

A Cable Survey

On the Upgrade Trail? Winning wires from Crystal Cable, Nordost, and TARA Labs

Neil Gader

The high-end pastime known as “upgrading” comes as naturally to an audiophile as breathing in and out. While no one category can be singled out as the most cost-effective upgrade, cables—so easy to swap—might be the most instantly gratifying. Even though some of my colleagues consider wire-reviewing about as much fun as a sleep-over at Camp Gitmo, I enjoy the process. The cables assembled here, from Crystal Cable, Nordost, and TARA Labs, all have pedigrees that are unassailable. And upgraders take note—they each hit significantly different price points. Please also consider that the cables were tested as speaker-wire/interconnect tag teams. They were designed as partners, and that’s generally how they tend to be sold.

gle as easily as a necklace from Cartier or Tiffany.

Preconceptions about physical size aside, the CrystalSpeak Micro plays big and clean. Like a sonic windshield wiper it sweeps the soundstage clear of dust and grime. Orchestral images snap into focus, and the sensation of pace and speed is immediately apparent. Tonally, the Micro combo is midrange-neutral with a little lift in the treble and lag in the bass. It’s ultra-swift in transient response with a turbine-like smoothness that rhythmically propels the music forward, as if tempos had been increased. There is no blurring or smearing of notes, even when Evgeny Kissin unleashes a series of lightning-strike piano arpeggios or summons a swirl of harmonics from his Steinway during Glinka’s *The Lark* [RCA].

However, there’s a region in the treble where the Micro suggests a modest coloration. It can be heard in the harmonic structure of a voice like that of a *cappella* artist Laurel Massé. A bleached,

silver quality overlays the fabric of her vocals; it implies “detail,” but unless your speaker is rolled in the treble, the added presence isn’t welcome. Also the Micro’s not as authoritative in the bass as I’d like, and at the lowest volume levels there’s some loss of character in instruments like tympani, bassoon, or acoustic bass.

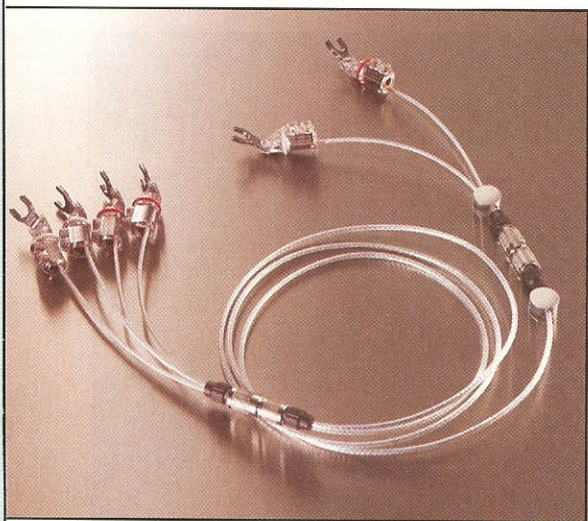
In terms of soundstage perspective the Micros always sounded as if the microphones were a couple of inches closer to the orchestra or soloist—an impression that slightly diminished the reverberant nature of larger acoustic spaces. Soundstage width was excellent, but, while depth is better than average, I found myself wanting more-complex layering of string sections. On balance, however, the Micros are arguably one of the most transparent cables I’ve heard to date.

Nordost Baldur Speaker Cables and Baldur Interconnects

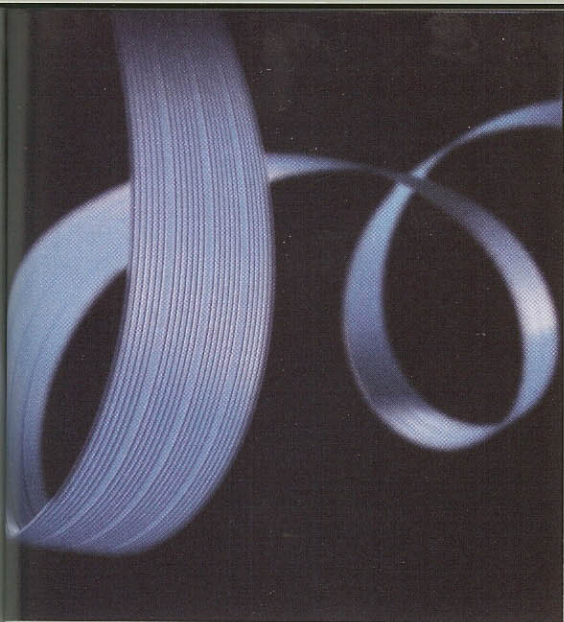
As the most affordable cables in the survey the Baldurs performed uncommonly well. They were evenly balanced, with the tonal composure and midrange solidity that I’m so fond of with Nordost wire. Baldur improves on Blue Heaven in every respect,¹ and by virtue of its greater resolution and transparency draws ever closer to Valhalla. Whereas the Blue Heaven can sound a bit whitish and hair-trigger, Baldur has greater effortlessness, with a welcoming

Crystal Cable: Crystal-Speak Micro and Crystal-Connect Micro Interconnect

Crystal Cable of the Netherlands describes its wire as “micro-sized,” and it ain’t kidding. Jewel-like, this skinny-mini could be mistaken for piano wire, and if you’re not careful it will tan-



¹ A budget staple of my reference system for years.



Tonally, Baldur has a small emphasis or "push" in the midrange that can energize violin sections a mite. Also, during Glinka's *Russian and Ludmilla Overture* from Reiner's *Chicago* [RCA], the violin section pushes forward as if gently spotlighted. Soundstaging in general was solid, but the rear of the soundstage lacked some definition, and various

Nordost closes down slightly, as if there's a narrow ridge in the upper frequencies where it peaks and settles back down. Likewise, brass sections tend to congeal a bit, and cellists had a more wiry character.

All in all, the Baldur may not be as focused as the Crystal Micro or as weighty as the TARA RSC Air 1, but it possesses a rewarding balance of criteria (and extreme affordability) that makes it tough to beat on this playing field.

midrange warmth and treble bloom. It imparts a firmer more extended low-frequency undercarriage which benefits a wide range of orchestral material. And with its class-leading low-level resolution I found myself isolating the smallest acoustic details in very specific areas of the soundstage. Baldur also has a buttery way with transients, making them rounder, without etch or hardness.

orchestral sections often sounded a little crowded together.

Perhaps my most interesting conclusion during this survey was the way each of the cables seemed to emphasize a different treble coloration. For example, when Emmylou Harris hits the upper octave of her range (in her duet with Mark Knopfler from *All The Roadrunning* [Warner Bros.]), the

TARA Labs RSC Air 1 Speaker Cables and RSC Air 1 Series 2 Interconnects

The TARA Labs RSC cabling arrived on my doorstep in the wake of a transcendent listening experience with TARA's brutally expensive Omega

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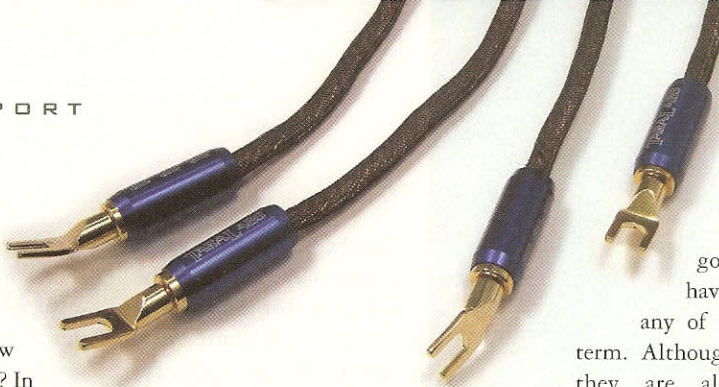
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cables—an *event* that has proved to be both a blessing and a curse.² With expectations running well into the red, how would the RSC Air 1 measure up? In fact, I can hear a great deal of Omega in the voicing of the RSC, particularly in the effortless way that it plays louder, hits dynamics a little harder, and digs a little deeper. Of this trio it's also the mellowest wire, imparting a resonant, darker character. This is an appealing trait if you enjoy cello and bass viols like I do. Complementing its lower-midrange tonal performance, the RSC Air 1 is also a specialist in larger-scale dynamics and seems to glory in the midbass octaves. Of all the cables I've listened to recently, with the exception of the preternatural Omega, the RSC exhibits a dynamism that verges on the propulsive. It has a way of extracting the micro-dynamic "touch" (even in the lower octaves) heard on pianist Warren Bernhardt's *So Real* [DMP]. And its open character seems to find "air" in the tightest spaces between notes and images.

But unlike the more forward Crystal and the Nordost, the TARA establishes a different relationship with the orchestra/soloist and the venue. Its soundstage



is the most expansive (depth and width). Instrumental images seem more settled onto the stage, like a genuine performance where you can sense the dampening qualities of the hall as it reflects and diffuses reverberant sound. The trait was also consistent during Dianne Reeves' "One For My Baby" from the *Good Night, and Good Luck* soundtrack [Warner], where the ambience retrieval of acoustic piano and bass becomes thicker, the macro- and micro-elements of the performance more fully revealed.

The TARA is dynamically lively on vocals of all stripes. But there is still a dry quality to Emmylou Harris' vocal during "If This Is Goodbye." It never grows strident, but there is a bit of fine white grit powdering the treble—a characteristic that all the cables of this survey shared to varying degrees.

It's an American pastime, crowning winners and vanquishing losers whenever competitors take the field. But in all

good conscience, I would have no problem living with any of these wires for the long term. Although they have differences, they are all uniformly excellent upgrades. There are no losers in this bunch, but there is, happily, one winner—you.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V pick-up arm; Shure V15VxMR cartridge; MBL 1531, Sony DVP-9000ES, and Simaudio Moon Supernova digital players; Plinius 9200 and MBL 7008 integrated amplifiers; ProAc Studio 140, ATC SCM20-2, MBL 121, and Pioneer 2EX loudspeakers; REL B3 subwoofer; Synergistic Research Spec REL interconnect and power cord; Vitruvial Dynamics Master, Wireworld Silver Electra & Kimber Paddian power cords; Richard Gray line conditioners; Sound Fusion turntable stand

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

CRYSTAL CABLE

29 Sunrise Lane
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458
(201) 785-1055
crystalcable-usa.com
Prices: CrystalSpeak Micro, \$2600/3m (\$2725, biwire); CrystalConnect Micro, \$599/1m, \$1119/2m

TARA LABS INC.

550 Clover Lane
Ashland, Oregon 97520
(541) 488-6465
taralabs.com
Prices: RSC Air One, \$2350/10' pr (\$1950/8' pr); RSC Air 1 Series 2 Interconnects, \$995/1m, \$1195/2m

NORDOST

200 Homer Avenue
Ashland, Maine 01721
(508) 881-1116
nordost.com
Prices: Baldur speaker, \$1379.99 3/m; interconnect, \$499.99/1m, \$674.99/2m

What's in a Cable?

Crystal Cable's Micro Series (developed in cooperation with Siltech) uses multiple silver conductors and a clever innovation—in order to increase surface area (and improve current flow) Crystal injects gold to fill the gaps between conductors. Isolation is achieved with a triple wrap of Kapton film, and finished with a silver-braided shield, wrapped in a Teflon jacket. Crystal also uses an ingenious splitter that allows the user to add cable length or swap terminations (or go from single wire to biwire) with the twist of the splitter ring.

Nordost's Baldur is one of three models that make up Nordost's new Norse line. It brings reference-line technology (think Valhalla) to down-to-earth prices. The 26 individual silver-on-copper conductors are manufactured and insulated using Nordost's proprietary Class 1 FEP extrusion process and widely spaced into Nordost's trademark flat-ribbon style. The interconnects use Nordost's Micro-Mono filament technology with twin silver-plated copper conductors.

TARA Labs' RSC Speaker cables are designed around 10+ gauge 8N copper with 24 individually insulated conductors (48 for each channel) helixed around Teflon air-tubes in *separate* positive and negative runs for each channel. The Series 2 version of the RSC Air 1 interconnect includes upgrades to the Air-Tube core technology that is central to TARA Labs' designs. It includes an increased separation between the shield and the central Air-Tube that houses the OF8N copper conductors. NG

² The blessing is that I heard them; the curse is that I can't afford them!