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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Crystal Cable Absolute Dream (Part One)

By Alan Sircom



There are already quite a few reviews of Crystal Cables' Absolute Dream floating round. It's an astonishing cable, at an astonishing price, in part because it raises the metallurgy stakes. Absolute Dream uses an all new monocrystal silver solid-core conductor wrapped in twin sheaths of Kapton and PEEK and then wrapped in a braid of both silver-plated monocrystal copper and gold-plated monocrystal silver to make up each conductor in the cable, and then housed in a translucent jacket, all wrapped up with the highest grade connectors and an elegant lozenge ID tag. Put this in the sort of presentation case you might get on a bottle of Louis XIII and the result is an expensive process, and a very expensive cable. Most of the reviews thus far have concentrated on the signal, loudspeaker and power cords (for good reason... they are incredible in their own right). But I thought I'd paint a target on myself and discuss the undiscussable first – the sound of the Absolute Dream USB cable.

The reason for this is simple and two-fold. As said earlier, no-one's covered the USB end. But also, USB is one of the few cables that is almost universally considered to step outside of the whole 'cable family' affair; it doesn't seem so tied to the sound of the complete system and even those who follow the family ethos often end up with a USB cable from a different brand (and all too often, a no-brand USB). This gives us an opportunity to study the performance of the complete Absolute Dream concept qua concept, and the chance to evaluate the performance in the context of how it performs on its own. The one difficulty here is matching products; there are many USB-supporting DACs on the market, but precious few that cost more than the cable itself. The wry humour of such a situation aside, in fact this only poses an intellectual problem rather than a physical one, and the Wadia 121 did sterling (silver) service as converter du jour, despite costing about a fifth of the cost of the USB cable it worked with. For this paring, the rest of the system comprised the Edge G3 integrated amplifier, a pair of Raidho C-1.1 loudspeakers and Cardas Clear cables as comparison USB, as well as for interconnect, loudspeaker and power duties. A top of the line AudioQuest Diamond USB – complete with 72v battery-powered Dielectric-Bias System – and Nordost's Blue Heaven USB were drafted in for comparison duties.

Intellectually at least, there shouldn't be much need for an expensive USB cable in most cases, and given the isolation of the USB input of the 121, this is one of those 'most cases'. While not completely smitten by the whole 'bits is bits' argument, the demands of USB even in tricked out asynchronous mode are not exactly huge. Nevertheless, under a variety of conditions, differences between cables have been heard, and not only through systems designed to maximise differences. The point, for the moment, is not 'why' or even 'how', but 'how much'; because if a £99 cable gets most of the way to a £6,480 cable, something's very wrong.

Nothing's very wrong at all. The Absolute Dream lives up to its name. The cable synergy issue made it hard to hear significant differences between Cardas and AudioQuest, but the Absolute Dream towered above both of them. So much so in fact the test took seconds to complete; the moment the Absolute Dream came on, the sound of the system through the other cables sounded uneven and boring by comparison.

First there's the overall increase in articulation, both vocal and more surprisingly musical. It's as if the musicians suddenly shook off the worries of being in a studio and got their act together. Voice was outstandingly precise, especially when coping with plainsong or early music polyphony; here, you need to establish the singers both as individual sonic entities in the mix, but as their voices blend together, and how that vocal blend resonates within the space it was recorded in.

There is also considerable impact to the sound. Here, the comparison between the Nordost and the Crystal became very useful. The Nordost is every inch the leading-edge performer, with the attack of each note taking precedence. The Crystal is also every inch the leading-edge performer, but it adds the sustain, decay and release of each note to what it portrays accurately. The Blue Heaven is pretty far from a one-dimensional USB cable, but in a straight fight it sounded one-dimensional by comparison. OK, so comparing a cable with a price tag maybe 20x larger than the other is somewhat unfair to both, but the fascinating part was just how complete the Nordost sounded... right up until the Absolute Dream kicked in. ▶

▶ The bass too kicked in with an intensity and drive not normally associated with computer audio. There was instrument tonality and energy right down to the bottom of the C-1.1's limits, but this was more natural than forced.

But perhaps what really wins you over with this cable is its musical nature. You just listen to more music through this cable. Yes, at first, you go through the tedious "I wonder what this sounds like?" and on goes the worn classics like *Take Five*, *Kind of Blue*, *DSOTM*, maybe even *Sea Change*. Pretty soon though that begins to get dull, and you are usually faced with the beginnings of the tell-tale itch that is the start of Gear Acquisition Syndrome. You don't get GAS from these cables, after that first flush, you begin to settle down with your music and just listen to an album at a time. I found myself devoting a regular late afternoon session to picking an old album, ripping it and playing it from beginning to end. Something that seldom happens in our sound-byte digital audio world today.

I found my computer audio happy place in the Absolute Dream USB, even if I'll never be able to justify the expense of owning it for real. And strangely, I found it in the almost forgotten charms of that late Latin jazz vibe player Cal Tjader and his *Monterey Concerts* album. The whole thing, one end

to the other. Not one track then off to some other attraction. Just music. Riveting, absolutely riveting; in precisely the way music always used to sound when you played it on LP.

However, I suspect the outstanding sonic performance of Absolute Dream USB is only half way there. There's the whole pride of ownership issue that comes with an expensive purchase. The full package, the presentation case, the finish and the case candy (a bag within the box, a credit-card owner's certificate, the full works) is something out of the Cartier textbook, rather than a Ziploc bag with some bits of wire in it. Does all that materially add to the actual sound of the Absolute Dream? Of course not, but those who spend this kind of money on cable can expect this level of all-round product sophistication from all their other purchases – why not audio?

Of course, this is hard to imagine if you cannot get your mind past the concept of the sheer expense involved. There are two ways for a journalist to look at expensive cable, or an expensive anything for that matter. The first is to set it against the context of your own life. To me, this one USB cable is equivalent to several square metres of the house extension that I've been putting off until funds permit. And they never permit.

The other way is to remember it costs roughly as much as a night in a good suite at Claridge's Hotel in London.

To someone able to afford to enjoy the finer things in life, without thinking about how better you should allocate those funds, a night at Claridge's seems a sensible way to unload thousands of pounds. For me, if I were in

the same position, I'd take the longer term satisfaction knowing I owned the

best cables I'd ever heard

over the weekend in

a hotel, no matter

how good. And

that means if it

came down to

it, the Absolute

Dream would

win out over

Absolute Luxury

in the middle of

London. Would my wife

agree? Sadly, we'll probably

never know either way. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Each conductor: Monocrystal silver core, Kapton and PEEK dielectric, gold-plated silver and silver plated copper monocrystal braid.

Four conductors per USB cable, high quality type A and type B connectors

Sold in a presentation case: £6,480

Manufactured by: Crystal Cables

URL: www.crystalcables.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

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Next time, the rest of the system gets the Absolute Dream treatment.