

Ikigai Audio Sugure digital audio cables

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Ikigai' is a Japanese term that broadly translates to 'reason for being.' It pertains to those elements that imbue life with meaning. The three product tiers of Ikigai Audio cable and equipment support feet – Sugure, Kangai, and Kinzan – all bear Japanese names. Furthermore, when you visit the Ikigai Audio site, you will find images of Mt Fuji, and the 'Company' page opens with 'Arigato!' (or 'Thank You' in Japanese). However, the company was established in the Netherlands in 2018 by Jeffrey Dam, a former engineer from Khama and Philips. This is not concealed, and Ikigai Audio is not attempting to present itself as an artisan Japanese cable maker; rather, the concept of Ikigai genuinely inspires the company and is reflected in its product ranges.

Jeffrey Dam's background makes him almost perfectly designed for audio cable manufacture. Although his academic qualifications are in Industrial Product Design, his background is in Applied Sciences, and in particular materials science. However, Dam is one of those people who has very expensive hobbies, and alongside a passion for audio, he is a keen goldsmith. Short of including 'polo' or 'restoring Ferraris', I'd struggle to think of two more expensive hobbies, but they paid off for Jeffrey Dam because they combine in making filigree silver and gold cables under the Ikigai brand.

Excellent!

Sugure (Japanese for 'excellent') employs 5N (99.999%) purity silver recrystallised conductors with two types of shielding to mitigate electromagnetic and radio-frequency spectrum interference, respectively. That term 'recrystallised' is distinct from 'monocrystal'. The distinction is a nuanced one; Ikigai thinks the notion of monocrystal cable is impossible and instead relies on the cable to form as one big crystal. Yes, as Ikigai uses a very pure silver (and in the even higher-end cables, gold) so it's a mono-material but not a monocrystal material. Ikigai's large crystal treatment is not publicly disclosed, takes a couple of days to produce and reduces burn-in time. It still takes more than 100 hours to condition the cable after manufacture, but the cables I tried had already seen many hours of use so I can't comment on how this break in affects sound quality.

We've concentrated on the USB and Ethernet digital audio cables in this review, but what applies for the digital, applies universally. So, in the USB cable, it features fully separated data and power lines, both with extra gauge and filigree 5N Silver with two different types of EM/RF shielding. Meanwhile, the Ethernet cables also use pure extra-gauge 5N silver conductors (four pairs in the Gigabit Ethernet design) and Telegärtner terminations at each end. Both 100Mbit and Gbit Ethernet cables use four types of EM/RF shielding. All three benefit from 100% shielding coverage.

That last sentence could be a throwaway line, but a significant part of the Ikigai ethos is to keep the rest of the world at bay, through high-quality shielding. The company uses an aerospace-style solution of tightly tinned copper mesh made up of multiple layers. The dual layer of copper mesh protects the stranded core of silver from extraneous noise. This works just as well in keeping the +5V power lines on USB from interfering with the signal conductors in very close proximity.

Lord of the rings

You might be mistaken for thinking the logo rings on each cable are some kind of filter, or even a ferrite ring. Filters get a firm 'no' from Ikigai, however, as they don't fit in with the company ethos. Instead, the ring denotes the level of the cable (they otherwise look very similar to the naked eye), shows directionality (granted that's less useful in USB) and includes the laser-engraved serial number. This is also replicated in the 'case candy,' as it's hand-written in the manual supplied in the case with each Ikigai cable. The packaging is minimal, with recycled bag and a wooden inset on the top of a recycled black box. There are no other identifiers on the box, so stock-keeping must be fun!

As you progress up the line, high-purity silver is complemented by silver and gold. At the Kinzan end, there is even more gold and a greater number of ever finer silver conductors. The more upscale lines utilise cotton insulation. Aside from the digital cables, Ikigai uses ETI Research KRYO and BRYO series and WBT terminations – although if you have a specific choice of termination, the company can accommodate. It uses welded rather than soldered connections throughout.





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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Ikigai Audio Sugure



» Listening to the Ikigai cables is easy; they are extremely consistent and have a characteristic sound that's likeable and approachable in equal measure. These are not big and bold looking cables, and they aren't big or bold sounding either. Instead, there's a lightness and deftness of touch to the sound; refined without being the least bit 'showy' or brash. You just find yourself relaxing into the music, but that's not code for 'boring' or even 'relaxed' sounding.

These cables are incredibly good at doing what seem like two contradictory things at the same time; they are clean and detailed, especially in the upper midband and treble. And yet they are effortless and entirely fatigue-free. The more you unpack that statement, the more you realise these shouldn't be contradictory, but we have come to equate clean mids and upper regions with an edginess we presume is intrinsic to audio. It's not, and the Ikigai cables go some way to show the way out of this siloed thinking. This means when you play something with lots of bright treble energy – such as 'Terminal Slam' by Squarepusher [*Be Up A Hello*, Warp] – it portrays it with all the frenetic speed and high-frequency energy required of this intense track. However, when you play something with a more mellow approach – 'Go Down Easy' by John Martyn [*Solid Air*, Island], for example – and it treats that more mid-range mood music with equal aplomb. In both cases, Ikigai cables make you want to dig deeper into their respective back-catalogues, despite the significant differences in musical style.

Sinewy and sensual

That detailed, yet unfatiguing, presentation gives Ikigai an ability to dig really deep into the recording. Even recordings you know well have something more – or something different – to give. Lady Blackbird's voice, for example, is powerful and soulful, but sometimes that voice seems to be all about the power. A closer listen through the Ikigai cables shows her to have a sensual tone throughout, but this is often masked by her belting out the songs. Aretha Franklin had the same problem; with a weaponised set of lungs on

hand, the force of her voice sometimes detracts from the sensual, but it's there. You just need a system capable of extracting the deeper stuff, and Ikigai's Sugure cables do just that.

Similarly, the cables reveal the sinew and strength in the surprisingly delicate. We expect that from music like Bach's Cello Suites and Monteverdi's Madrigals, but I'm afraid I often dismiss a lot of the baroque as just ornament. Specifically I usually find Handel's Water Music to be little more than orchestral noodling. But listening here, I found myself drawn deeper into this intensely English music ever composed by a German. The repetition I once found boring became clever instrumentation, the musicianship (I played the Pinnock/ECO version on Archiv) is dynamic and, full of strength and sinew.

Moving around my music collection to electronica, opera light and heavy, even a spot of pure Wet Leg indie pop, only served to confirm the performance of the Ikigai cables. They give an excellent midrange, great treble, dig out any energy in the sound. And yet they remain inherently musical.

A hand at the tiller

Cables should not alter the sound; they should enhance it as their performance improves. At their worst, the inherent filtering properties of an audio cable are ever-present. At their best, their filtering is kept to a bare minimum. However, as every cable acts as a filter to some extent, I'd prefer someone at the tiller making sure that the filter sounds good. That's what's going on here. The cables sound excellent, and cumulatively so.

This doesn't mean Ikigai has an all-or-nothing, change-every-cable-in-the-system effect. It's more that each cable gently wins you over. It's less of an annexation, more of a gradual and increasingly firm friendship with your system.

I'd lay bets that Jeffrey Dam purchased a book titled something like 'The Little Book of Ikigai' and read it from cover to cover. Twice. Whatever the origin story, it certainly paid off, and the Ikigai Sugure digital audio cables not only work exceptionally well but also make me curious about the rest of the Sugure range. And then there's Kangai and Kinzan above it. As the man said, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." +

Price and contact details

Sugure USB: £1,650/0.7m (£250 per additional 0.25m)

Sugure 100Mbit Ethernet: £1,725/1m (£330 per additional 0.25m)

Sugure Gbit Ethernet: £2,850/1m (£495 per additional 0.25m)

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