

Tellurium Q digital cable range

by Nicholas Ripley



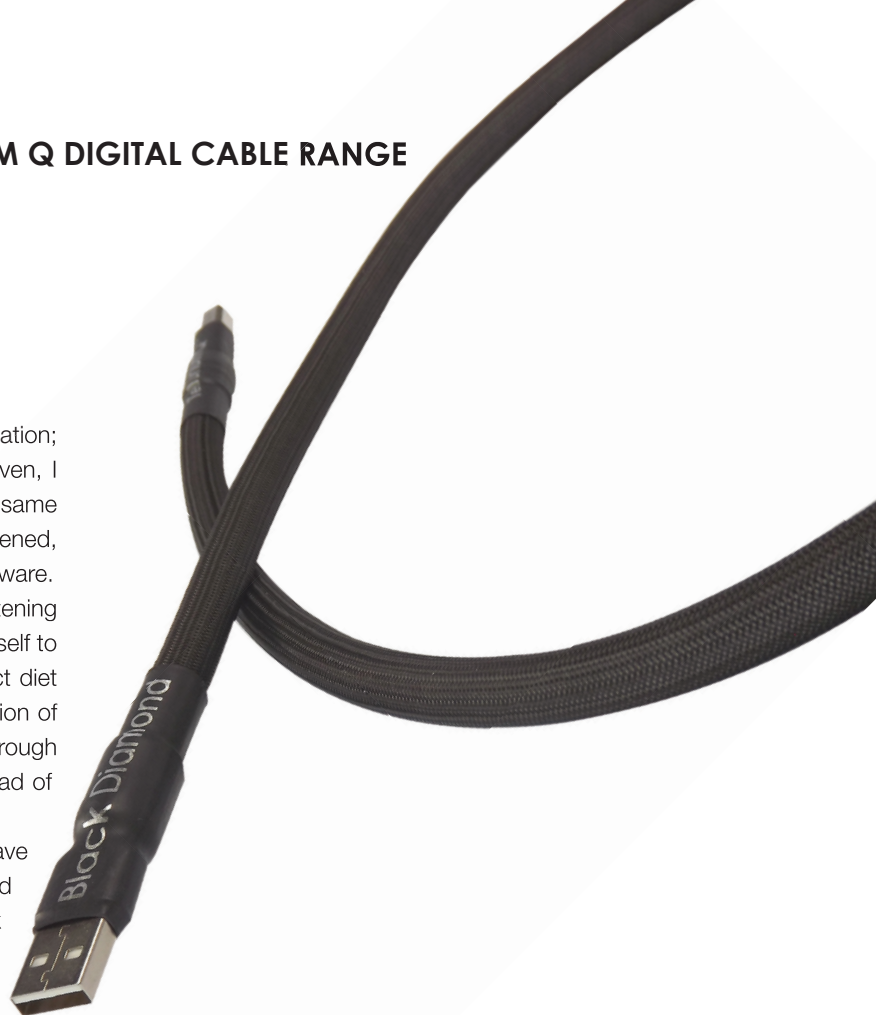
Let's get the difficult part of this review out of the way. Tellurium Q doesn't publish specifications – in part because it doesn't want to hand over its trade secrets to its rivals, and in part because there's a tendency for people to make odd proclamations about sound based on materials alone ("it's a silver cable, and as such it sounds shiny"). While this is entirely understandable from a commercial proposition (Tellurium Q is not alone in this; Kubala Sosna is also reluctant to disclose details of its designs), it does make it difficult to explain 'how' Tellurium Q cables sound as they do, and 'why' one cable might perform better than the next in line. The nearest we get is that the cables are designed to eliminate phase distortions in general and the digital cables are good at removing the demon problem for all things onesy-noughtsy... jitter!

Worse, there is an increasing rejection of the need for aftermarket cables, and that rejection is focused in particular on digital cables, and most especially USB. In a way, that isn't important; 'how' and 'why' a thing makes a difference becomes academic when you are ideologically opposed to it making a difference in the first place. The growing 'bits-is-bits' chorus would likely reject any description of the concepts underlying Tellurium Q's cables as so much snake oil anyway. So, maybe dispensing with the 'why it does it' is not such a bad idea, after all – for the manufacturer, at least.

We were given a range of Tellurium Q digital cables for test; five in total. Black and Graphite (in USB and 75-ohm coaxial S/PDIF configuration) and Black Diamond (available in USB only). The prices of these cables ranged from a smidgeon under £300 for the Black USB, right up to a frisky £740 for the Graphite coaxial. There are also digital XLR cables for AES/EBU installations in the Black and Graphite lines, priced identically to their S/PDIF brethren. They all have a common character to the performance, and that performance does improve as we move up the lines in fairly clear steps, so most of the test concentrated on extracting the most from the best; the aforementioned Graphite, and the £660 Black Diamond.

To do this, I simplified my system to its barest bones; a computer, a CD transport, a Wadia 121 DAC, which I used as headphone amplifier into a pair of Philips Fidelio X1 headphones. By way of comparison I used my usual Nordost Blue Heaven USB. The only hiccup here was the CD transport; although I've still got all my CDs, most of my digital listening is now through computer and I had to borrow that front end (the B.M.C. Audio BDCD1.1 tested by AS last issue) and acclimatise myself once more to spinning discs. I also borrowed a Nordost Blue Heaven S/PDIF for consistency.

This turned out to be an interesting and almost immediate overtuning of any 'bits is bits' mentality I might have still been harbouring. It's actually irrelevant which Tellurium Q cable you select to compare against its Nordost opponent, it's more that the difference in the nature of the performance of both 'families' is so huge as to render the 'bits is bits' idea laughable to any listener. Curiously, I had expected this difference to be less significant, because both Nordost and Tellurium Q have a reputation for leading the field in leading-edge resolution. This turned out to be correct, but after that things went in very different directions. Put simply, the Nordost had more energy, and the Tellurium Q cables were darker sounding. ▶



▶ Neither is an inherently 'right' or 'wrong' presentation; even though I use – and continue to use – Blue Heaven, I could appreciate the Tellurium Q cables as walking the same path, just in slightly different shoes. And the more I listened, the more I came to appreciate that other choice of footwear.

After the comparison session, I spent greater time listening to just the Tellurium Q range, in a way acclimatising myself to its performance in its own right. I put myself on a strict diet of moderns for this process, as I believe the combination of the sonorous Debussy to the riotous Stravinsky right through to the experimental Webern cover a good overall spread of sounds to cleanse and reinvigorate the palette.

Once de-Nordosted, I could hear that the cables have a potent solidity to the way the music is structured, and this is especially noticeable in music that doesn't stick to old musical patterns, like Schoenberg. This, coupled with the overall speed of the cables in general (and Black Diamond USB in particular), gives a sense of drive and order to music that can easily appear chaotic. It's perhaps a less immediate sound than I'm used to (hence the need to 'decompress' after the comparison session), but over extended listening reveals itself to have subtlety of texture and shade that is extremely attractive. It remains a rich sound, but not in a false and certainly not in a thick or bloated manner. Nor is it a tone control, although those with an exceptionally dark sounding system might find the addition of Tellurium Q's digital line 'a step too far'. Instead, it's a tonal character trait, and one I personally find positive; a Richard Burton in a world of Tiny Tims.

I'm not one profoundly driven by rhythm; the music I enjoy rarely places great accent on the tempo. However, I was impressed by the way the Tellurium Q cables seemed to approach transients (both leading and trailing edge) and cohere the sound of the music temporally. Although I am not sure how a digital cable can influence the timing of a musical signal, it's clear through audition that the Tellurium Q cables do just that.

Perhaps the one of the strongest things the Tellurium Q cables have in their favour is their consistency, both vertically and horizontally. By that, I mean that the cables have a distinct and common sound, whether S/PDIF or USB, and they improve across the range in several important aspects, including inner detail retrieval, dynamics, and solidity of instruments in the soundstage. That rich, dark chocolate presentation gets richer and darker as you go up the lines too. It's a consistency that is rare, and a sure sign the company behind the product is not simply 'in it for the money'. Finally, Black Diamond USB is a true gem! All highly recommended. +

PRICE AND CONTACT DETAILS

Cable: Tellurium Q Black Digital

Connection type: RCA (tested) and XLR

Price: £390/1m

Cable: Tellurium Q Black USB

Connection type: USB A/USB B

Price: £298.80/1m

Cable: Tellurium Q Graphite Digital

Connection type: RCA (tested) and XLR

Price: £740/1m

Cable: Tellurium Q Graphite USB

Connection type: USB A/USB B

Price: £450/1m

Cable: Tellurium Q Black Diamond USB

Connection type: USB A/USB B

Price: £660/1m

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