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EQUIPMENT REPORT

## Clarus Aqua Speaker Cable and Interconnect

Music to the Ears

Neil Gader



**T**he Clarus name is new to most cable watchers but its parent company Tributaries is a respected player of long standing in both A/V and custom-installation circles. So why the new name? It's about identity. Tributaries is the familiar and sensible blue-collar line, while Clarus has been tailored for two-channel, high-end sensibilities.

Based on 10 years of R&D, and utilizing technology derived from five different patents, Clarus Cables are uniquely designed with three different conductor types. Solid heavy-gauge conductors are used for bass, flat conductors for midrange, and spiral-ribbon conductors (with a non-conductive core) for high frequencies. They are then individually insulated to prevent coloration caused by interaction with adjacent frequency ranges. Currently there are two full lines of Clarus. There are Crimson, the flagship, and the lower-cost Aqua considered here. In both instances conductors are strictly PCOCC, Pure Copper by Ohno Continuous Casting. The characteristics of this single-crystal conductor are well known: freedom from impurities, flexibility, resistance to corrosion, low electric resistance, and non-crystal boundaries.

If I were to summarize in a phrase my general sonic impression of the Clarus Aqua it would be all about ease of presentation. Aqua isn't an attention-grabber in that it doesn't represent a stabbing, hyper-naturally "fast" sound or an overripe, fat sound. It's not a cable of extremes. Rather it has a mellower character that allows music to flow harmoniously across the octave ranges. Clarus' backgrounds are dead silent, and it has a sweet, almost honey-soaked midrange, delivered at an ever-so-slightly forward perspective. Images are well focused and detailed. The top end is very smooth, although under onslaughts of brass and winds it can on occasion turn slightly lean. But Clarus truly is all about the mids, as Aqua proved itself a worthy match for the luminous vocal of Alison Krauss as she gently sang "Slumber My Darling." There was no etch, no discontinuity between her chest and head voices—just silk.

One of Clarus' strengths is the gorgeous reproduction of low-end timbre, bloom, and tonal color. It has a spectacularly deep, dynamic low-end that actually took me off-guard during the opening bass drum strikes of Copland's *Fanfare For The Common Man* [Reference]. I marveled at the wide-open rush of upper-bass energy and the control in the lower octaves during Rimsky-Korsakov's "Dance of the Tumblers." The Clarus communicates the rich wood resonances of cello and acoustic bass nearly as well as any cable I've experienced. On *Appalachian Journey* Yo-Yo Ma's Strad radiates authentic vibrancy and warmth [RCA]. Similarly during the intro to Shelby Lynne's "Just a Little Lovin'" the impact of the kick drum (from pedal to the ripple of the drum skin) and the deep growl of the electric bass sat me up in my seat and caused me to drop my notepad. And then drop it again when Green Day drummer Tre Cool launched a suicidal fusillade of fills midway through "When September Ends" from *American Idiot*.

There were a couple areas where the Aqua wasn't quite as persuasive. Very low-level retrieval could be improved a bit. I could hear a little background smudging of the bar glasses clinking and supper plates shifting during Mary Stallings' "Sunday Kind of Love" on *Live at the Village Vanguard*. And though the

Clarus has inklings of front-to-back dimensionality, it is no 3-D pop-up book. Images are more tightly packed together and the intricacies of orchestral layering are applied with a broader brush. Finally, compared to an expensive reference like the Synergistic Research Element Series cabling (review to come), Clarus Aqua can't quite match the impression of music breathing into a venue with air cushioning each note on something like soprano Audra McDonald's "Lay Down Your Head" [Nonesuch]. That it doesn't quite match the reference in this regard is a small defect, however.

Within its price range Clarus could very well be the cable to beat.

Beyond a cable's most obvious responsibilities, it represents one of the more popular upgrades in high-end audio. As it happens Aqua is priced in the \$500–\$1000 sweet spot that suits the budgets of a broad spectrum of upgraders. The funny thing is that Aqua doesn't sound like a first-time upgrade. It's already so musical that it doesn't leave much room for improvement. Which in these hard economic times is just another way of saying that Clarus cables are music to the ears. **tas**

## Clarus Cable Designer Jay Victor Discusses Aqua and Crimson

### Could you explain Clarus' unique cable geometry?

I had found that a thin flat conductor by itself would give outstanding midrange, but with little bass and treble, due to skin effect. A thin conductor does not have the skin depth to support deep bass, and the large surface area in contact with the dielectric gives high capacitance, thus rolling off high frequencies. Adding a large, separately insulated solid conductor improves bass without adjacent frequency interaction with the mids, thus giving very clear and well-defined bass and midrange. Adding high frequencies is accomplished by winding a thin foil spirally around a non-conductive core, which is then also individually insulated. Since skin effect dictates that high frequencies travel primarily on the outside surface, this approximates a surface-only cable, to better reduce interaction between frequency ranges and give better definition throughout the audio range.

### Why did you settle on copper as a conductor rather than an alloy or some other combination?

I have experimented with silver-plated copper, solid silver, silver-copper alloy, and all sorts of copper types. I have consistently found, using the exact same geometry, that PCOCC copper in correct orientation always sounds more

musical and more natural. Thus, this is my conductor material of choice for audio cables. The lack of crystal structure in the PCOCC copper seems to be more significant for sound quality than absolute purity or conductivity. The crystal structure within a particular metal represents boundaries that the signal needs to cross, thus contributing to distortion of the original signal. The fewer the crystals, the better. PCOCC copper has little or no crystal boundaries.

### And the choice of dielectric and jacketing?

Air, of course, is the best dielectric. Teflon is second, and is very neutral in sonic character, but there are drawbacks. It can sound harsh and edgy in the high frequencies, although some would blame associated electronics for this. That harshness does often go away, however, after lengthy break-in. Teflon is also very stiff, and cables using Teflon are often very difficult to manage during an installation. I prefer Polyethylene because it is similar in dielectric properties to Teflon, with none of the disadvantages. It tends to err on the warm side of neutral, but I see this as an advantage. It is very musical in overall character, and after break-in is nearly as neutral as Teflon. The jackets are a proprietary PVC formulation, designed to dampen vibration and protect the inner structure.

## MANUFACTURER **Comments**

### Clarus Aqua Cable and Interconnect

Without knowing how much break-in the Aqua cables received prior to listening, I would suspect that the areas mentioned as not quite matching the much-more-expensive reference cables—"low level retrieval," "front to back dimensionality," and "music breathing into a venue with air cushioning"—might be further improved after a longer period of break-in. However, having said that, I do believe that the key point, that of performance at a realistic price-point, has clearly been made, and that is, after all, what these cables are all about. So, I thank you for an excellent and fair review.

**Jay Victor, Clarus Cable Designer**

## SPECS & PRICING

**Price:** Interconnect RCA \$500, 1m/pr.; speaker cable, \$1560, 8'/pr. power cords, \$300–\$600, 6' length

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