. Lee's music isn't jazz -- folk-inspired pop is more like it. "Street Corner Preacher" is the song Lee played on NPR, and while I love that stripped-down version, what's on the LP sounds more vivid and intimate, the Dreamline cables' midrange presence paying off with slightly enhanced vocal solidity amidst that essential neutrality. In this way, the Dreamline interconnects and speaker cables remind me of those from Siltech -- no surprise, I guess. Both use ample amounts of gold, which, from my experience, can mellow out the sound some.

I like it, that golden sound. Contrary to popular belief, I think it leads to greater realism. Life doesn't sound physically lean and tonally threadbare, at least to my ears. The question with Dreamline is if there's too much mellowness -- if it's too additive. I suspect that in isolation, most listeners won't think it is, while in comparison to other cables, it might be.

Enter Ultra

Which leads me to Crystal Cable's Ultra interconnects and speaker cables, the company's previous top of the line and some very accomplished cables -- a [Reviewers' Choice](#), in fact. Looking very similar to the Dreamline cables but costing far less -- \$3759 per meter pair of interconnects and \$7250 per eight-foot pair of speaker cables -- the Ultras don't use the same gem-like connectors of the Dreamline, and the conductors aren't wound quite so tightly, both of these disproving any claim that the two cables look identical. They don't sound identical either. I have had quite a bit of experience with the Ultra interconnects and speaker cables, having used them with various products I've reviewed over the past two years. I called them "among the most immediately correct-sounding cables I've ever heard," pointing to their "acute...balance between harmonic resolution and tonal color." Furthermore, "The clarity through the Ultras' treble and midrange has OTL-like directness.... Their character [is] one of true neutrality, not a manufactured perception of such."

This reads rather like what I've written about the Dreamline cables, and, as expected, there are striking similarities between these two cable lines from the same manufacturer. But I called the sound of the Ultras "true neutrality," while the sound of the Dreamline cables is "essentially neutral." This is no mere semantic difference, the mellowness and presence of the Dreamline interconnects and speaker cables giving them a recognizable sound, while the Ultras' character is more like water -- flavorless. This actually changes the mien of the music, the Dreamline cables sounding less incisive and more gentle, and the Ultra cables faster and less colorful. With *Tender Feelin's*, this translated to a greater in-the-room sensation with the Dreamline cables and a more inside-the-recording feel with the Ultras. With the Amos Lee LP, his voice is slightly more full and weighty with the Dreamline cables and leaner with the Ultras. And so it went with every recording with which I compared these two cables -- the view of the music changing a bit but never so much as to obscure any important details.

Perhaps because of all the time I spent with the Ultra interconnects and speaker cables, relying on their neutrality to help me suss out what review products were doing, I actually prefer them to the Dreamline cables. That they cost quite a bit less is worth keeping in mind as well. Still, the Dreamline interconnects and speaker cables really shone with vocal music especially, and this helped make the case that their presentation was actually the superior one.

Concluding thoughts

So many companies would love to be in Crystal Cable's position: well known by audiophiles and reviewers, and having not one *but two* high-performing series of interconnects and speaker cables. Dreamline, the company's top of the pops, has an inherent presence and sweetness that are seductive because they don't come at the expense of transparency and neutrality. They pass the signal naturally, allowing -- perhaps helping -- the music to inhabit the space of your listening room. I can't quibble with their sound, though I can say that if you are auditioning them, you should also borrow some cables from the Ultra line, as you may find that they mesh better with your electronics, your speakers and your ears.

Either way, these are both high-level cable lines, and that there are two of them seems consistent with Crystal Cable's meteoric rise to prominence. Every audio company should be so fortunate.

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Crystal Cable CrystalConnect Dreamline Interconnects and CrystalSpeak Dreamline Speaker Cables

Prices: Interconnects, \$6250 USD per one-meter pair; speaker cables, \$13,000 per eight-foot pair.

Warranty: Lifetime.

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