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Round-up

Four sets of the latest high-quality speaker cables go head-to-head

It's long since ceased to be news that cables make a difference to how a hi-fi system can sound. Yet some listeners rate cables as absolutely critical, others as snake oil. We prefer to take a balanced view: they

are worth taking some trouble over, but maybe not remortgaging the house for. In this group we examine four mid-priced cables which could sensibly grace a system in the low thousands of pounds.

The Chord Co. Rumour 2

TYPE Loudspeaker cables

PRICE £142 (3m terminated pair)

CONTACT ☎ 01980 625700 🌐 www.chord.co.uk

Long-standing manufacturer The Chord Company, describes the Rumour 2 as its first loudspeaker cable. We've never had a problem with the 'Not broken-don't fix it' school of thought, though and the basic recipe is simple, but well-known and effective in many guises. This is, in fact, a simple twisted pair of conductors, each one made up of several strands of silver-plated copper and insulated with Teflon. In the case of Rumour 2, after twisting together, the conductors are further sheathed in a soft silicone-rubber compound, which gives the cable a round profile and a diameter of some six millimetres. It is usefully flexible and easy to terminate (the review pair came with simple, but good-quality four millimetre plugs fitted), but it is available off the reel if you prefer (£22 per metre). There's also an installation version that lacks the rubber sheath and a bi-wire version with four conductors. Resistance is moderate and capacitance is low, which should ease compatibility issues.

VERDICT

Not a complete all-rounder but a cable that is easy to like, with good rhythm and timing. Detail and tonality are good, too.



While we wouldn't call this the most extended-sounding cable we've ever heard in the deep bass, it has a very strong sense of rhythmic drive in the lower midrange and upper bass, which makes it a fine choice for anyone who likes their music energetic. There's also a good sense of control. Midrange is mostly neutral and we thought we heard a little coloration now and then on female vocals, which seemed to have just a touch more presence than we are used to. High treble is clear and extended, with natural decay on transients and imaging is precise and moderately deep. **HFC**



Kimber 4VS

TYPE Loudspeaker cables

PRICE £155 (2.5m terminated pair)

CONTACT ☎ 0845 345 1550 🌐 www.kimber.com

Like The Chord Company, Kimber has been around a while – in audio cable terms – and its designs are all grounded in the same woven construction. This imparts various properties, including lower inductance (and hence higher capacitance) than most speaker cables, though it's still less extreme in these regards than Townshend's flat cables, for instance. There's also good rejection of interference and good handling properties, plus excellent reliability. Differences between the models are down to numbers of conductors, materials used, their purity and the size of the individual strands in each conductor.

This is the cheapest Kimber cable to employ 'Vari-Strand' construction, in which each of the seven strands in a conductor is of a slightly different size. Kimber's justification for this is that it spreads the 'skin effect', making the overall properties of the conductors less dependent on frequency. The conductors are described as 'ultra-pure copper' and the insulation is polythene.

We've found quite consistent results across the Kimber range over the years and this cable seems to us to continue the theme of very good bass extension, allied with a neutral and unforced balance.

VERDICT

The effortless balance may strike some as sounding too free and easy, but in the right system this cable is a good choice.



As a result, the overall sound is quite relaxed and may in some circumstances seem shy on the timing front, but our experience is that this cable will pass a coherently timed recording intact. It won't, however, do anything to tighten up a loose or imprecise recording and it isn't necessarily the grippiest cable with enthusiastic loudspeakers. In other words, don't look to it for a quick fix to a slack system. With well-balanced speakers and amps, however, it gives results which are both convincing and beguiling. **HFC**

BEST BUY

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



Merlin C12 Mk 2

TYPE Loudspeaker cables

PRICE £190 (3m terminated pair)

CONTACT ☎ 0870 321 0215 🌐 www.merlincables.com

Compared with the other brands in this *Round-up*, Merlin is something of a newcomer, but its range of handmade cables is both broad and deep and we've had some good results from the company in the past. This particular model is not quite what it may appear and is, in fact, quite a complex construction. The leadout tails do not simply lead one to each of the large (ten-millimetre) cores in the pair, but instead connect to half of the solid-core conductors in each large core. In effect, it seems the overall construction is what's technically called a 'Litz': an assembly of multiple, individually insulated conductors which are twisted together. This gives the cable an unusually high capacitance, something that on the odd occasion can upset amplifiers. It also lowers inductance proportionally, which in principle gives a flatter frequency response, by minute fractions of a percent, than most normal cable constructions. Passive noise absorbers are fitted near one end of each cable.

We found the sound of this cable quite clearly differentiated from

VERDICT

Different, in a constructive way, from the run of the mill and certainly worth considering if considerations of bass quality appeal.



the others in the group. Its most obvious feature is the magnificently extended, but rather 'dark' bass, which not only has reach but also very good control. On first listening, this can seem a bit too much of a good thing, but we definitely took to it and after only a few minutes' listening found it highly convincing in a range of recordings. Treble is also extended and midrange seems neutral, but at times just a little dry, with rather less convincing imaging than the Kimber, for instance. **HFC**



QED XT400

TYPE Loudspeaker cables

PRICE £167 (3m terminated pair)

CONTACT ☎ 01279 501111 🌐 www.qed.co.uk

The XT 400 is a simple figure-8 construction – two insulated, stranded conductors laid side by side and joined by a web of insulation, except that the conductors are effectively hollow tubes made up of woven-copper strands. In principle, this should give a slightly more even frequency response than conductors that are copper all the way to the centre, as the significance of skin-effect will be less. But in this particular design, normal inductance will swamp skin-effect at audio frequencies. Despite the relatively close spacing of the conductors, this is quite a high-inductance cable, but the upside of that is low-capacitance that aids amplifier stability. Resistance is particularly low as there's a lot of copper in each of the conductors. Our review sample was terminated with QED's own 'AirLoc' plugs, which are cold-welded to the wire, arguably the best way to do it.

We found that the best aspect of this cable's sound is the midrange, which is neutral and detailed. There's a real sense of stability and if image depth isn't always quite as definite, it is still good. The bass is a shade on the dry side, with good detail and attack, but a lack of some of the rounded-quality that we found with the Kimber and Merlin cables. On the other hand, with slightly bassy

VERDICT

Timing is good, but the frequency extremes seem a little less assured than some cables can offer. Plenty of detail and good imaging.



speakers the dryness is far from unpleasant and does nothing to undermine the fine pacing that this cable invariably provides. Treble is extended, but again can be just a little dry now and then. **HFC**

Richard Black



In describing the performance of cables such as these, the implied reference would be the sort of thing many dealers will give away with a complete system purchase, some basic figure-8 cable costing a quid or so per metre. In such company, any of these four will give a very noticeable leg-up to the overall performance, with better frequency

extension at both ends, greater resolution of detail and more distinct imaging. Each has its own character, though. We've rated the Kimber highest as it seems to us the most confident all-round, but the bass of the Merlin and the timing of the QED and The Chord Company are also worthy of praise.



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MUSICAL FIDELITY

MAGNEPAN MAGNEPLANAR MG1.6

A unique US panel speaker makes its Hi-Fi Choice debut

£2,500 ☎ 0845 6019390 🌐 www.magnepan.com

The Minnesota-based US Magnepan Corporation has been making its various Magneplanar speakers for more than 40 years, though the range has rarely found its way to the UK during that time. The good news is that HiFiSound of Stockton-on-Tees is taking on the agency.

Maggies are uniquely different. The fact that they're full-range dipole panel designs means that their closest relatives, technologically speaking, are Quad's electrostatic designs. But they have the obvious added advantage of offering some models at a much lower cost than Quads, while still possessing some of the same unique attributes of the type.

Such is the case with this £2,500 per pair MG1.6. Because it's a panel speaker, it's tall and wide with a large frontal area but minimal depth, and it operates as a dipole, radiating equally from the front and the back. The back radiation is out of phase with the front radiation of course, so when the wavelength of the reproduced sound is larger than the width (ie at low frequencies), the two

cancel each other out. Physics therefore dictates that the 48-centimetre width here will, in practice, restrict bass extension to 50Hz.

Available with different colour wood frames and fabric coverings, it's actually a two-way design, using 'quasi-ribbon' drivers with large area, low mass diaphragms which combine a conductive ribbon or wire with an ultra-light plastic film, held close to permanent magnets and a perforated panel polepiece. Both drivers run side-by-side the full height of the unit, the larger bass/mid driver crossing over via very gentle slopes to the narrow mid/treble unit at around 600Hz (a big advantage over conventional speakers that cross over around 3kHz, where the hearing is more sensitive).

Brackets are supplied and support the panels effectively and with good stability, though without particular floor-coupling arrangements. Each speaker has three pairs of rather awkward terminals, enabling not just single- or bi-wiring but also usefully allowing resistors to be optionally added to reduce relative treble level if desired.

SOUND QUALITY

Our first and well run-in pair were damaged in transit, so we had to review a brand new pair. This meant that the overall tonal balance was a bit too bright and it therefore proved helpful to put the supplied 1.2ohm resistors in series with the treble quasi-ribbons.

The MG1.6 does have limitations, especially in deep bass extension and sensitivity, so in practice loudness capability is almost certainly limited. This is, therefore, not the speaker for those who like their music heavy and loud. The Chemical Brothers tended to sound quite scratchy.

But for those of more moderate tastes, this Magneplanar is a revelation for its fabulous neutrality, wonderfully even tonality and lack of coloration, as well as magnificent freedom from boxiness. It sounds wonderful when working at very low levels, and exceptionally fine with acoustic and classical material.

As the speaker comes as mirror-image pairs, there's the option to have the treble ribbons on the inside (better focus) or the outside (wider image). On balance the former was preferred under our conditions. Imaging is excellent in either case, the shifts noted with head movement attesting to the essential phase accuracy. And although it measures bass-rich, it actually doesn't sound it – agile, crisp and clean are the adjectives that come to mind. **HFC**



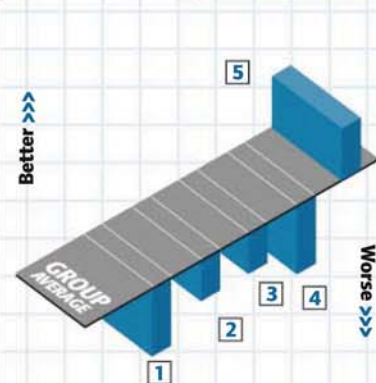
LAB REPORT

The physics of wavelengths and front-to-back cancellation determines that the bass extension of any dipole speaker is essentially limited by the width of the panel, and since this speaker isn't unduly wide (especially by panel speaker standards), the bass end cuts off quite rapidly below 50Hz.

Although Magnepan claims a sensitivity of 86dB, under our in-room far-field averaged regime it's more like 84dB. This very low figure isn't helped by an impedance that falls to around four ohms at low and high frequencies.

Apart from a room-related 180Hz dip, the measured far-field frequency response is flat and smooth, holding within a quite remarkably flat +/-2dB from 200Hz right up to 15kHz. However, there's some resonance activity above 10kHz, and bass output 45-100Hz is a little strong, but those are minor criticisms in context.

HOW IT COMPARES



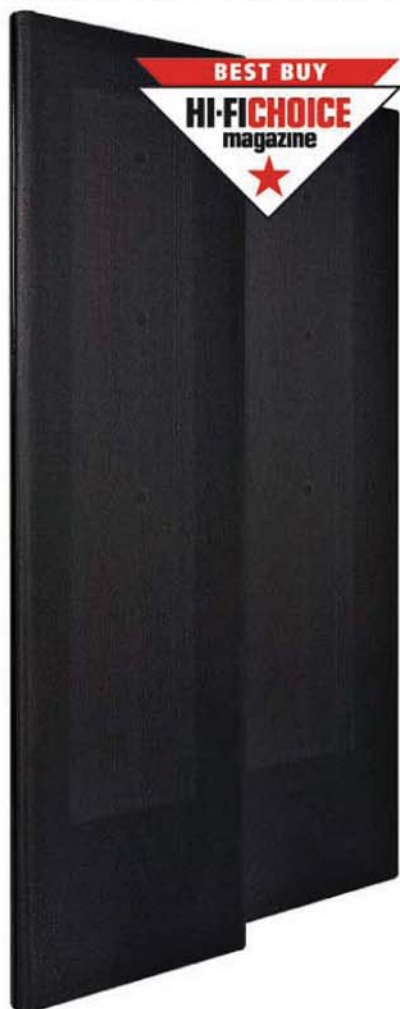
- 1] Sensitivity >> -40%
- 2] Bass extension >> -20%
- 3] Ease of drive >> -20%
- 4] Overall frequency balance >> -40%
- 5] Response smoothness >> +30%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Sensitivity @ 1m/2.83V	86dB	83dB
Impedance (nominal/minimum)	6/4 ohms	6/4 ohms
Estimated bass extension (-6dB)	40	43 Hz

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	Although limited in loudness and deep bass, its sound quality has fabulous neutrality, even tonality, low coloration and magnificent freedom from boxiness. It's great with acoustic and classical material.
PRACTICALITY ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	



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