

Two USB Cables

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Over the past year I've been using the USB output from my MacBook Pro sparingly. This was not my original intent, but ever since I set up a NAS drive the Lumin A-1 Network Music Player (Issue 248) has been my go-to digital source. Consequently, USB kind of fell off the radar. However, having just powered up the excellent new Esoteric K-03x, which is equipped with USB and multiple 32-bit DACs, I thought it a good time to put a little USB back in my life. Fortuitously, I also had two new USB cables on hand—the makings of a tidy little comparison.

For the tests I used a MacBook Pro, running iTunes/Pure Music, connected via USB to the Esoteric K-03x, a Classé Audio CP-800 preamp and CA-D200 amplifier, and the Dali Rubicon 6 or TAD CE-1 loudspeakers. Loudspeaker and interconnect cables were Synergistic Research Atmospheres, and power cables were Audience Au24SE's.

Clarus Cable Crimson USB

Clarus Cable has quickly gained a well-deserved reputation for standout performance at reasonable prices (for the high end anyway). Its USB cable uses conductors of 22-gauge PCOCC (Pure Copper by the Ohno Continuous Casting) and 6% silver plating. Power conductors are 20 gauge. Clarus uses proprietary twisting to reduce noise and jitter, and separate shielding for both signal and power conductors. The five separate shields

in the Crimson include aluminum foil, copper foil, and braided silver-plated copper. Signal conductors are insulated with high-grade, high-density polyethylene, while the jacketing is PVC with nylon braiding.

The Clarus USB nails the middle range of the musical spectrum with a fullness of body, a timbral warmth, a transient alacrity, and an overall honesty that calms and relaxes the ear. As I listened to Laurel Massé's luminous a *cappella* performance of "How Can I Keep From Singing," I was struck by how persuasively warm and articulate the character of this cable was. Its balance and its light touch with vocal sibilance were excellent.

During the Tchaikovsky, the Clarus USB reproduced Anne Sophie-Mutter's violin with a little more grit, a little more tension in the upper octaves, yet had a nice enveloping warmth and weight with larger stringed instruments like cello and contrabass. Low-end response was powerful and expansive with hints of added bloom that on one level conveyed a lively venue atmosphere but on another suggested some minor pitch ambiguity.

Throughout this survey I kept returning to the ballet section of Vaughan Williams' *The Wasps*, specifically the opening flute theme with harp accompaniment (later joined by percussion triangle and strings). In this delicate example of low-level interplay the Clarus was slightly darker in character and transparency seemed ever so slightly muted—a minor subtraction.

Summary: The Clarus is an authentic bargain with performance that flirts with top-tier cables. A terrific upgrade cable (a standard-setter in this range) for nascent and experienced computer-audio fans alike.

Kimber Kable KS 2436

The 2436 is all about the silver. Stranded and solid-core conductors are woven together in a field-isolating braided geometry which keeps the power and signal paths separate throughout the entire assembly. Kimber is big into silver and emphasizes that the metal needs to be optimized for audio applications, not jewelry. The silver is drawn at the ideal temperature and tension, and there are no chemical baths using lubricants like graphite which can embed themselves in the silver. Terminations are realized by bonding the connector body to the concentric shield with conductive epoxy and copper foil. Next, each conductor is soldered to the gold-plated pins using a nitrogen-charged system to eliminate the possibility of impurities at the interface. Finally, the ebony wood shell, which also insulates the conductors, is added.

The Kimber established the widest, most detailed soundstage I've yet heard from a USB cable. During the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto orchestral images seemed to fill every corner of the venue; a flurry of timbral information and ambient activity flooded the space behind violin soloist Mutter. Low-level retrieval of the aggressive bowing from the bass violins was almost distracting in its clarity.

The Kimber's character was the embodiment of speed with a hint of added top-end brilliance and extension. It's a cable of strong tonal and micro-dynamic contrasts. It doesn't offer a harder sound, mind you, but is a hair's breadth more finely grained in energy and treble air. For instance, during Dick Hyman's big band disc *The Age of Swing* not only did the KS demonstrate excellent transient attack and micro-dynamic expression, but it also allowed me to hear further back in the mix. The KS 2436 also followed descending bass lines a little more attentively and clung to that pitch information with tenacity.

During "The Wasps" referenced earlier, the Kimber seemed to reproduce the finest threads of a performance especially during the low-level interplay with flute and harp and triangle. The KS also hinted at a little more keyboard tonal color, finer gradations of the player's "touch"—contrasts of loudness-to-softness—during pianist Evgeny Kissin's performance of Glinka's "The Lark." During the high-octane rush of keyboard trills near the end of this composition, the KS was as open and free from treble tension as I've heard from this piece.

Summary: A brilliant soundstager, the KS has a cooler character that's ultra-detailed and transparent. It's so revealing that only the finest DACs need apply.

Conclusion

These are both musically persuasive USB cables. But there's another consideration to keep in mind—application. The Clarus is the sweetspot, sure to please the majority of users. The Kimber is a different kettle of fish. This is an ultra-premium wires designed for first-class DACs and well-informed (and -heeled users. Candidly, the full breadth of its performance will be lost in the entry-level world. The takeaway is to know your system and your aspirations for that system. That will help make the choice an easy one.

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CLARUS CABLE/GORDON J. GOW TECHNOLOGIES. INC.

(470 477-2277

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kimber.com

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