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EQUIPMENT REPORT

Transparent Reference XL Digital Link Interconnect

Must-Audition

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Close readers of TAS—and what other kind are there?—may recall that I recently contributed a sidebar to editor Robert Harley’s comprehensive review of the new dCS Vivaldi CD/SACD playback system. In it, I compared and contrasted the performance of the dCS Scarlatti, the company’s longtime flagship, to the Vivaldi, concluding that the latter handily surpassed its predecessor. There I thought the matter rested. I was wrong. In recent months, there have been rumblings of even greater gains to be had by employing Transparent Audio’s new Reference XL line of digital cables. Transparent itself claims new technological advances in designing these cables. It says, “Reference XL Digital Link uses Transparent Advanced Expanded Foam Technology for precise impedance control and low noise signal transmission. With a solid OFHC conductor that is significantly larger than the Reference 75-ohm Digital Link conductor, Reference XL Digital Link has far more surface area with which to transfer digital signals accurately.” It doesn’t

take more than a glance to see that the construction of these handsome cables is exemplary.

But how much further could the performance of the dCS Vivaldi be taken? Well, the answer to that question is not exactly what I thought it would be. After Transparent’s Brad O’Toole sent me the new cables for review, I anticipated some improvement in the bass and treble, and perhaps a pinch more detail. Once again, I was dead wrong.

The improvement rendered by the new cables was not subtle or minor or difficult to detect. On the contrary, inserting them proved to be one of the most flabbergasting experiences I have ever had in the high end. The Reference line did not improve the sound; it took it into another realm. As good as the Vivaldi is—and it is superb—there can be doubt that ancillary equipment such as the digital cables employed on it not only can but do have a profound effect upon its reproduction of music.

This is not an easy concession for me to make because it adds

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substantially to the cost of the already costly Vivaldi. But friends, there is no way around it. The Transparent digital cable makes an immense improvement by banishing any lingering digital artifacts, opening up the treble, sending the bass plunging down another octave, fleshing out the midbass, and noticeably increasing the articulation and weight of instruments and voice.

Take the recording by the London Brass of Francois Couperin's *La Triomphante*. The brass possess a vibrancy, a snap and sassiness, that simply was not present previously. Somehow micro-dynamics also benefit immensely from the Transparent cables. The attacks of trumpets are resounding—they pop into the air. They sound, to put it another way, as if they are supported by more air. The swells and crescendos of the brass choruses are vastly clearer. But at the same time, the increase in dynamic range means that pianissimo passages simultaneously sound softer and clearer. It is as though these cables increase the bandwidth of a recording. At the most basic level, the intonation of voice and instruments—the centering of an individual note—is much more precise.

Nor is this all. Soundstage separation also benefits. The soundstage seemed to expand laterally and to deepen. The sense of three-dimensionality, of an actual stage populated by musicians and instruments, is heightened. Suddenly a background chorus to Leonard Cohen on his CD *Old Ideas* isn't simply floating murkily in the background but is its own distinct entity. Or take John Eliot Gardiner's recording of Bach's "Advent" Cantatas for Arkiv. There is something profoundly moving about the ability to hear each chorus gently enter without intruding on the others. The anchoring of the instruments, the lack of any sense of

drift, means that it becomes simplicity itself to track complex passages of music, something that also becomes abundantly clear on Andras Schiff's marvelous recording on ECM of the Bach Partitas.

But the greatest merit of the Reference XL is its supernatural ability to help deliver a kind of clarity on digital playback that I have never previously experienced. The slightest swish of the cymbals, a foot tapping on a piano pedal, the mildest brush of the bow on a cello—nothing is effaced by these cables. There is a limpidity and tranquility, a sense of ease to the sound, that are hard to forget once you've heard them. Whether on jazz, classical, rock, or rap, the Reference XL/Vivaldi possesses the ability to vanish from the signal chain, imposing no audible coloration.

No doubt further advancement in digital playback looms. The high end bears more than a passing resemblance to an arms race in which various manufacturers constantly attempt to one-up each other. But for now, the combination of the dCS Vivaldi and Transparent Reference XL digital cables exceeds anything else I have heard. I could tell you that it took a lot of listening and chin-stroking to arrive at this conclusion. Fiddlesticks. It didn't take long at all to realize that these cables take digital performance to a glorious place. If you have a high-end digital rig, then auditioning Transparent Reference XL is not a good idea. It is a must. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

Reference XL Digital Link (75 ohm): \$3195 (one meter)
Reference XL Digital Link (110 ohm): \$3595 (one meter)
(longer lengths available at additional cost)

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