

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



Tellurium Q Ultra Black II XLR

Wednesday, April 3, 2019
Chris Kelly

Do you ever have one of those ‘am I imaging this?’ moments when listening to hi-fi? It happens to me sometimes, at which point I invite an innocent civilian to listen and tell me what they think. Usually it is my very patient wife who is nearest to hand, and so it was that she that I pressed into service towards the end of my time with the Tellurium Q Ultra Black II XLR cables, which are the subject of this review. We’ll return to Mrs Kelly’s observations in due course.

The good people at Tellurium Q asked if I would like to hear the brand new XLR interconnects which are in the same series as the loudspeaker cable which had so impressed me a few months ago. As then, they suggested sending me a pair of the first generation Ultra Black cables as well as their successors, the Mark II version. Of course, in the interests you dear readers and to satisfy my own intense curiosity I agreed. I own a pair of Tellurium Q Black XLR cables which normally sit between my Yamaha CD S3000 player and its integrated amplifier sibling and I am very happy with them. The loudspeakers throughout the review were my trusted Harbeth SuperHL5+ 40th Anniversary editions on mass loaded Skylan stands. Speaker cable was Tellurium Q Ultra Black II because that seemed the obvious choice in this context. I also own XLRs from towards the top end of a well known American cable manufacturer, so there was lots of scope for trying different things. However, at about the same time I received for review a Moon 390 streamer/preamplifier and a matching 330A power amplifier. And they too needed XLRs to connect, so now the permutations of cables got even more interesting, with four different pairs to plug in and play through.

After everything had warmed up, I started to listen using the “other brand” between the pre and power amps and my own Tellurium Q Black between the Yamaha CD player and the Moon 390. I played several silver discs, both SACD and CD. It sounded pretty good to be fair. Pink Floyd on SACD had plenty of drive and detail, the Dunedin Consort on the Linn label gave a very good account of Bach’s *Brandenburg Concertos* on SACD, and all sorts of other music went into the rather ponderous Yamaha loading mechanism. The first change was to the pre/power connection. I decided to deploy the Ultra Black original there and try again. Hmm, a bit better. More life, more pace - more to my taste. The “other brand” cable did not get used again until much later. Then the Ultra Black II went in from the source to the preamp. Holy moly! Cue the usual cliches - veils lifting and all that good stuff. Now a degree of logic suggested that as I only had one pair of the Mark II cables they really should go between the pre and power so that every source could benefit. I cued up ‘Money’ from *Dark Side of the Moon* on the LP12 and played it, first with the Mark I and then with the Mark II between the pre and power. The difference was not trivial.

At that point I sent a “pretty please” request to Tellurium Q for a second pair of Mark II cables, which they dispatched very quickly, with the warning that the new pair needed a good few hours burn in. I complied, playing silver disc after silver disc without sitting down to do any

critical listening. After about three days I decided to have a proper listen. To say I was genuinely taken aback is no exaggeration. Every disc I played sounded bigger, better and altogether more realistic. Soundstage was enormous and rock solid. Bass had huge depth while the top end had an almost spooky ethereal gossamer quality, while in the middle things were just so right. I played rock, jazz, classical, folk, blues, you name it, and it was almost like hearing these very familiar albums for the first time. That may sound hyperbolic but I can only tell you what I experienced. I then reverted to the original Ultra Black cables and played some of the same music. Every piece I played sounded flatter, more two dimensional and much less involving. I was very happy to restore the MkII to the system.



So now let us return to where we started, getting a clear-headed opinion from a civilian. Although not afflicted with the audio compulsion which most of you reading this will recognise, she has 'good ears' and often hears system changes to which I have not alerted her (which makes smuggling new stuff in quite tricky...). To minimise her suffering, I simply played 'Money' on SACD via the four different pairs of XLRs, with the Ultra Black IIs between the Moon390 and 330A. I didn't tell her which cable was which. The Ultra Black IIs went last. Her astonishment was not feigned! "I can hear the words so clearly" was her first comment. "The drums are so much clearer, I could follow all the instruments more easily in fact". In case you wondered, she liked the Ultra Black II best by a distance, then our own original Black, then the Ultra Black with the 'other brand' being her least favourite.

The Moon equipment has now been boxed up and sent back, so my Yamaha A S3000 integrated amplifier is once again in place on the rack. The Ultra Black IIs are plugged in between it and the matching player. By now it will come as no surprise to hear that I feel silver disc replay is sounding better than ever it has in this room. These cables really are that good.

What can we deduce from all this? First, that the Ultra Black II XLRs are audibly and consistently more enjoyable than their predecessors. Second, that cables do make an obvious difference, even if the difference is hard to quantify scientifically. Third, that the Tellurium Q Ultra Black II family now has an extremely accomplished new member.

I have no idea what Geoff Merrigan and his team at Tellurium Q have done to these MkII cables and he is not about share that information with anyone. What I can tell you is that what they bring to a system is addictive and irresistible. And no, I wasn't imagining it, which is a relief!