

2011 SOUNDSTAGE

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Siltech Classic Anniversary 330i Interconnects and 330L Speaker Cables

Doug Schneider, 2011

I rarely review cables. Though I seldom have anything bad to say about any of them (except if the price is astronomically high), I seldom have anything good to say either. Most high-end cables that I've heard don't sound any better than or different from properly terminated, good-quality copper wires. Besides that, some super-high-end cables are so thick and stiff and unwieldy that I don't want to even bother with them. Compared to other types of products, cables are often a waste of my time.

You'd expect, then, that I'd keep few sets of cables around. On the contrary, I probably have a couple dozen different cables, most of which just hang around the house doing nothing after the initial auditions, while a select few get all the play. Those few I use -- models from DH Labs, Crystal Cable, Nordost, and, for the longest time, Nirvana Audio -- are, in effect, my reference cables, and they're what you usually see listed in my reviews of other products. I use them because they do nothing objectionable to the sound, they're compatible with a wide variety of equipment, and they're easy to install and use. It's kind of like having a closet full of shoes, but wearing only the few that are most comfortable.

Company

Siltech is based in the Netherlands. Their Classic Anniversary series, updates of the company's original Classic line, have been launched in belated celebration of Siltech's silver anniversary (the company was founded in 1983).

Siltech's gold anniversary may still be a long ways off, but the two metals aren't just for anniversaries. They form the heart of what this company's cables are about, which makes them unique -- a key ingredient to the company's success. Siltech's president, founder, and chief engineer, Edwin van der Kley, is a longtime audiophile who feels that high-end hi-fi products shouldn't be like plain-Jane Hondas; instead, he feels they should not only sound superb but also be distinctive and special -- not something everyone else has. As a result, over the years Siltech has produced innovative loudspeakers, tubed power amplifiers, and recently, even a battery-powered tube preamp -- all in limited editions, which increases their exclusivity.

But Siltech's core business is cables. Van der Kley prefers that their conductors be an alloy of silver and gold, which he claims has better properties of conductivity than the more commonly used copper, and doesn't degrade over time as that metal does -- and, more to the point, produces no audible distortion. Removing every iota of distortion is what van der Kley fixates on -- he feels that certain kinds of distortion, even in tiny amounts, can destroy the music-listening experience.

Being unique and distinctive comes at a price. Nothing Siltech makes is cheap, including the 330-series cables, which aren't even close to the top of Siltech's lines. Part of this has to do with van der Kley's philosophy: If you're going to make distinctive, top-quality products, then they're likely to take a while to create, and they'll be produced in small numbers -- the cost will thus be much higher than for something mass-produced. Also contributing to the cables' high prices are where and how Siltech operates, and, of course, what they're made of: silver and gold.

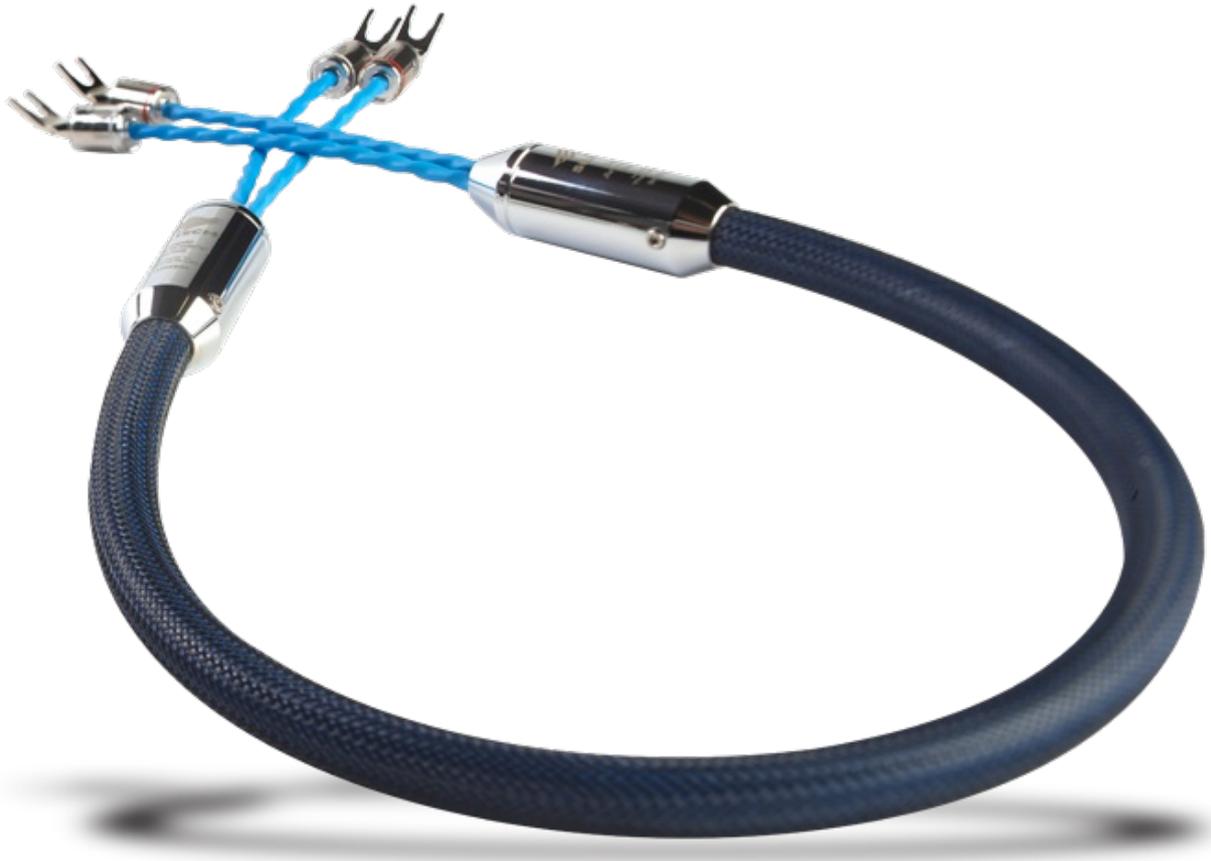
Two years ago, I visited Siltech's headquarters in Arnhem: a sizable, spotless factory in which a small staff worked at an efficient pace, handmaking every product with impressive attention to detail. Some cable companies operate like sweatshops, while many others farm their work out to subcontractors, often in Third-World countries, where labor is cheap. But van der Kley insists on full control of production, so he does it in-house, even if it means high labor costs.

Nor does van der Kley use inferior or knockoff parts or materials in any of his products - - he wants them to be not only unique, but the very best for a given price. His cables' silver-gold alloy isn't cheap, and neither are any of the other parts that go into them. Siltech's most expensive line of cables, the Empress Crowns, retail for \$16,000 (interconnects) and \$35,000 (speaker cables; all prices in USD). You can buy new cars for those prices. But you don't need to pay nearly so much for hand-built, reference-caliber Siltech cables -- and that's where the Classic Anniversary comes in.

Product

Siltech currently has three cable series: MXT, the entry-level line, uses copper with silver and gold for the conductors; at the top are the Royal Signatures, including the Empress Crown wires, which use only the purest silver-gold conductors and absolutely uncompromised construction; and in the middle are the Classic Anniversarys, in which, again, only silver-gold conductors are used, but of varying levels of purity.

The Classic Anniversary series comprises four models: 220, 330, 550, and 770. The entry-level 220 uses polyetheretherketone (PEEK) insulation and Generation 6 (G6) silver-gold alloy conductors arranged in twisted pairs. The 330, 550, and 770 use G7 (Siltech's latest) silver-alloy conductors in a dual-balanced coaxial configuration, and a higher-quality insulation that Siltech calls EPTFE Polyimide Air FEP E-Silicon. The differences between the 330, 550, and 770 are in the gauge and purity of the conductors and the thickness of the insulation. The top of the Classic Anniversary line, the 770, has the largest conductors, the highest purity, the thickest insulation, and the highest price, starting at \$2700 for interconnects and \$4800 for speaker cables. Siltech sent me 330i single-ended and balanced interconnects (\$1000/m with RCA or XLR connectors, \$280/additional 0.5m), as well as 330L speaker cables (\$1800/2m with spade connectors, \$280/additional 0.5m).



The overall construction of the 330 series, though far from the top of Siltech's lines, is first-rate, and the look is subtle yet elegant -- a dark blue, mostly due to the nylon mesh surrounding the cable's polyurethane-silicon tubing. The speaker cables are lighter blue outside the tubing near the terminations. The functionality is great -- the interconnects are extremely flexible, and the speaker cables, while not nearly so, were easy to snake around my components.

Siltech's standard RCA, XLR, and spade connectors are extremely good, and each cable is finished at both ends with a solid stainless-steel collar engraved with the company and product names and a serial number. This gives the cables a more luxurious look, and the serial number has a practical benefit: Siltech's cables are expensive and highly sought after, and there's a strong used market for them; as a result, they're frequently counterfeited. The serial number helps Siltech keep track of every legitimate cable they've sold. If you're about to buy Siltech cables, new or used, but you doubt their authenticity, it's a good idea to verify the serial numbers with the company. Buyer beware!



Performance

I'm apprehensive about using the word *sound* in any discussion of cables. If a cable has a sound -- an actual sonic character or personality, such as reticent highs or lows -- then it's not a cable that I want in my system, because its effect will be more like that of a tone control. If I wanted tone controls, I'd buy a preamp with those features. Cables should be nothing more than conduits between components, adding nothing to the sound and taking nothing away, behaving as if they're just not there -- basically, providing sound that is *soundless*.

Siltech's Classic Anniversary 330i and 330L cables provided that soundless conduit, passing the signal along with everything intact, from the highest highs to the lowest lows. In a word, they were neutral, as any good cable should be. But that wasn't the whole story. From the moment the 330s were installed, my system sounded subtly cleaner and a touch smoother, with more detail than I'd ever heard before. This was most apparent when I was assessing some super-high-resolution components: Revel's Ultima Salon2 and Vivid's B1 speakers, Bryston's 4B SST² power amplifier, Ayre Acoustics' QB-9 USB DAC, and Simaudio's Moon Evolution 650D DAC-transport. Subtle changes among these expensive high-end products became startlingly apparent because *everything* showed through the Siltechs. This is how I could tell that the 330s were bettering any other cables I had on hand.

The 330s were no more neutral or versatile than Nirvana's S-L interconnects and speaker cables, which have been my reference cables longer than any other for their across-the-board high performance and compatibility with every component I've had here. However, the Siltechs *were* subtly smoother and cleaner, but never gave up an ounce of detail; in fact, *more* detail came through the Siltechs. This was most apparent with recordings on which a sense of the space of the recording venue had been well captured; the 330s generally revealed more of these spaces, letting me hear more of the subtle spatial cues and expanding the soundstage, and making more distinct the degrees of separation between musicians on the stage.

For example, I thought I'd heard every bit of depth and separation there was to hear in Ennio Morricone's choral-based score for the film *The Mission* (CD, Virgin CDV 2402), but the Siltech 330s revealed just a touch more soundstage depth and width, clearer separation among the voices, and better clarity than the Nirvana S-Ls, or any other

cable I had on hand. These weren't huge differences, but they were clearly apparent through such startlingly transparent speakers as the Revel Salon2s or Vivid B1s driven by electronics of commensurate quality.

Then there were recordings I'd never thought had much, if any, sense of recorded space, such as Bruce Springsteen's *Tunnel of Love* (CD, Columbia CK 42000). Patti Scialfa's backing vocals are really hard to pick out of the mix of "One Step Up," but the Siltechs made her stand out a touch more, and revealed more space around Springsteen's voice than I'd ever thought was there.

This is in no way a knock against the Nirvanas, which cost less than the Siltechs (\$1095 for the speaker cables and \$695 for the interconnects, way back when I originally received them) and have worked very well for years as my versatile, topflight reference cables. But the Classic Anniversary 330s were cleaner and more resolving, and to me that makes them better. Nirvana's S-Ls have always sounded smooth, but the 330s were a touch smoother, to the point of being liquid with a hint of warmth -- which is how I describe them to folks who visit my listening room.

In fact, that's the other area worth touching on. Leonard Cohen's new *Songs from the Road* (CD, Columbia/Legacy 88697 75916-2) is a great-sounding live recording: rich, full, and warm. The engineers probably made the whole recording sound that way to match Cohen's thick baritone. You'd think that with a sound like this, which cables you used wouldn't matter, and that's correct -- those qualities show up no matter what cables connect my components. For instance, Nordost's Valkyrja models are the leanest-sounding cables I use in my system, and *Songs from the Road* still sounds robust and rich through them. But still, the Siltechs sounded smoother -- in particular, less sharp up top -- with an undeniable hint of warmth that the Valkyrjas don't add that contributes a touch of life to Cohen's voice and makes the entire recording sound even more pleasing to the ears. Detail has always been a strong suit of the Nordost Valkyrjas, but the Siltech 330s equaled them in this regard. This was impressive performance -- when released a little over five years ago, the Valkyrja interconnects cost almost twice as much as the Siltech 330s, and the Nordost speaker cables cost *more* than twice as much as their Siltech counterparts.

Conclusions

The major qualities I attribute to the Siltech Classic Anniversary 330i and 330L -- clarity, smoothness, high resolution -- are, in the grand scheme of things, small things, and their liquidity and hint of warmth are smaller yet. Swap out a new pair of speakers or even source components, and you'll hear bigger differences. But they *are* differences, and in the context of a high-resolution audiophile system they're relevant, especially to me -- my goal in reviewing hi-fi gear is to pursue the highest fidelity



to the source signal. I want all the resolution I can get. With first-rate gear such as I now have in-house, the subtle increase in detail that the 330s provide, along with the undeniable cleanness and smoothness of their sound, helps move me another step or two closer to that goal.

All told, the 330s are reference-grade cables that have edged out all others I have on hand, even if they represent only the middle of Siltech's line. Siltech may have better, more expensive cables, and I'd be interested to hear them, but I question if most people need more than the 330s provide. These speaker cables and interconnects are shockingly good.

But despite my praise for them, far be it from me to casually recommend \$1000 interconnects and \$1800 speaker cables as if those costs were pocket change. Yes, I admire the Siltechs, but you should probably get the rest of your system up to snuff before you make such an investment in cables. These cables didn't make mediocre components sound like components costing two or three times as much; instead, they complemented the already outstanding components I had on hand.

That's the bottom line: The 330s provided a noticeable, incremental improvement over my reference cables in key areas, and in that context, they can be considered good deals, compared to what many companies charge these days for reference-caliber high-end audio cables. If there are better cables out there, I'm all ears. For now, I'm impressed enough with the performance of Siltech's Classic Anniversary 330s that I've put them at the very top of my short list of references and given them a new nickname: The knockouts from the Netherlands.

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