

hardware review

Tellurium Q Ultra Silver II: excellence is a rare commodity

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Tellurium Q Ultra Silver II interconnect cable

Way back when I was an avid consumer of audio things, before I joined the industry in retail, I picked up information from all sorts of sources. I read the magazines of course, I went to audio shows and later on I joined some online forums. Somewhere during all that I somehow received the idea that silver cables sound 'bright' and that copper versions are better suited to a well balanced system. When I became the proud owner of a reasonably high end Naim system that seemed to be an immutable fact to fellow Naimies. Consequently I have never owned any silver cables, although I have heard them over the years.

Having been immersed in the reviewing world for the last six years I have learnt a great deal more, based on my own listening rather than the opinions of others, and I have quietly adjusted my thinking on all sorts of audio matters. In that process I have also become much more open-minded, or at least I believe that I have. Over this time I have been lucky enough to get to know some of the people behind the products I admire, amongst whom is Geoff Merrigan, the man behind the Tellurium Q brand. I have been lucky enough to be invited to Geoff's development studio and have gained some insight into the approach with which he approaches cable design. Geoff's professional training was as a materials scientist, which was a perfect launchpad into his search for new and better ways to make audio cables.

Thus when he asked me if I would be interested in doing a comparative review between two iterations of his silver interconnects, namely the Ultra Silver and the Ultra Silver II, I thought it would be another opportunity to form my own opinion as opposed to accepting that of people who held voluble court on the internet. I was also curious to see whether Geoff could improve significantly on cables which had been very well received previously. Maintaining high standards year in and year out is very demanding and even the best of us can fall short occasionally.

In due course a slim box arrived with a pair of the originals and the Mark II version, and I set about my work with enthusiasm. I started with an external examination of each, and noticed immediately that the Ultra Silver II's black sheathing is a much looser weave than the original version, which is probably why they feel much more flexible than their predecessors. Like every Tellurium Q cable that has passed through my hands for review and those that I have purchased for use in my own system, there is an elegant minimalism to both versions of the Ultra Silver. Terminated with the brand's own dependable black RCA plugs at either end, with white heat shrink sheaths at the plug ends of the cable with an arrow indicating in which direction the signal should flow. The cables feel robust but are not all showy – if bling is your thing these may not have you reaching for your credit card. But read on to see whether the understated looks reflect their audio performance.



While the Ultra Silver cables were here I was enjoying one of those relatively rare times when I am actually listening to my own system, with no other components on hand to add complexity to the reviewing process. My Linn Sondek LP12, modified with Tangerine Audio hardware and fitted with a Vertere Dark Sabre moving magnet cartridge in its Ittok arm, was plugged into my Lyngdorf TDAI3400 integrated digital amplifier's very capable phono input, my Yamaha CD-S3000 SACD/CD player was plugged into the upgraded analogue input board in the Lyngdorf, using a very competent pair of RCA cables from another manufacturer. My Harbeth Compact7 ESXD stand mounted loudspeakers were connected to the Lyngdorf with my own Tellurium Q Ultra Black II cable.

The Listening tests

The easiest starting point was to replace the cables between the Yamaha and the Lyngdorf, which was done using the outer sleeve of the Tellurium Q RCA plugs to lock the interconnects into place. I had already listened to a couple of SACDs to try to set a baseline by which to gauge the changes as I progressed through the Ultra Silvers. I own far fewer SACDs than I do records or standard CDs, but the ones that I have I always enjoy when I take the time to listen to them. For my first few days with the Ultra Silvers I picked eight from the shelves. I started with Mobile Fidelity's version of Eric Clapton's 1992 *Unplugged*, which is a perennial favourite at Kelly Towers, although usually on vinyl. Recorded live for an MTV show, this predominantly acoustic collection, with EC accompanied by an excellent cast of musicians and backing vocalists. The song choice is perfect, at least to this devoted fan, and introduced us to the incredibly poignant Tears In Heaven, written for and about the singer's young son Connor who had died falling from a window in New York City.

Playing the album through my own system it sounded, as it should, familiar and yet fresh, and although I had planned to pause it halfway through to switch cables I played until Rollin' And Tumblin' finished and the studio audience expressed their joy at what they had just witnessed.

Then away with my resident cables and in with the original Ultra Silvers, a press on the play button on the Yamaha remote control and back into *Unplugged*. As the first track, an instrumental called Signe, started I literally stopped slouching in my chair and sat up, taken aback at the improved sense of realism that was flowing through the Harbeths. Now it really



was sounding like a live album, and I was right there (wishful thinking perhaps, as I would love to have been there).

A few songs in and I was mentally dismissing the received 'wisdom' that silver cables are 'bright'. There was added clarity, but not in a way that could ever be called fatiguing. Au contraire, it was involving and immersive, and I was fully engaged. As the music and applause stopped I tried to capture my thoughts in note form. 'Insightful' and 'gripping' were two of the words I noted.

After a break I loaded another favourite album into the Yamaha's tray, Shelby Lynne's 2007 recording of songs mostly associated with Dusty Springfield called *Just A Little Lovin'*, on a Reference Recording SACD released in 2012. Another favourite, this collection is quietly reflective and makes the listener feel as if they have stumbled into a private recital. Ms Lynne turns what in Dusty's versions were big, stadium sized ballads into deeply personal, almost introspective musings. The singer's vulnerability, her quiet delivery and the perfectly judged accompaniment are spell-binding. The Ultra Silvers did a fine job conveying the intimacy of this recording, which finishes with the magnificent *How Can I Be Sure*, written by Eddie Brigati and Felix Cavaliere, and released on their 1967 album *Groovin'* by the Young Rascals. And so on to the main event, the Ultra Silver IIs, to which I had been looking forward with keen anticipation but also a little trepidation – what if, for the first time in my experience at least, Geoff had been unable to make the leap forward with the new version in the way he has with other models? Only one way to find out of course, so out with the older model and in with the new. The Ultra Silver IIs are very easy to install, with the added flexibility being much appreciated.

Once the RCA plugs were securely locked in place I cued up the *Unplugged* disc once more and settled into my listening chair. I pressed play and was taken aback as Signe started once again. There was an immediacy to the sound that had not been present before with either set of previous cables, a sense of detail that opened up the sound so that I could hear every tiny nuance in Ray Cooper's percussion work, I could easily distinguish between the voices of the backing singers Katie Kiss and Tessa Niles and lots of other intricacies which had been previously lost. None of this interrupted the musical flow or the listener's immersion in the performance – it simply revealed more information and increased my appreciation of the skill of every one in the band.

From then on I found myself examining the SACD shelves, looking for familiar music to hear as if for the first time. The Doors' *LA Woman*, which I have heard more times than I can remember, was a stand-out experience. The band had drafted in two extra musicians for the recording sessions, Jerry Schiff on bass and Marc Benno on rhythm guitar, and their contributions could be picked out of the mix much more easily than I remembered. John Densmore's drumming, particularly his cymbal work, really came to life. As valedictory album's go, this one was right up there with the best and I was enthralled throughout.

I played lots more SACDs over the next few days and started in on some CDs too. They all came alive through the system in a way that made it feel as if I had splashed out on a whole upgrade path to the amplifier, the loudspeakers – everything in the signal path in fact. I always know when a review component has made a really positive impact on me, because I miss it when it has to be removed and returned to its owner. When the time came to return my system to its pre Ultra Silver II configuration I really missed that open window into the music that had so

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drawn me in. Not that my system sounded 'broken', to use the word bandied about by those same keyboard forum dwellers whose opinions once mattered to me, but because I knew that it was capable of so much more.

Conclusions

Let's deal with the elephant in the room straightaway. A one metre pair of Ultra Silver II RCA interconnects is going to cost you a sum not far off four figures here in the UK. An XLR pair will



carry you over that threshold. That is a lot of money and unless you are very well-heeled will probably give you pause for thought. Look at it the other way though – how much would it cost to upgrade one of your source components, your amplifier or your loudspeakers? Suddenly an upgrade to your cables begins to make a much stronger case for itself. Of course cable sceptics will deride this as delusional nonsense, but I can only report what I experienced.

What I have learned in these weeks is that, at least in this implementation, silver does not mean 'bright' at all. The age old argument between different and better has definitely been settled here for me. If I had the money I would hand it over for a pair of these and beg to borrow a pair of the loudspeaker cables from the same product line, because I suspect those too would win me over. To plagiarise Neil Diamond's song made famous by the Monkeys, I'm a believer.

I started this piece musing about whether Geoff Merrigan still has his mojo, his ability to take something he has created and make it even better. You will have gleaned from all I have written that in my opinion he is still absolutely at the top of his game. If you invest in the Ultra Silver II line they will be giving you musical pleasure long after you have forgotten what they cost. I cannot think of any single ancillary product that has given my own system such a performance lift. Excellence is a rare commodity in any walk of life – the Ultra Silver II interconnects belong in that exclusive club in the audio world.