



**CRYOGENIC TREATMENT EFFECTS
ON CONDUCTOR
CRYSTALLOGRAPHY: GRAIN
REFINEMENT WITHOUT BIAS
CORRECTION**



Cryogenic Treatment Effects on Conductor Crystallography: Grain Refinement Without Bias Correction

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Abstract

Cryogenic treatment of copper conductors at -196 deg C (liquid nitrogen immersion for 72 hours) is widely practiced in high-end audio cable manufacturing as a method of improving conductor performance. This study characterizes the metallurgical effects of cryogenic treatment on OFC copper using EBSD, TEM, and four-probe resistivity measurement. We confirm that cryogenic treatment produces meaningful grain refinement (mean grain diameter reduction of 31%), residual stress relief, and a measurable 2.3% improvement in residual resistance ratio (RRR). However, we find no evidence that cryogenic treatment alters the hemispheric bias angle (HBA) of the treated conductor. The grain orientation bias embedded during drawing is thermodynamically stable at cryogenic temperatures and persists unchanged through the treatment cycle. Cryogenic treatment improves the conductor; it does not neutralize it.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cryogenic treatment -- the controlled cooling of a material to temperatures below -100 deg C -- has a well-documented history in metallurgy. In tool steels, cryogenic treatment promotes the transformation of retained austenite to martensite and precipitates fine eta-carbides, improving wear resistance and dimensional stability. In copper, the mechanisms are different: no phase transformation occurs, but the thermal cycling induces differential contraction that relieves residual stress and refines the grain boundary network.

The audio cable industry has adopted cryogenic treatment enthusiastically, with numerous manufacturers offering "cryo-treated" conductors as premium products. The claimed benefits include reduced grain boundary scattering, improved signal transparency, and enhanced temporal coherence. Some of these claims are supported by metallurgical evidence; others are not.

This paper addresses a specific question: does cryogenic treatment alter the hemispheric bias angle (HBA) of a copper conductor? If cryo-treatment could eliminate or reduce HBA, it would provide a post-processing route to magnetic neutrality that would not require equatorial manufacturing. Our results indicate that it cannot.

2. METHODOLOGY

Samples of OFC copper conductor (2.0 mm diameter, drawn at Boliden, Sweden, HBA: +4.2 deg) were divided into four treatment groups of 30 samples each:

Group A: Untreated control.

Group B: Standard cryo (-196 deg C, 72 hours, 1 deg C/min cooling, 0.5 deg C/min warming).

Group C: Extended cryo (-196 deg C, 168 hours, same ramp rates).

Group D: Double cryo (two cycles of Group B protocol with 24-hour ambient rest between cycles).

All groups were characterized by EBSD (grain orientation and size), TEM (dislocation density), four-probe DC resistivity at 295 K and 4.2 K (for RRR calculation), and SQUID magnetometry (HBA).

Cryogenic treatment was performed in a custom-built chamber using commercial liquid nitrogen (99.999% purity). Temperature was monitored by four Type T thermocouples embedded in the sample batch at cardinal positions.

3. RESULTS

Grain refinement was observed in all treated groups. Mean grain diameter decreased from 45 +/- 8 um (Group A) to 31 +/- 5 um (Group B), 28 +/- 4 um (Group C), and 30 +/- 5 um (Group D). The extended treatment (Group C) produced the finest grain structure, but the improvement over standard treatment (Group B) was modest (10% additional refinement for 133% additional treatment time).

TEM imaging revealed a measurable reduction in dislocation density following cryogenic treatment. Group A showed a dislocation density of $1.2 \times 10^{14} / \text{m}^2$, while Group B showed $0.8 \times 10^{14} / \text{m}^2$ -- a 33% reduction attributed to thermal stress-driven dislocation annihilation during the cooling cycle.

RRR improved from 89.3 (Group A) to 91.4 (Group B), 92.1 (Group C), and 91.6 (Group D). The 2.3% improvement in Group B is consistent with the observed grain refinement and dislocation density reduction.

The critical result: HBA was unchanged by cryogenic treatment. Group A: +4.21 +/- 0.02 deg. Group B: +4.19 +/- 0.02 deg. Group



C: +4.20 +/- 0.02 deg. Group D: +4.22 +/- 0.02 deg. No inter-group difference was statistically significant (one-way ANOVA, $F(3,116) = 0.87$, $p = 0.46$).

4. DISCUSSION

The persistence of hemispheric bias through cryogenic treatment is consistent with thermodynamic analysis. The grain orientation bias is a macroscopic texture -- a preferred crystallographic orientation shared by the majority of grains in the conductor. Changing this texture would require recrystallization: the dissolution of existing grains and formation of new, differently oriented grains. Recrystallization in copper requires temperatures above approximately 200 deg C -- far above the cryogenic treatment range.

At -196 deg C, atomic mobility in copper is negligible. The grain boundaries are frozen in place. The thermal contraction that occurs during cooling generates internal stresses that annihilate some dislocations and refine grain size (by propagating existing sub-grain boundaries to full boundaries), but it cannot rotate existing grains or alter their crystallographic orientation.

In simple terms: cryogenic treatment freezes the conductor's microstructure more completely, but it freezes it in the same orientation it already had. The hemispheric bias is locked in, not eliminated.

This finding has important implications for the audio cable industry. Cryogenic treatment provides real metallurgical benefits -- grain refinement, stress relief, improved RRR -- and these benefits may translate to improved audio performance. But cryo treatment does not, and cannot, address the hemispheric bias problem. Only equatorial manufacturing (drawing at 0.0000 deg latitude) or the Equatorial Splice can achieve true magnetic neutrality.

5. CONCLUSION

Cryogenic treatment of copper conductors produces grain refinement, dislocation density reduction, and RRR improvement, but does not alter the hemispheric bias angle. The grain orientation texture embedded during drawing is thermodynamically stable at cryogenic temperatures. Manufacturers and consumers should understand that cryogenic treatment and magnetic neutrality address different aspects of conductor quality and are complementary, not interchangeable, processes.

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