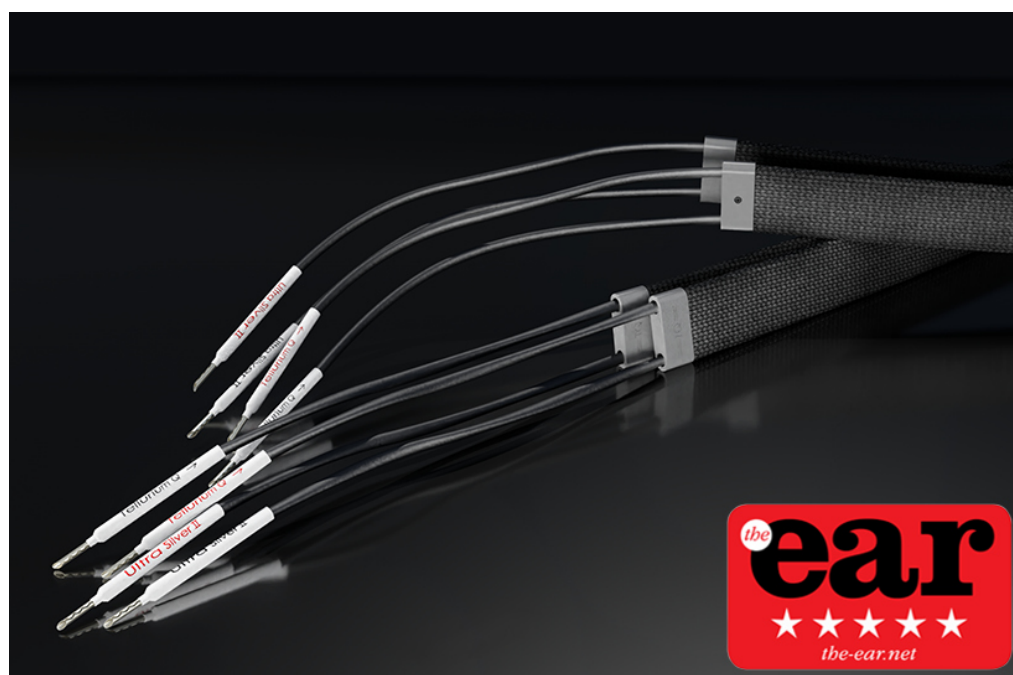


Tellurium Q Ultra Black II vs Ultra Silver II cable showdown

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Tellurium Q Ultra Black II & Ultra Silver II speaker cables

First of all, let me be clear about my long history with Tellurium Q loudspeaker cables. Many years ago, when I worked in the retail side of the audio industry, I bought with my own hard-earned (well I thought so) money, a pair of the original Tellurium Q Black loudspeaker cables. I had heard them in our shop's demonstration room and was astonished at what they seemed to bring to the music. Since then I have worked my way up the company's loudspeaker cable ladder and have in recent years been a very satisfied user of the Ultra Black II version. They have been a pretty constant component of my system as I have reviewed loudspeakers, amplifiers, source components and interconnect cables.

In the course of my time as a reviewer I have had the pleasure of getting to know the chief designer of all things Tellurium Q, Geoff Merrigan and have visited his studio more than once. From him I have learnt about cable design principles and his work process. His attention to detail is extraordinary and it is a fundamental precept with him that he will only release a new version of an established product if it is an audibly significant improvement on the current version. He is driven to investigate new and potentially better ways of making his whole family of cables the best that they can be. He must be doing something right because he has built a thriving worldwide business on cables alone. He has not branched out in to mains distribution systems for example – all of his considerable creative energy goes into signal cables.

In the latter part of last year Geoff called me and asked if I would be interested in doing a comparative review between my Ultra Black II and the new Ultra Silver II version. I replied in the affirmative without hesitation, and without thinking through the implications of the undertaking. My least favourite part of reviewing is the switchover day, when whatever has arrived for review has to be switched into my system, carefully set up and then allowed to warm up. Contorting my aging frame in order to reach behind the rack to unplug or insert cables is not fun, but a

necessary part of the reviewing process. I have lost count of the number of times I have gone through that exercise with loudspeakers cables during this lengthy review process, but it is a relief to have finally finished and come to the writing phase.

There are three distinct families within the Tellurium Q product range. If you are interested in more than this superficial overview I recommend, nay urge, that you spend some time on the company's excellent website, where there is a great deal of detailed information about the families and about each family member cable within them. In essence, the families are colour-coded. Blue is recommended to those customers who prefer a warmer and richer sound, while the Silver offers a more detailed and revealing sound. Black sits between those two and offers a blend of both worlds.

For this review we can concentrate on the Black versus Silver contest, although in truth it turned out to be a very friendly rivalry. My core system, comprising the Primaluna Evo 300 hybrid integrated amplifier, the Yamaha CD-S3000 SACD/DAC, the Gold Note PH10/PSU two box phono stage and my Harbeth Compact 7ES-XD stand-mount loudspeakers. Throughout the review I was playing host to the very excellent Michell Orbe SE turntable fitted with their own Cusis S moving coil cartridge. A pair of Vertere Redline RCA interconnects ran between the Gold Note and the Primaluna and a pair of Tellurium Q Ultra Black II RCA interconnects between the CD player and the amp.

For most of December and into early January I was lucky enough to host the new Quad 33 preamplifier and a pair of Quad 303 power amplifiers bridged to mono, and these supplanted the Gold Note, Yamaha and Primaluna devices. As an added comparison point I also hosted a pair of the new Wharfedale Super Linton speakers too. They were paired with the Quad system initially and stayed on after the Quads had gone home to spend some time with my own amplifier and ancillaries. My reviews of the Quads, the Wharfedales and the Orbe SE will be appearing here in The Ear very soon.



Physically the Ultra Black II and the Ultra Silver IIs are very similar. They are about 4cm wide and 1cm deep, and both are fitted with hi quality banana plugs. The fit and finish of all Tellurium Q cables in my experience has always been praiseworthy, and these were no different.

My testing protocol stayed the same throughout the review period. As mentioned, I do not enjoy changing cables too often, so I had these on a weekly rotation. Before doing the weekly swap I would play at least two pieces of music on the outgoing pair and then play them again on the incoming pair in an endeavour to hear the differences most clearly.



Son of a preacher man

As the Ultra Black IIs have been my mainstay loudspeaker cables for some time now they were in place when I started the review. Prior to the first switch over, I lined up some albums and played one side of each. First up was the Analogue Productions double album release *The Wonderful Sound of Female Vocals*. Four sides of magnificent singing by some of the best voices of the second half of the twentieth century, mastered by Kevin Gray at Coherent Audio this compilation never fails to delight me. Playing side one, I was immersed in the sonic excellence of performances by Julie London and five other star performers. The voices had warmth, emotion, power and sensitivity. Dusty Springfield's *Son of a Preacher Man* has always been special to me, partly because I am the son of a preacher man and because it is part of the great *Dusty In Memphis* album from 1969. Switching to another album from the '60s, I cued up the first side of The Rolling Stones' *Now!*, originally released in 1965.

I bought my original copy in 1965 at the American PX in West Berlin but sometime in the late 60s or very early 70s it disappeared never to be seen again. At vast expense I bought a used Japanese repress from 1976 by the King Record Company, who went out of their way to reproduce the original to the last detail. This was the 'Stones transitioning from a very good rhythm and blues cover band to the pop and rock power players that they were to become. Starting with Solomon Burke's *Everybody Needs Somebody to Love*, the band tears through some terrific tunes, with Ian Stewart's uncredited piano playing well up in the mix. The last side I played was one of my favourite recordings of this century, Dave Alvin's 2011 release *Eleven Eleven*. If you like Americana and you haven't come across this album yet, it comes very highly recommended. As I know all these records well it was important to listen closely before switching to the Ultra Silver II cable. I did the exchange as quickly as I could and played the same music but in reverse order.

You will recall that I said Tellurium Q's description of the Ultra Silver II was that it was 'detailed and revealing'. It transpires that this isn't just marketing speak. As the first song Harlan County Line started I actually sat up straighter in my listening chair. I had the volume set at exactly the same level yet Alvin's voice seemed closer to me, more realistic, with greater urgency and yet also a more human quality which is quite hard to describe. There was nothing wrong at all with what I heard through the Ultra Black IIs, it has been my benchmark now for quite a while. This Ultra Silver II rendition was quite startling, and felt much more like a live recording.

Switching to the 'Stones recording, I was able to pick out some of Charlie Watts' cymbal work more clearly (he really was unexceptional drummer), as well as Ian Stewart's piano. The tracks on this album have always sounded like they were recorded in one take, by a group who were just really getting into their stride. It had sounded terrific on my original set up but it fizzed with extra snap and sparkle through the Ultra Silver II cables, and those words are meant as sincere compliments. The female vocals were really well served by the upgrade, Shelby

Tellurium Q Ultra Black II vs Ultra Silver II

Lynne's intimate take on another Dusty classic Just A Little Loving shimmered from the Harbeths, her quiet vulnerability laid bare before us. This was exquisite music making.

Fast forward to the arrival of the Quad amplification. I started off with the Ultra Black II and it sounded terrific. Back in the day my first 'proper' hi-fi system had a Quad 44 pre and 405MkII power amplifier at its heart. The Quad design team have managed to recapture the essence of that old Quad sound in these very twenty-first century units, but somehow made it better at the same time. I won't bore you with my whole playlist but I will mention that we were now in



directing the Academy of Ancient Music and the Choir of Christ Church Cathedral Oxford with guest vocalists including one of my favourite sopranos Emma Kirkby. Switching to the Ultra Silver II cables did exactly as promised and allowed me to listen into the recording more deeply than I have ever done before. The timbre of the authentic instruments used by the AAM (they and Hogwood did much to bring hits style back into vogue) is different from the modern counterparts and some have found it not to their taste. I really love it and it was as if I was hearing it for the first time all over again.

When another retro component arrived, in the guise of the Wharfedale Super Lintons, I had another opportunity to hear the two sets of loudspeaker cables through a different medium. The Super Lintons are most impressive, with more bass weight than my Harbeths but, perhaps because of that a slightly darker character, I expected to prefer them with the Ultra Black IIs when they were paired with the Quad 303s. As it transpired, these loudspeakers also benefitted from the extra detail and sheer musical communication through the Ultra Silver IIs. In the real world, rather than the reviewing world, I suspect that most buyers of the Super Lintons would be more than delighted with the results through less expensive cables than either of these, but it was fascinating to hear what they can achieve with cables that cost nearly as much as the speakers themselves.

When the Quads had been boxed up and, with some sadness on my part, sent back to their rightful owners, I lifted my Primaluna Evo 300 hybrid back on to its shelf and reinstalled the Gold Note PH10/PSU and the Yamaha CD player. As I was in installation mode I switched back to the Ultra Black II s into the Super Lintons. I gave everything a day to warm and settle back in then a had a few days of listening to a very eclectic mix of music, in addition to the chosen comparison albums. I also streamed from Qobuz through my little Auralic Aries Mini, which has been souped up with some enhancements from Network Acoustics and which I think sounds very good indeed.

Through the system described above I flitted from jazz through some heavy rock to modern pop via the Qobuz/Auralic source and it all sounded really good. The Super Lintons paired really well with the Primaluna, creating very credible soundstage imagery and not losing their way even when I cranked up the volume to levels that some would consider antisocial. For the last phase of the review I made one final cable swap and the Ultra Silver IIs took over once again. The Dave Alvin album sounded so good that I played all four sides in one listening session. It was absolutely compelling. I then played both my Japanese pressings (sad but true) of the The Rolling Stones' *Now!*. Recorded 61 years ago, every last ounce of the youthful

energy of the band shone through the Super Lintons, and even my ancient frame was forced to get up and move to the beat. After expending all that energy something more restful was required, and the female vocals album hit the spot perfectly.

Some final thoughts

Let's deal with the obvious elephant in the room here. The Ultra Silver II is an expensive cable choice, at least in the context of my finances; your mileage may vary, as the cliché has it. Indeed the Ultra Black II is not exactly pocket-money priced either, but is a very fine cable in its own right. If you are someone who follows what used to be the advice of experts and allocates 90% of your budget to sources, amplification and loudspeakers, and 10% to cables and other ancillaries, either of these loudspeakers cable choices might seem extravagant. The layout of your system and your room come into play too, as that will determine what length of cable you require. But with all that said, I cannot now forget what the Ultra Silver IIs brought to the sound of my system compared with the incumbent Ultra Black IIs, and I have previously been delighted with how the system performs.

As usual, Geoff Merrigan politely but firmly refuses to reveal what goes into any of his cables, and who can blame him – the secret sauce is his to guard. What I can say is that I have never heard so much detail, so much micro-information, being delivered through my system, and yet without losing any of the drive or the emotion in the music. My own Harbeths are terrific communicators in their own right, but in the end they will always be constrained by the quality of the signal which is fed to them. These weeks with Ultra Silver IIs have been an absolute treat, and have shown me how much more I could get from my existing components if I could make this upgrade permanent.

I hear from readers from time to time, who remain convinced that when I write about cables I am confusing different with better. I envy them in some ways, because they will save themselves a small fortune by sticking to whatever choices they made when assembling their systems. Unfortunately I hear not only differences but improvements with some cable changes and I can only report that in all honesty, the Tellurium Q Ultra Silver IIs are the best loudspeaker cables I have yet encountered in my own system.

As always, I urge you to listen for yourselves, but do so with this warning, only audition if you know that you can afford the asking price, because you will be wanting to go ahead and make a purchase. If your budget better suits getting the Ultra Black IIs you will still be acquiring a magnificent set of cables. I have lived with mine very happily for quite a while now and have loved what they do, but now begins the tricky task of working out how to get my own set of their more expensive siblings.

