

REVIEW

TELLURIUM Q ULTRA BLACK II

XLR INTERCONNECTS



Tellurium Q launched their very first cables ten years ago this month and so what better time for Janine Elliot to test out the second iteration of this UK based company's Ultra Black interconnects, the Ultra Black II costing £558 a pair in XLR format.

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Geoff Merrigan of Tellurium Q is very protective over the content of his cables at Tellurium Q. Their design and components remain a mystery to everyone except him and his UK based team. Geoff believes you should just listen to them and judge them for yourself without being inundated with blurb about their inner workings. All he will say is that his cables are unique; "The things we look at in developing a cable are not what people would expect". Even the excellent XLR plugs on the model for review here are made to Tellurium Q's own specification with three levels of plating, and solder chosen for its acoustic transparency. When making new products they are put into studios and then friends to audition before they ever go to market, and every component is chosen because it is the very best for the particular quality bracket (more on that later). Similarly, Geoff doesn't take reviews for granted and is always nervous about the outcome, though he needn't have worried about this one.

On asking Geoff what was better about the Ultra Black II interconnect over its predecessor the Ultra Black he simply sent me both cables so that I could listen to the two and hear the difference for myself. That was a great opportunity for me to experience some great chemistry from this ex-industrial chemistry student. Training in material science, Geoff turned to cable manufacturing exactly 10 years ago. Certainly, Geoff puts a lot of magic into his cables as they have been raved about by reviewers and the company achieved the Queen's Award for Enterprise in 2018. This second version of the cable, the Ultra Black II, is nothing like its predecessor, indeed, the only reason it carries the name to the next level is because it fits in the same quality bracket, the Ultra Black being mid-range with the Silver range tops and Blue the starter range and with each range designed for matching with particular levels of products. The Ultra Black range prides itself on being a natural and transparent series "that allows an incredible life-like reproduction for use in a well-balanced system to simply unlock what the system can do". The loudspeaker cable bearing the same name looks nothing like the interconnect, their big link being, as Geoff says "The minimizing of phase distortion, inherent in all cables. This is because all cables act as filters and add their own amplitude and

phase characteristics". Tellurium Q aims to remove this; "We are primarily focused on removing the smearing of frequencies through a timing shift and by doing this you get better clarity and transparency".

Reducing the filtering effect is not an easy task, and when making cables Geoff needs to consider everything going into construction including multiple stranded conductors of slightly differing materials and various dielectric materials and geometries. Attention to detail also includes the solder, plating thicknesses and even consideration as to specifying what chemicals should or should not be included in a plating bath. The process of soldering (temperature etc) also varies depending on which cable is being made. He, like many others including myself, doesn't like silver solder, but he has found an ideal solder that doesn't contain silver or lead. Geoff has discovered that the shininess of the silver used in the connectors varies, commenting "A shiny finish is less conductive because of the additives used in order to make it shiny" and so the silver used in the cables appears matt. Tellurium Q wants to engineer as clear and phase-neutral a path for the signal as possible and to preserve the original signal phase relations as much as is possible.

The loudspeaker version of the Ultra Black is indeed an exceptional cable, so just how good would the XLR interconnect version be...I wanted to find out. My main system comprises two XLR cable paths; one between my Krell KPS 20i CD and Music First Audio pre, and the other cable between the pre and the Krell KAV250a power amp, the cables consisting of top Nordost and Ecosse cables respectively. They work a treat, so the Tellurium Q would need to be pretty damn good to get my vote. Whilst both Ultra Black and Ultra Black II look totally different (apart from the plugery) I would be in for a surprise just how different the two cables would sound. To do that I would need to spend several hours listening to the earlier model followed by the new. This all became a very enjoyable few weeks for me listening to Saint-Saëns, Tanguito, Holst, and Pink Floyd amongst others.

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SOUND QUALITY

Don't tell me CD is dead. Using my brilliant Krell KPS20i gives some astounding results. I still believe this to be one of the best and musical performers out there. This not only uses the excellent Philips CDM9 Pro transport but has no less than four power supplies and 12 regulators for digital and analogue sections, with the important digits up-sampled to 24bit and featuring 56-bit internal precision. No wonder the thing gets so hot. I wasn't shy to use this machine as the first part of my testing, initially with the older Ultra Black. The first piece of music was my Saint-Saëns Symphony no 3, better known as the Organ Symphony, though it also employs a brilliant rippling pianoforte part. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra do the best version out there in my opinion; a performance of great musicality with excellent placing of instruments and attention to detail of dynamics marked in the score. As expected, the Ultra Black gave a compelling performance with great bass, punchy treble and good detail of position of each instrument. It was good, but nothing on the scale of the Ultra Black II. I could now not only hear exquisite detail of each instrument, including the Organ sounding slightly out of tune on a few top pipes but in the second movement could hear the individual weight of the bow falling on the violin strings on their reprieve of the main theme. Everything was up a large notch on its predecessor; a more extended and clearer bass-end and improved speed and detail at all frequencies. This is quite unusual; usually one end of the frequency scale benefits at the expense of the other, but here nothing was lost. More importantly, it sounded like the orchestra was in the room with me.

Turning to Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition (Orchestre National de Lyon) the music was precise with a greater bass extension and energy than I remember it having. "Walking on the Moon", Yur Honig Trio, had me flying high with excitement with the level of detail of the music, particularly the powerful and close drumming with echoes from the snare drum so very clear. "Children Go Where I Send Them" (The Fairfield Four) was open, exact, tight and with an extended bass that my Torus sub welled in.

Thelonius Monk was a brilliant jazz pianist, and Devialet with Fondamenda has created a series of rare or forgotten albums of jazz treats including Monk's concert at Rotterdam in 1967. 'Ruby, Dear Ruby' is one of his best-known works. The Tellurium Q gave an open and spacious performance, especially front and back. Despite this recording's lack of stereo depth, the cable made mono wholly acceptable even to my stereo ears. Monk's style might be somewhat dissonant, aggressive and with modern harmonies, but the cable eked out every ounce of musicality with panache. Music was controlled and highly addictive. The excellent percussion mic'ing allowed the music to sound alive; it might be forceful, but it was in control. The extended bass solo in track "Hackensack" had equally high potency, control and detail. This cable picked up everything.

Staying with jazz I turned to "Jump St(u)art" from Jim Gallioreto's Split 'Decision'. Again, it was the detail and pace in the bass that caught my attention. This track is recorded with just two AKG 414EB microphones recorded on to a Nagra IV S tape recorder, something I am in favour of to give a very natural spread and phase correct sound across the sound stage. With the acoustic bass on the left and Rhodes piano on the right and with tenor sax and drums in between this was a very natural sound covering all frequencies with detail and musicality, and no phase issues at all from this cable. Next, I chose "Poetspeak" with Fred Simon on keyboard. This had great control and depth with top ends clearer than from my resident cables. This was pure magic at work. Listening to "Tubby" (Ted Sirota's Rebel Souls) I was even able to pick out sympathetic vibrations from the bass on the

'snare' of the snare drums at the start. Everything was given space and respect from this cable; nothing out of place or exaggerated, nothing filtered out. This was as clean a sound as it gets.

Turning to Mozart's Horn concerto in Eb K-447 suddenly the soundstage was wide and spacious. Indeed, something the Ultra Black II excelled in was in getting the maximum out of the soundstage. I was now in a big hall rather than it being a 'pair of AKG microphones'. The Ultra Black gave a greater depth to the soundstage than the more forward sound from my resident cables. Whilst the Mozart horn concertos don't perhaps get such a good reception as his piano concertos, in reality, the horn has an even wider expressive range than the keyboard and is none the less exciting. Indeed the horn is thought to be closely related to the human voice; its range being close to that of a baritone. The TQ cable gave an extremely emotional and human performance, so much so that I was compelled to listen to the other three Horn concertos on this album from Philips (Hermann Baumann and St Paul Chamber Orchestra). So much for doing a quick review. Whatever I played I wanted to hear more and more. Not bad for TQ's mid-range cable. I just wondered how good their top-end Silver cable would sound like.

Placing the Ultra Black II between the pre and power amplifier gave equally good results. Listening to Lee Jones's distinctive voice in "Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most", her almost "yawning" voice was so detailed accompanied by the equally relaxed bass and guitar I was far from yawning as I hadn't heard such a controlled bass end for ages.

The "world's first Binaural Direct Cut Recording" from Chasing the Dragon and Pachelbel's Canon was next on the listening list. This record really needs to have a pair of headphones at the end of it as it doesn't work so well on speakers, but the TQ cable made every ounce of reverb count. Whilst other cables might smear the sound, the Black II was pure black and white. Nothing added and nothing taken away. I was there amongst the musicians.

STS from The Netherlands make some amazing recordings, largely using the iconic Philips EL3501 reel to reel, though their collection of other machines from around the world will set any reel-to-reel lover drooling at the mouth. I am pleased to have several recordings from this company. Their "On the Way to the 30th Analog Forum Anniversary" is perhaps not the easiest title to remember but the music is very memorable and easy to listen to, with close-mic'd guitar and beautiful saxophone playing. Fritz de With's recordings have excellent space and timing as well as great sound quality and track 2 "They Can't Take that Away from Me" from George Gershwin certainly had nothing missing. Again, the TQ gave a clear rendition with complete focus on making good music. I could understand exactly what Geoff meant about focusing on eradicating phase distortion. Interestingly Fritz de With ensures in his recordings that there is phase purity, both by the choice of cables/connections and also acoustic phase that is acquired through proper placement of the microphones, something I was OTT about as a sound engineer at the BBC. The TQ cable extended that further in my system. The music was so pure. "It Might As Well Be Spring" allowed me to pin-point in 4K detail every breath from the beautiful tenor saxophone. This was fun and I really didn't want to have to unplug these cables but alas I would need to do so, well, maybe after a few more records and reel to reel tapes, and perhaps a glass of wine...

CONCLUSION

For precision from lowest to highest frequencies and with all types of music these cables are a no brainer. Having run in these cables over

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the few weeks that I had them I could see exactly what Geoff was trying to do, even if he is rather secretive about what magic is inside them. And boy did the cable work in my system; the music was controlled, and with an open and natural transmission of the music with no colouration. There was a great sense of spatial and phase awareness in the music, and this meant not just between speakers but all around them, giving for a more exciting and compelling listen. I just hope I get asked to review the Ultra Silver.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Excellent quality control. Excellent XLR connectors.

Sound Quality: Excellent clarity and transparency to the music at all frequencies with excellent speed of operation.

Value for Money: £558 might sound a lot but boy does this sound worth every penny.

Pros: Clarity and transparency. Excellent soundstage allowing music to sound exactly as it is intended.

Cons: Nothing other than I wish I knew what was inside...

Price: £558

