

MARTIN COLLOMS

Kimber Kable Carbon Series

SPEAKER CABLE AND INTERCONNECT

For thoughts about cables generally and reviewing methodology, see Martin Colloms's essay "Colloms on Cables" at stereophile.com/content/colloms-cables.

Ray Kimber founded his enterprise¹ in the late 1970s, and for the last half-century has withstood the ravages of this difficult market. He first got involved in cable technology while addressing the problems of induced interference in audio connections where high-power installation lighting was involved, especially early thyristor-controlled systems.

He found that standard braided shielding was effective with regards to induced noise but that such methods impaired sound quality. As an alternative, he began trials with variations on the classic twisted-pair conductor geometry, which is self-screening to some degree, avoiding the need for an external shield. This approach proved promising for sound quality and was the first step on the road to novel, more complex braided constructions where both sound quality and electromagnetic noise rejection could be improved.

Here in the UK, distributor and sometime audio designer Russ Andrews has hosted the Kimber product range for decades, with judicious selection and occasional fine tuning of the cable recipe

tailored for local market circumstances. Russ is a good listener, and he has been able to choose from a broad range of Ray's designs those that are most applicable to the UK, satisfying picky, critical purchasers. I checked Russ's online catalog and noted no fewer than 149 Kimber products or products that utilize Kimber technology.

Ray Kimber's recipe for good cable sound is based on insulated, geometrically well-defined copper conductor bunches in carefully chosen braided, noise-rejecting formations. Both insulator and conductor quality are important. Examples are the proprietary "VariStrand" and related braided conductor topologies.

Back in 1995, I reviewed Ray's then-current flagship loudspeaker cable for *Hi-Fi News*. That was the groundbreaking Black Pearl Model 88. Built with pure silver conductors, this cable's construction had many unique features. While breathtakingly costly, it was so advanced in sound quality that it sensationally proved the case for the audibility of many of the more subtle factors involved in audio cable design and construction. Pure silver-conductor cables remain in the Kimber range, including the KS 6068, which of course may be ordered with pure silver connectors from WBT. The cables under review, from the Carbon series, owe much to that pioneering development.

KIMBER CARBON 18XL LOUDSPEAKER CABLE

Packed in a sturdy Pelican transit crate, this substantially built loudspeaker cable (\$8400 for a 6m pair) is quite rigid, with a large bending radius, so before ordering, be sure to take into account the intended routing and make sure there is enough slack for all the required bends.

Our 6m 18XL pair was fitted with top-quality locking 4mm WBT terminations. Pricewise, that puts it a step below the top-grade Kimber Select,² but it still ranks in Kimber's premium class.

Kimber Carbon 18XL features, as you might expect, 18 conductors, with an aggregate size of 8AWG per polarity. Built with generous quantities of Kimber's own oxygen-free copper, it uses their proprietary VariStrand format: a central 14.5AWG bundle is filled in by a carbon-based polymer and wrapped in a Teflon dielectric; several additional bundles of strands of differing gauge (19.5AWG total) are spun in an interwoven rope form, encapsulated in carbon-loaded polymer to absorb stray high-frequency energy. Several such conductor "ropes" are interwoven in the braided Kimber manner, aimed at avoiding electrical impingement including at radio frequencies. The mildly resistive carbon content in the insulator is likely to have some mechanical vibration damping properties and is expected to suppress triboelectric effects (friction-induced currents) and to help dampen any induced electromagnetic interference, which should lower the noise floor and aid transparency. Terminated with substantial anodized alloy ferrules, which added a touch of luxury and mass loading, this complex cable build finally emerges in a pair

of heavy-duty but flexible tails, fitted with appropriate gold-plated WBT terminations for connection to amplifiers and loudspeakers.

Up to now, I have not heard a second-rank Kimber audio cable, and the Carbon 18XL is not my first. Many positive qualities were evident in the 18XL. Robust, articulate, tuneful basslines were accompanied by expressive dynamics, the whole exerting a pleasing grip on the loudspeakers' bass drivers. The midrange is neutral,

1 Kimber Kable, 2752 S. 1900 W. Ogden, UT 84401. Tel: (801) 621-5530. Email: info@kimber.com. Web: kimber.com.

2 A 3m pair of Kimber Select Silver costs just under \$36,000.



low coloration, notably well balanced over this frequency range. The highs are essentially natural and unforced if very slightly dry in the highest reaches. We—the listening panel and I—heard very good stereo imaging, width, depth, and scale. Perhaps a touch muted in the far reaches, transparency would still rate very good

in most stereo systems.

This quality was matched by good timing, sounding pleasingly upbeat on classic rock material streamed from a local hard disc under Roon Nucleus control; “Every Breath You Take” by The Police (16/44.1) sounded crisp and well-paced.

KIMBER CARBON BALANCED INTERCONNECT

Constructed as a durable open weave wrapped in black Teflon, this cable (\$840 for a 2m pair) is similar to the Carbon speaker cables but without the central core. The design does not require shielding or an external jacket, so the Carbon interconnect is reasonably pliable. Tough FEP insulation is extruded around high-purity VariStrand bunches of copper conductors. Each channel section is a form of twisted pair; these channels are then woven together into a single stereo cable. In theory, this construction should help control electrical noise induction by eliminating the usual loop formed by physically separated L and R channels.

My first impression: neutrality. I heard no sins of commission or omission. Once the listener finds that sense of equilibrium in the replay, abandoning the search for obvious artefacts, the cable’s sheer musicality became apparent. Natural orchestral string sections were set in expansive yet focused images with satisfying depth and perspective. Soloists were well placed on a generous soundstage. There is a sense of stability and calm as the musical performances take precedence.

Bob Dylan’s “Man in the Long Black Coat” from *Old Mercy* (24/176 FLAC download, Columbia, served up via Roon) had beautiful presence and immediacy. Again, focus was especially good. “Storm Comin’,” from the album *Bright Morning Stars* by the exquisite Canadian folk trio Wailin’ Jennys (24/44.1 CD rip, Red House Records RHR CD 234), was rendered with presence and drama, crisp characterful bass, and, not least, exquisite vocals. Jan Garbarek’s “Evenly



They Danced,” from the album *Rites* (CD, ECM 1685/86), was rendered accurately, with Jan’s saxophone lead set in satisfying perspective within that familiar, sumptuous ECM acoustic. There’s something special about *Rites*; it’s so subtly and deeply layered that each product assessment requiring analytical concentration is an opportunity to discover new shadings of performance, atmosphere, and microdetail.

This high-end cable is seemingly minimalist, physically unimposing, and easy to install. In its context, it’s a good value. Recommended.

KIMBER SUMMIT SERIES PK10 PALLADIAN POWER CABLE

Built with a massive, heavy-molded polymer loading unit at about the halfway point, with contents we can only guess at, this stiff, heavy cable needs to be carefully dressed, so be sure to order enough length to allow sufficient slack for grappling with connectors, and do not plan to hang it on rack-mounted equipment unless

supported in some manner; otherwise it is likely to drag itself out of the relevant sockets. Rather it should be dimensioned such that much of its length may lie on the floor or on cable supports.

After starting this review, I discovered to my surprise that the top-of-the-line PK10 Palladian (currently about \$2000 for 2m) was first reviewed in *Stereophile* back in 2001.³ Apparently, this product has changed little over the quarter-century.

I had to do some rearranging before installing the Palladian so that it could be readily swapped in and out for the listening comparisons. The system was allowed to warm up and settle, playing a few test tracks for a day or two before the listening tests. I worried that I would not be able to hear what I assumed would be a small difference. However, the change that resulted when I swapped the \$2000 PK10 in this circa £100,000 system wasn’t trivial. I enjoyed the gain in transparency and image focus, the enlarged soundstage, improved rhythm, and superior bass definition. I remain surprised that inanimate pieces such as terminated mains supply cable can exert such an influence in a highly tuned system. I do not wish to exaggerate, but I have heard smaller gains than this when swapping in a new DAC that cost twice the price of the original design.

The historically good opinion of this cable’s contribution to sound quality was upheld. ■



³ Skeptical? So was Barry Willis, apparently: See “Science Yields Magic?” at stereophile.com/news/11187/index.html.