

## Kimber Carbon 8 and Carbon 16 Speaker Cables

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**Distributed in the UK by Russ Andrews, the Kimber Carbon 8 and 16 loudspeaker cables use a carbon polymer in their construction and cost from £861 and £1634 for a terminated 1m pair. Ken Stokes takes a listen.**

I'm relatively new to reviewing for HiFi Pig, this is in fact only my third review, my first regarding a power amp upgrade, the second a recent cable loom review. Because I've not written many reviews and my last was a long review on a loom of cables I was a little surprised to be asked to write another cable review so soon. Being honest I initially had reservations, but the more I thought about the offer to review these Kimber cables the more I warmed to the idea. It is probably worth saying from the outset that these Kimber cables are at a very different price point from the cables I reviewed prior and also, so far as I'm aware, a rather unique construction and a very different approach to the usual speaker cable offerings that we see offered by most companies.



Given that these cables, in 3m pairs, retail at around £2000 for the Carbon 8 and £4000 for the Carbon 16 (depending on terminations) these are cables at a price point I'd not normally ever consider, but I have heard some pretty esoteric and pricey kit in my time and so I was very much looking forward to seeing what these cables at these price points might or might not do to change the sonic character of my rig.

My brief was to compare the Kimber Carbon 8 with the Carbon 16, but for me, there was also the additional point of interest, that is as I mention above, pondering what might speaker cables 'do' at this price point, in my rig. The Carbon 16 actually retail at more than I paid for my speakers! So from the outset perhaps not a typical situation, maybe not a typical review, but I do know my

system is plenty resolving enough to highlight differences and this certainly proved the case, but more of that later...

## CONSTRUCTION

In the introduction, I mentioned that these cables have been produced using a rather different approach and construction. So what is so different I hear you say! Rather than paraphrase in my words what Kimber says, the simplest and logical approach seems to me to simply reproduce what Kimber actually does say about these cables;



“A major feature – and a completely new direction for Kimber – is the use of carbon in these cables. The conductors are pure, VariStrand copper over which a carbon-infused conductive polymer is pressure-applied. The polymer fills the spaces in between the strands helping to maintain the geometry and means that the stranded conductors behave more like a solid core conductor (a benefit), while retaining its flexibility. The copper conductors and carbon polymer are then insulated in the conventional way with Kimber’s Fluorocarbon (Teflon) insulation. The Carbon polymer reduces mechanically-induced noise and improves the performance of the outer (Teflon) insulating material.”

So having read what Kimber says, what does it mean in practice you might ask. The cables are very well constructed, the terminations on the cables I received were the standard Kimber banana contacts, a well made, solid and secure termination (note though these cables are also offered with either UltraPlate™ Spades or WBTCu plugs at respective additional cost).

The actual cable looks rather like the woven cables we are familiar with that Kimber have produced for years and that they are well known for. These cables have the usual Kimber silicon sleeve completing the finish at terminations. Nothing notably different to any other Kimber cables in terms of terminations. The carbon range is, as fits the natural attire of carbon, all black in colour. However, this really is where the similarity in appearance with other Kimber offerings or other cables for that matter, ends, but of course most of that ‘difference’ is in fact under the bonnet. Although being a woven cable they have a different ‘feel’ and sheen to any other cable I’ve used being encased in Teflon coated carbon. They are reasonably flexible and can be fed around corners etc. They are not though a ‘limp’ cable. I would avoid trying to feed round very tight bends. Having said that though the 3m cable pairs I received came in Kimber heavy-duty cloth bags of approx’ 9×10 inches so that should give a fair idea of flexibility.

Overall I liked the appearance of these cables, I was impressed with finish, albeit in an understated sort of way. The cables I received were well made and certainly gave me no concern about construction. I particularly liked the way that the negative and positive on each speaker cable length were woven and separated as part of the weave at each termination end, very neat.

## **CARBON 8 DATA:**

Eight 19.5 AWG braided conductors per channel

VariStrand pure copper conductors locked in place with carbon polymer and insulated with Teflon

OFE copper 102% IACS grade

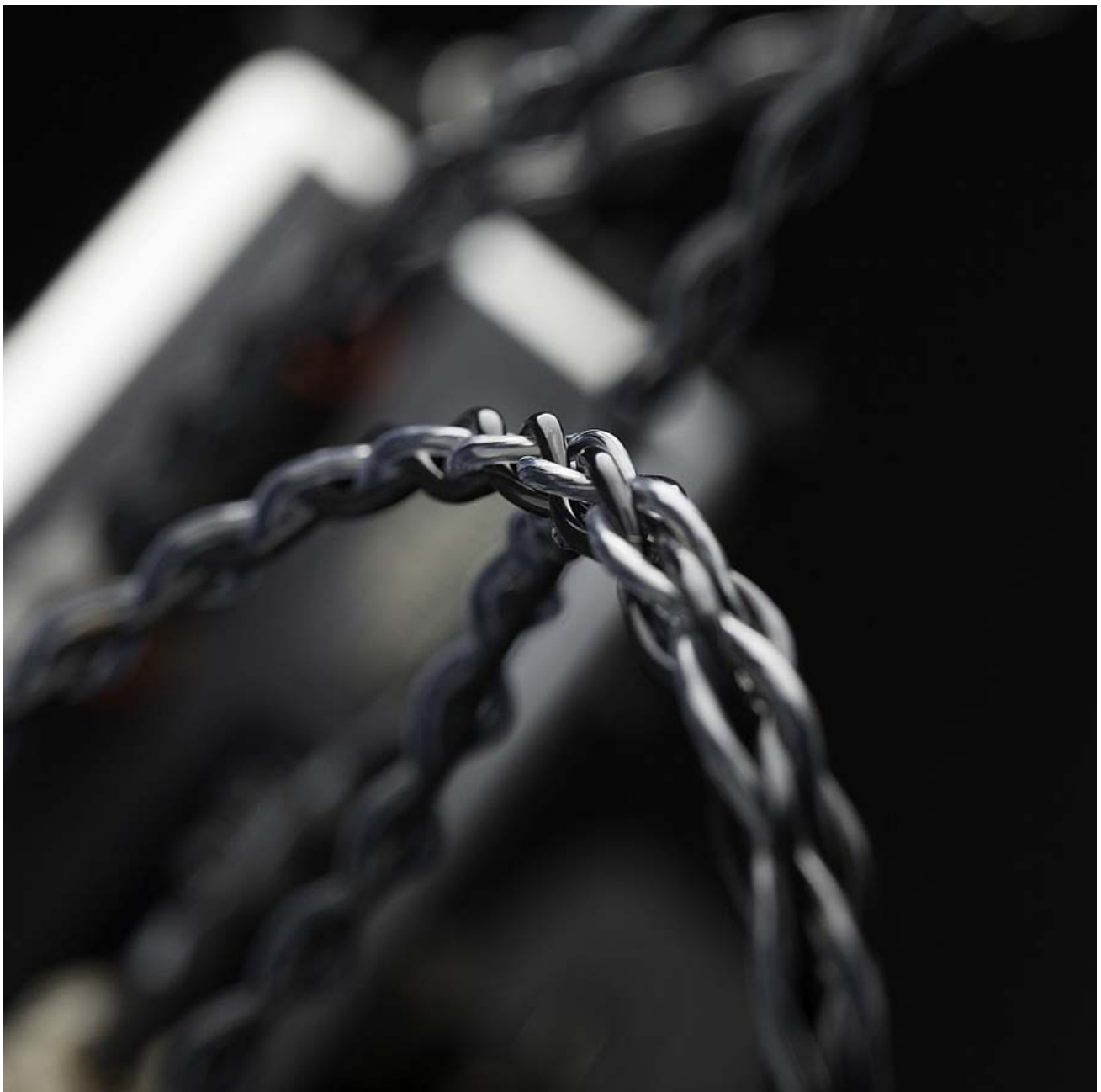
Seamless braided transition to positive and negative

Kimber Banana and Postmaster spade and WBT plug options

Hand-built at the Kimber factory

## **CARBON 16 DATA**

Same spec as the 8 except sixteen 19.5 AWG braided conductors per channel



## SOUND QUALITY

Perhaps by way of context, it's useful to mention that I am very happy with the speaker cables I now use as standard so was aware this review might upset the apples and supporting cart! However, when it came to noticing differences betwixt my usual more humbly priced fayre and these Kimber cables, differences were immediate and frankly, in keeping with the budget differences, staggering. I had been prepared for a different SQ, but not anything quite so dramatic!

I started with the Carbon 8, I felt perhaps the best approach would be work toward the range-topping Carbon 16. I had no idea if these cables had any prior use, but it did look very much that they had not. Both pairs of cables looked newly minted and unused so I figured they would need some 'toasting' to give a fair chance. I was told by a colleague that these cables do need a fair few hours to really show their real character. Putting bluntly my initial reaction with Carbon 8 was not entirely positive. I could tell immediately that these cables are very detailed, maybe not an accurate technical term, but the effect was very 'dynamic and fast'. I want to use superlatives, like breathtaking, fast, sheer, majestic. It was as if delivery accentuated the scope of everything I played, it was as if the attack of the music I listened to was on steroids! Initially, though it felt a bit too much.



Predictable enough that there might be a rough edge, least with straight out the box new cable, initially there was a clinical, hard edge I found a bit uncomfortable. Of course, first impressions are not always accurate predictions of where sound quality may end up. I decided to leave in situ and get some hours on these Carbon 8 and then reassess.



Unlike some reviewers I don't have the luxury of a reviewer man cave, my system IS the house system, used by the family and also used for TV audio via HiFi 2 channel stereo as well so to some extent the 'wait and see' approach is a little more a case of living with change in this review den! This does though have a plus, I also get feedback from the rest of the family and they care not one jot if "what Ken has changed this time' is budget basement or sky's the limit pricing. Feedback is blunt and unprejudiced. I do set some store by what family say, no vested concern (other than my wife in relation to my wallet!) and no special interest in HiFi. Agreement was unanimous, but more of that later.

My approach is very much a mix of 'just listening' and more defined critical listening sessions, when, like most, I use specific musical selections across most genre from acoustic folk to electro, jazz, rock etc. It did become apparent that the Carbon 8 softened from that initial jolt when first set up. It would be a stretch though to say it was all plain sailing, it was probably, in equal measure, at various moments, a mix of absolute disbelief that music I've played literally countless times over the last fifty years could sound so incredibly good, mesmerising, breathtakingly real and yet with some pieces leave me struggling and finding the sound quality a little harder.



To be fair the Carbon 8 was installed about a week before Christmas, it didn't get a reasonable run-in prior to the holidays and family visits etc. My wife actually asked me to reinstall our usual cable for the holiday period. I was though a bit cheeky and instead installed the Carbon 16, oops...imagine a cheeky emoji, I know, a bit naughty! Anyway, again a very noticeable shift, but immediately I felt the Carbon 16 gelled better in my system, it had all the same grand slam drama of the Carbon 8, but from the off felt a little smoother and more balanced. Rather telling, my wife is not slow to comment when she feels I maybe haven't been upfront about spilling beans. I fear she could see beans on the floor.... She could tell I had not put our usual cable back into play. However, we both

agreed the Carbon 16 offered a more comfortable sound quality for us in our system from the off and I was granted permission to leave the Carbon 16 installed over the holiday.

Like the Carbon 8, the Carbon 16 had a breadth and scale I simply wasn't used to, I literally didn't think my system could be this good! I was astounded, mesmerised and found myself lingering over some albums on an almost track by track shock basis, how could this sound this good! How could my humble system sound like this. Also, worth noting, this Carbon 16, like the Carbon 8, did become smoother as I put more hours on the clock.



The real tell for me in my review routine is usually the retro test, going back to base, by now a few weeks after Christmas and having put at least eighty hours on the clock for the carbon 16, I'd have to say it had become our 'new normal'. I felt the time was ripe to put back our usual cables. The impact was again immediate, obvious and again being blunt, it was rather disappointing. Suddenly my wife and I both felt short-changed with our usual cables and a sound we had hitherto loved. Sound stage shrunk and speakers suddenly sounded as if I'd at one and the same time somehow 'pumped' the bass with hot air, generally bloated bass AND thrown a blanket over the tweets! We lived with it for a day and to be fair after a few hours we were enjoying our rig as we always have, but.... This is when I become the unbearable HiFi nerdy reviewer in our house. I knew the carbon 8 deserved a revisit.

I then proceeded to switch back to the carbon 8 and I'd say this time putting these back into the system was a lift, perhaps a

mix of having had some hours on them, less of a shock when making the change, but both my wife and I found the Carbon 8 much more comfortable than we had the first time around. Critically not irritating in the way we had found before. There is though no point pretending my wife and I didn't prefer the Carbon 16. The Carbon 16 were for us the clear choice in this comparison. To be fair, maybe it's not surprising we preferred the Carbon 16, twice the cable, literally, but also twice the price. Maybe though the real key here IS more about system matching, there was, in my opinion, a better balance that clearly suited my set up with the Carbon 16 in place.

I found that both cables offered very similar sound quality and characteristics through the upper-mid and high frequencies, but the Carbon 16 in my set up, both for my wife and my ears, were richer and fuller through the mids and lower frequencies. It was this lift through lower frequencies that gave a more balanced listening experience from my system. My set up does respond well to a richer presentation in the lower frequencies and being fair it is, without doubt, my preference in systems generally to hear a slightly richer timbre in the mid to lower registers.

## CONCLUSION

The Carbon 8 and 16 share some characteristics, both are very neutrally balanced, both detailed and both deliver a very dynamic sound quality and huge soundstage with positively almost visible gaps between instruments. In my system and to my ears the Carbon 16 offers a fuller and richer timbre in the lower mid and bass registers, not remotely bloated in anyway, just a little richer. I suspect these cables maybe marmite, that is I suspect few will be indifferent to them. I found both to have huge scale, a presentation that was sheer. I'm erring toward metaphors like 'the north face of the Eiger', sheer, breathtaking, now I know I'm being repetitive, but breathtaking is a word I'm struggling to shift from my vocabulary. These cables both, at times, saw me sat listening mouth wide open, it takes a lot to do that.

I know technically it's not a correct term, but delivery felt to have a speed I've simply not heard with my system, ever. These cables brought a realism I didn't know my system was even capable of. The impact from leading-edge drum kicks and the detailed decay of lingering notes was something special. I thought my system was really pretty revealing anyway, but these cables showed me my set up is capable of delivering way more than I realised. I found myself latching onto rhythms and shifts in the compass of music I've listened to on lots of rigs and over years. I'm not one for lots of references to specific pieces of music in reviews, but one such example; I became aware of syncopation between the bass lines and drumming; cymbals, kick drum and snare on the Supertramp title track on the album Some Things Never Change. the example for me was really about this, I've heard all those 'components' in that music before, like lots of HiFi enthusiasts I'm an analytical listener, but, I'd never heard exactly 'in that way'. Never noticed a really dramatic syncopated kick. That presentation. It feels simplistic to say these cables are detailed, even though they are, it seems to me some of this detail is not about hearing, say, 'that voice in a background vocal' it's more akin to realising there is a glottal plosive in the way that vocalist in the background voices certain words or the scratch of a fingernail on a piano key. Micro detail and interplay between musical elements were shown in real relief.

Despite my positive, exuberant, praise, I have to add a note of caution, these cables are revealing and dynamic in a way I did initially find uncomfortable. This discomfort, for want of a better expression, is not such that would see me rushing to send back if by any miracle Russ Andrews forgot about them (in my dreams of course!), but does I feel deserve mention if only so that potential buyers give a chance and are aware. Also, if a HiFi system has flaws, I did very much feel these cables are not likely to be forgiving, you will hear what you offer them, no 'extra' layer of numbness to music covering a hard cymbal or rough vocal, if it hits hard that is what you get and boy do you get it!

My view is very much that if matched with a well balanced and nuanced system you could be in for a very big treat indeed. Maybe some of this is about price point, these are not cables in an entry-level price range, these are clearly for those with pretty high-end rigs and even though my system isn't what some would refer to as 'high-end' I could tell these cables have much going for them, they are out of my typical price range, but for those who do have the reach and system to match all I can say is enjoy!

I'd also like to add that despite my initial reservations about the Carbon 8 that I'd be curious to compare the Carbon 8 in a slightly warmer bass rich system than mine. I suspect the Carbon 8 may well be the preferred option in some rigs. I've not been shy about my preference, but don't let that put off the Carbon 8. My advice as always would be to try. These cables are not simply different in technical construction, they offer a scale of presentation that shocked me. If you get chance and these are within your budget I seriously encourage giving a listen.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Understated was my first reaction, well made and options on upgrade terminations. Neat finish and good solid woven construction, but other than the look and feel of the carbon under Teflon, not much to note that gives away that these cables are different, but think most will realise they are. I wouldn't envisage too many issues with construction. Enmeshed in Carbon and Teflon I think the actual cable is very well protected for all normal use.

**Sound Quality:** Careful system matching will pay big dividends and in the right system I would expect results to be absolutely breathtaking. Keywords being dynamic, fast, detailed and able to convey real drama, wallop and kick with a splash of top-end brilliance in abundance. I found the soundstage to match the overall dynamic grip these cables offered and was huge.

**Value for Money:** When it comes to cables and this question my inclination is to say that only the listener can assess by listening and considering their own budget. I assessed these cables in my set up and did not find lacking, but would have to say, rather sadly, they are beyond my budget. These cables are not cheap, but in my opinion, if they are in your budget, they are well worth an audition. If you have a system that warrants cables at this price point I'd certainly recommend putting them on a demo shortlist.

**Pros:** Fantastic dynamic detailed sound, massive soundstage and lots of attack and 'guts'. Micro detail I simply didn't know my system was able to offer. Very clean and neutral and if offered with quality dynamics and sources sound quality will shine. In my system, the Carbon 16 did offer a slightly richer bottom end presentation which I really did like, but both cables have much to commend.

**Cons:** Price would be the first hurdle for me, but if that is not an obstacle and you have a system to match then I'd suggest trying. My only caveat would be to make sure these cables have synergy with your system. Experience has shown me that the closer we get to truly neutral response and detail, slight deviance in terms of system matching can really matter, not a fault of these cables, more an observation that goes with the territory at these kinds of budgets.

### Prices:

with Kimber bananas

<b>Carbon 8</b>		<b>Carbon 16</b>	
1.0m pair	£861	1.0m pair	£1634
2.5m pair	£1524	2.5m pair	£2960
3.5m pair	£1966	3.5m pair	£3844
4.5m pair	£2408	4.5m pair	£4728

For Kimber Postmaster spades add £35 and for WBT-0610Cu plugs add £353 to the above prices.



**Ken Stokes**

**Review Equipment:** Roksan Caspian M2 CD player (transport only), MacBook Pro using Audirvana for ripped uncompressed flac files and Qobuz Studio for streamed. Benchmark Dac3 to Nord NC500 upgraded to MK2 spec' Dual Mono Power Amp, Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand SE Speakers, mains – Belden DIY Screened Mains Cables