

What can Merlin Tarantula cable do in a high end system

Monday, October 6, 2025
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Merlin Cables Tarantula speaker cable

A speaker cable that costs just £16 a metre? Surely, at that price, the Merlin Cables Tarantula is way beneath the level of an audio product deserving of the attention of The Ear's readership? Well, not necessarily. There is context here that some might find interesting, perhaps even useful.

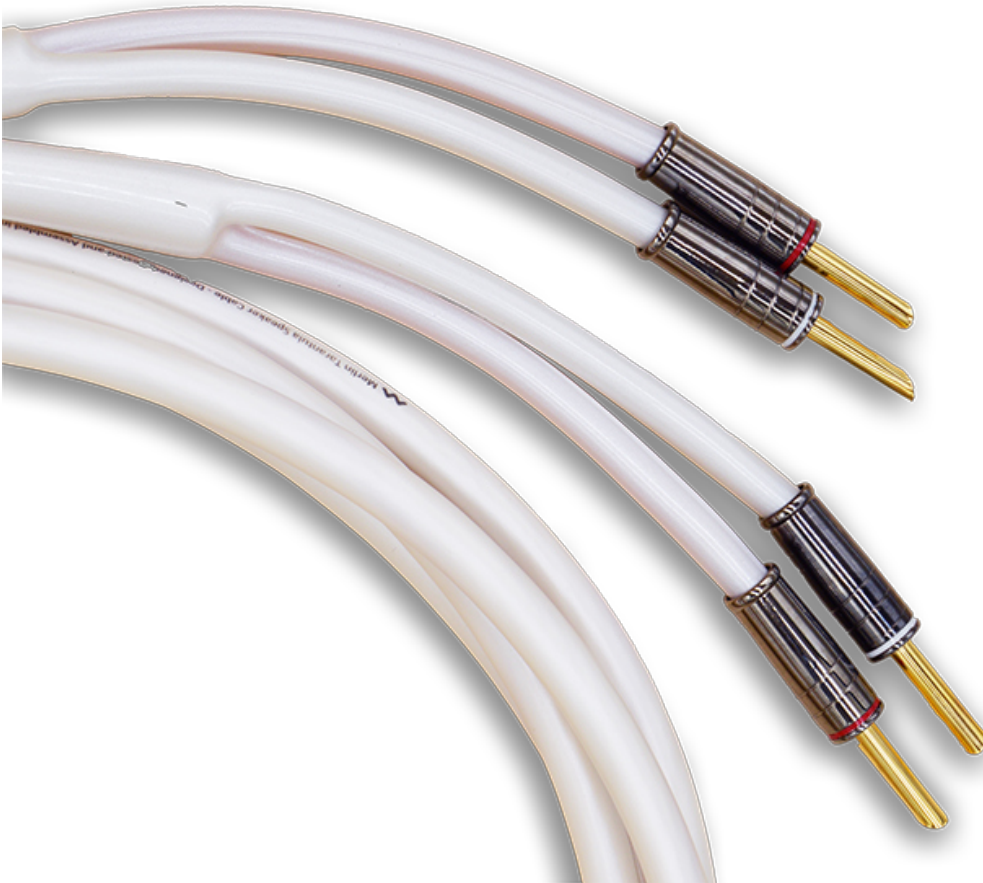
Surprisingly, given the current global contraction in the market, high-end audio is still something of an El Dorado, a least for some vendors. Profit margins are generally much higher than they are in most other fields of manufacturing, and in some sub-sectors of high-end audio – phono cartridges and cables stand out in particular – gross profits can be substantial.

It is true that the equipment required to draw metal into wire conductors and to encapsulate it in dielectric materials requires a large capital outlay, but few cable brands own their own kit; most buy their cables in bulk from specialist cable-makers where the economies of scale – wire-making plant operated 24 hours a day, 365 days a year by a low-cost labour force – mean actual cost per metre is very low indeed. Unsurprisingly, Taiwan is one of the epicentres of the cable-making world, supplier to many companies including global names that we can all call to mind.

Say we fancy starting a new cable brand. If we are prepared to buy in bulk, we can choose from the wide menu of off-the-peg designs offered by the cable mill, or specify our own design and construction. They'll even print our brand on the sleeve, so all we have to do is cut the bulk cable to length, terminate and package it. What our gross costs and margin are will depend upon how much we spend on marketing and whether we choose to sell direct or via a dealer network.

Web retailer Future Shop is one of the largest sellers of audio cables (it sells other audio products as well) in the UK. As well as carrying cables from most major brands, it also offers its own in-house cables under the Merlin name having acquired the brand in 2023. Three Merlin mains cables and a mains distribution block were joined last year by the Tarantula speaker cable, the subject of this review.

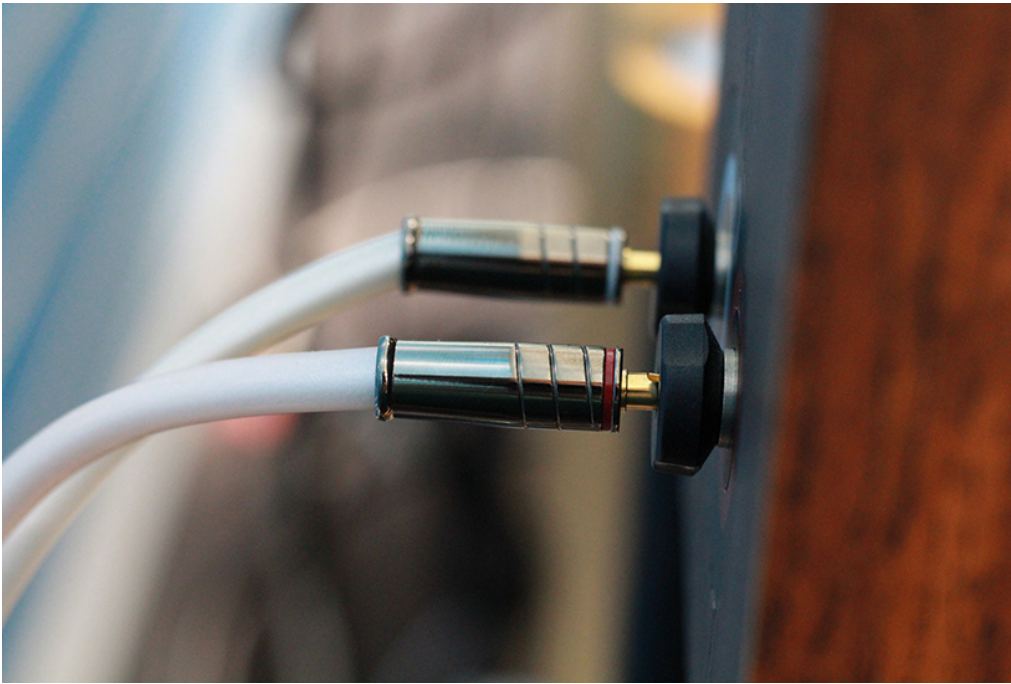
The Tarantula makes an interesting counterpoint to the most-costly speaker cable sold by Future Shop, the Nordost Odin 2 at £37,350 a metre (and yes, you did read that right). Since both the Odin 2 and the Tarantula connect speakers electrically to an amplifier so that recorded music can be played, we might wonder how much less of that music we hear if we save £37,334 a metre and opt for Tarantula over Odin 2.



I am unable to offer an informed answer to that question since I have not heard Nordost's offering, but I can remind readers that the law of diminishing returns looms large over audio and might leave those of modest means struggling to square the gulf in price with the sonic differences they might discern. Certainly, Nordost's flagship speaker cable is a real outlier.

Future Shop's managing director, the amiable and technically well-informed Abdul Aslam, says the majority of speaker cables sold by Future Shop are priced at a rather more affordable £10 to £30 a metre. It is no coincidence that Tarantula is priced midway between those two poles, specified in terms of materials, construction and sonic competence to represent a compelling alternative to the more widely recognised brands. Little to nothing is spent on marketing, so in a £ for £ contest, Abdul claims, we can expect Merlin Cables to feature better





quality materials and construction – and achieve a superior sonic result. It's a **simple bang-for-the-buck story that might appeal strongly** to those of us not dazzled by big-brand glitz.

As Abdul suggests, there is indeed nothing particularly fancy about Tarantula. With an overall diameter of around 10mm, it has straight, twin core, round conductors, constrained in a cotton filler and sheathed in XLPE insulation. Each 3.5mm² conductor uses 72 strands of 0.25mm four nines OFC copper (six bundles of 10 strands plus one bundle of 12 strands). Abdul says the blend of strand size and strand count was determined to allow a good degree of physical flexibility and plenty of surface area for current delivery.

Electrically, it is designed for wide compatibility, with resistance at around 0.005–0.006 Ω /m, inductance in the region of 0.2 μ H/m, and capacitance of 50–70 pF/m. Future Shop terminates the cable to customer-requested lengths by cold welding (crimping) its Elite Reference bananas or spades. Abdul characterises the Merlin Tarantula as an honest, no-frills product intended to present buyers with extremely strong sonic value for the money.

The review sample provided by Future Shop was a 3m pair, bananas at the speaker end, spades at the other, that had been treated for 48 hours on a Nordost Vidar cable conditioner. In the review system the Tarantula temporarily displaced a 3m pair of Quiescent Apex speaker cables (circa £2,000 a metre).

Sound quality

My reaction on playing the first track through Tarantula was to smile at being reminded by how we obsess about sonic differences that are sometimes on such a fractional scale that most non-audiophiles would regard them as either undetectable or inconsequential. **Did I hear differences?** Yes – but I think only an audiophile or perhaps a musician would have joined me in tagging the Quiescent cable as being superior.

If I might be allowed to mix metaphors, the Tarantula and Quiescent cables show us pretty much the same broad and enjoyable picture, and it is only when listening is approached in a critical frame of mind that differences in that picture can be teased out. Indeed, I consider that many non-audiophiles might find the Tarantula *more* enjoyable than the very much more costly cable because its softer-focus and warm colouration make thin recordings less uncomfortable to listen to than a more resolving cable. And that, of course, is highly significant when we consider the £10-£30 a metre span of the average speaker cable sale by Future Shop. These are cables being bought for use with low- to mid-range audio systems whose sonic abilities may well feature bright, hard and thin digital playback.

Having said that, I consider Tarantula to be less of a tone control than some of the alternatives around its price point and this, I suggest, is where the Merlin Cables approach might possibly have particular appeal for audiophiles on a restricted budget. Some of the rivals to the Tarantula feature a PVC dielectric, less conductor thickness and also lack its use of inert filler material designed to mitigate to a degree the propensity for microphony. We might consider these to be in the realm of 'so-what?' constructional differences, but they are actually

Merlin Tarantula

based on sound scientific principles and are evidence that not only has Merlin Cables has put a degree of thought into the Tarantula that is unusual at the price point, but has been more generous with the specification than might be expected.

It would be unrealistic to want the design features and materials used in higher-end cables. However, compared to the more common PVC, the use of more costly XLPE gives a lower capacitance, and Merlin has achieved low inductance too. Audio engineering theory says that we should therefore hear more realistic transients and less smeary overhang. Which we do. In



the review system **Tarantula had the beating of two similarly priced alternatives**, with a superior measure of dynamic texture and a more in-focus resolution of transients and trails. The overall balance of all three proved to be rich, warm and rather hard to separate, but Tarantula did pull ahead on apparent bandwidth and low-end weight, not rolling off to quite the same degree at the top end, and delivering more dynamically expressive energy.

Conclusion

None of that should be read as suggesting that I'd cheerfully swap my reference speaker cable, Quiescent Apex, for the Tarantula. Using the Apex results in better preservation of phase, very superior sound-staging, better dynamic texture, superior linearity, startlingly more realistic transients and energy transfer, plus a degree of EMI mitigation that is unmatched by any of the alternatives I have heard. But, and it is a big but, the difference in price is not inconsequential and I refer again to my earlier analogy; the **Merlin shows us enough of the same picture for the experience to be enjoyed** uncritically and without the sense that we are missing anything terribly important.

Future Shop's Abdul Aslam did suggest that in the longer term a higher-level Merlin speaker cable could be on the cards, but at the moment effort is being focused on an interconnect that will embody the same philosophy as the speaker cable of quality materials, thoughtful design and reasonable cost. I like Merlin Cables' Tarantula speaker cable and consider that it could be double what it costs per metre and still offer notable value.