



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Tellurium Q loudspeaker cables and interconnects

by Steve Dickinson

**T**ellurium Q is a recent entry to an already fairly well-populated field. They have a range of four loudspeaker cables, starting at an entirely sensible £16 per linear metre and extending to, if not the stratosphere, certainly the upper levels of the troposphere (where one has to breathe deeply and quickly or risk light-headedness, or worse). There is also an interconnect, priced at a level where hyperventilation is somewhat less necessary. The rationale behind the Tellurium Q range is a belief that the preservation of the phase relationship in a musical signal is the most important element. That differs from the majority of cable manufacturers out there, but chimes very well with my own experience. I've begun to think that phase coherence is not only important (and often neglected) but is in many ways fundamental to a properly musical performance. Phase coherence isn't simply a matter of making sure all the red plugs go to the red sockets and so-on, either, but if the high frequencies in a musical signal are phase-shifted relative to the lows, the resultant sound will be smeared and musicality will suffer.

Talking of red plugs and red sockets, the TQ interconnects don't have a 'red' and 'black' cable, each cable has a red end and a black one. Red is the 'upstream' end, black goes into the 'downstream' component. The interconnect is available in three variants, normal single-ended, high-impedance single-ended (for some valve designs) and balanced. DIN versions will be along presently, for those of that persuasion. There is only the one interconnect in the range, priced at £279.00 for a 1 metre single-ended pair. They are fairly chunky, but flexible, with good quality locking connectors at each end. On appearance alone, they look worth the money. Of course, nobody would buy an interconnect on looks alone, would they?

Just as well the TQ interconnect sounds so good, then. Putting it into my system, I was impressed by just how communicative this modestly priced cable was. Compared to my favourite of the similarly-priced cables I had to hand, the TQ offered a significant improvement in focus, timing and overall lucidity. 'Clandestino' by Roberto Fonseca, from the album Zamazu, is a busy, latin-jazz number with stabbing piano, fast and complex percussion and driving bass. Through the TQ cables, it was apparent just how percussive Fonseca's piano style is and the interconnect not only gave me the piano tone, but also reminded me how brilliant a pianist I was listening to. Piano is a tricky instrument to reproduce, often sounding smeared and blurred; the TQ created a solid, stable image with a very good sense of the weight and sonority of the instrument. Percussion was focussed and impactful, with speed and control and I didn't just hear the bass clearly, I could feel how it was being played. That's the thing, it's not really about the obvious things like tonal colour or graininess, what the TQ cables do so much better than their peers is portray the musicianship. In



the Fonseca piece, it was clear that not only were the musicians playing their parts, but they were listening and responding to each other, playing as an ensemble.

Time and again, I listened to familiar pieces and the Tellurium Q impressed not only with the hi-fi stuff like colour, timing and dynamics, but with a firm sense of the shape and substance of instruments, a clear portrayal of performance, how and why the players were doing what they did. Sometimes I like a piece of music because it is pretty, or maybe tuneful or dramatic. But these are short-lived enthusiasms. For a piece to become a long-time favourite, there must be something to hold my attention and keep me going back for more. That something is performance, it's an essence born of subtlety, skill and insight and it's one of the things I think you simply can't get to any meaningful degree without phase coherence. The Tellurium Q interconnects tap into the performance to an extent I've not previously encountered at this price level.

The speaker cables can be thought of as being grouped into two pairs, Blue and Black; Green and Ultra Black. Physically the pairings look similar, with the black-coloured cable taking pole position in each. Each upgrade improves on the qualities of the last without undermining the strengths of those



▶ below it; no sudden changes of direction as you move up the ranking, if you like the entry-level product, you'll love the top of the range. The emphasis, again, is on musical communication. All the TQ cables bar the Blue come made to length and pre-terminated with Z plugs, a simple design whose performance is good enough to be standard on my usual Nordost Tyr, a cable costing around 50 times the price of the entry-level Tellurium Q. Blue is bought straight off the reel from dealers, who will also fit Z plugs.

We'll start, then, with Tellurium Q Blue. A neat and flexible, flattish, cable jacketed in a fairly grown-up shade of blue, it gave a pretty good account of itself right from the start. While it's not bargain-bucket price, it's certainly a budget cable in terms of cost, a 3m stereo pair will set you back around £100. For that, you get a degree of coherence, timing and focus distinctly uncommon, in my experience, for this sort of money. These qualities give the cable a very engaging presentation with good pace and drive, accompanied by very decent levels of inner detail and musical insight. What it lacks is most noticeable at the frequency extremes: less weight to the bottom registers and some gentle rolling-off of upper treble makes this a fairly easy-going cable which will probably flatter budget systems, without exposing any obvious flaws too starkly. The midrange, in contrast, is engaging, lucid and perhaps ever so slightly forward; vocals, for example, are well-projected and simple, acoustic tracks come across with a very effective degree of intimacy and intent. 'Red Rain' by Peter Gabriel starts with some fairly light and fast percussion, mostly cymbal work, quite useful as a yardstick for upper treble performance. This was, as expected, perfectly acceptable at the price, but somewhat soft and mellowed in absolute terms. Then the bass and lead guitars came in, and Gabriel began to sing, and what had started as a quick 30 second check of the intro turned into a proper listen to the entire track. Carried along by a wave of energy and propulsiveness, this was music I simply couldn't ignore. Not a bad start, at all.

So, what about the Blue's pricier sibling, the Black? Similar in profile to the Blue, the only external difference is the colour of the jacket, a nice, sober black. Still discreetly sized, flattish and flexible, this is without question an easy cable to manage. Tonally, the bass is firmed-up and the treble is cleaner, crisper and more extended than the Blue, but the cable's midrange is still the first thing you tend to notice. Then, again, you realise there's lots of wonderful stuff going on with the performances. Listening to 'Roxanne' from Sting's live album All This

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Tellurium Q interconnects.

Single-ended

1 metre pair £279.00

1.5 metre pair £309.00

Balanced

1 metre pair £359.00

1.5 metre pair £399.00

Tellurium Q loudspeaker cable.

Blue £16 per linear (mono) metre, unterminated

Black £46 per linear (mono) metre, made to length, terminated with Z plugs

Green £145 per linear (mono) metre, made to length, terminated with Z plugs

Ultra Black £248 per linear (mono) metre, made to length, terminated with Z plugs

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- ▶ Time, the vocals project clearly and cleanly and it's all too obvious just what outstanding musicians Sting chooses for his gigs. The TQ Black may not be completely faithful to the tonal balance, compared to a full-range, high-end cable for example, but for sensible money, it gets you through to the essence of the music, partly by virtue of its good timing, inner clarity and that luminous midband, but mainly because it offers insight into the way the instruments are being played that is rare at this price. This is a very communicative, engaging and capable presentation, making it the most natural thing to just forget about listening to the system and simply enjoy the music. Back to Peter Gabriel, 'Biko' through the Black is assured and confidence-inspiring – the opening percussion and vocals are more solidly and convincingly portrayed, but most tellingly, the atmosphere and mood created, that feeling of world music exoticism, mixed with tension and foreboding, comes across much more convincingly via the Black.

What we do get with the Black, then, are some strong hints at the performance of the top cable, the Ultra Black. Timing and dynamics have taken a noticeable step up in performance; the general levels of coherence in this cable put it well ahead of any examples of its obvious competition which have crossed my path.

*“Whatever you do, don't audition the Ultra Black. As I said before, once you do, there's no going back.”*

This seems like a good point to talk about the top of the range loudspeaker cable, the Ultra Black. Physically much bulkier than the Blue and Black, most obviously due to a 3cm web which separates the two signal cables, each of which is also somewhat heavier gauge. It's both less flexible, and visually more obtrusive than either the Blue or the Black, but many, me included, will think this a price worth paying. That price, by the way, is slightly under £250 per linear metre, so this is a significant stretch from the cheaper variants.

I'm not really a Sinatra fan. I don't dislike him, but I never understood what all the fuss was about. Until recently. A friend gave me a copy of the remastered CD version of Only the Lonely and 'One for my baby' is, no way around it, quite simply a masterpiece. The way the man creates an atmosphere; subtle, intimate, regretful. His phrasing, the way he modulates his voice, his exquisite timing. This is not merely talent, it's genius. Through the Black, the piano and performer seem slightly semi-detached, almost as though the pianist is noodling along to himself and Sinatra is doing his own thing over the top of him. Through the Ultra Black, it's clear that this detachment is nothing of the sort, the pianist is giving Sinatra all the space he needs, but listening carefully and underpinning the whole thing. It's the most beautifully understated performance I've heard in ages and the Ultra Black is one of very few cables I've heard which does it any sort of justice.

What you're getting for your money is partly extra bandwidth, better articulation, timing and control, but much, much more significant is the way the Ultra Black lets the listener perceive the musicianship. It's not something you simply hear, you're just aware that this is better: the musicians are more skilful, and playing higher quality instruments. This makes for a pretty compelling

level of musical connection, we're now comfortably, firmly, irretrievably in the realms of being able to enjoy the performance, rather than merely hearing the music. There's no going back from here. The sheer physicality of Joanna Macgregor's playing on 'Libertango' from Live in Buenos Aires for example. That track also shows another strength of the Ultra Black, its inner focus, lucidity and general cohesiveness. This isn't simply about being able to hear low level detail, but tonally everything is tightened up, there is less noise, backgrounds are blacker, there's a sense that everything is being given every opportunity to work properly. Piano, for example, sounds very slightly blurred by comparison through the regular Black but Ultra Black gives the instrument not only clarity, but proper weight and scale.

The Green sits below the Ultra Black in the range and offers a fairly substantial cost saving. It shares the flagship cable's profile, but in comparison sounds a little held-back. Perhaps slightly less subtlety, timbral detail and definition to soundstage depth and solidity but the vital tunefulness, timing and leading edge detail is still clearly there. The impression, through the Green, is that the musicians are slightly less determined than they are when heard through the Ultra Black. Listening to the Kings Singers perform 'Villancico Catalan' the Ultra Black gives a more open, fluid and expressive performance than the Green, which lacks some of the sense of ethereality, born of the commitment and concentration of the performers. This is a serious lack, once you've heard the Ultra Black, the Green just won't do. Having said all that, I'm quite sure the Green is a significant step ahead of most cables at the price in terms of communicating those nebulous qualities we think of as musicality and performance, so if you can stretch to the Green but no further, I'd give it a hearty recommendation but, whatever you do, don't audition the Ultra Black. As I said before, once you do, there's no going back. +