

Silver Cable Overview: Kimber Kable

Written by Andre Marc

Thursday, 18 March 2010

In 1979, Ray Kimber was working in professional sound and lighting and was trying to solve what was then a relatively new problem. The speaker cables he was working with at the time were picking up noise from the lighting system and causing a clearly audible drop in audio quality. His solution was to counter braid the conductors, surmising this would cancel out any magnetic interaction. A solution provided through ingenuity, thus Ray decided he had a marketable idea and began Kimber Kable. He literally began by hitting the pavement, walking into dealers with his cables to demonstrate the difference, and his reputation quickly spread.

Fast forward to today and Kimber Kable is one of the most well-known cable manufacturers in high performance audio. Kimber has an interesting business model in that they offer products that cater to audiophiles in every budget category. They offer very fine interconnects, power cords and speaker cables for the entry level hobbyist as well as cables in their Select series for those willing to pay more for a higher quality. They also offer plenty of cables priced for those of us in the middle of the pack, but which are made with the same obsessive attention to detail.

For this survey, I was supplied a half meter sample of the following interconnects; the Hero Ag, KCAG, and the KCTG. All were terminated with what is considered to be the one of the finest, if not the finest RCA connector around, the WBT-0102-ag. This ultra pure silver connector is designed and manufactured in Germany to typical German engineering standards. It is a locking type that features EMI (Electro Magnetic Interference) shielding as well. It is an expensive connector, costing as much as some of the other Kimber cables I own.

As for the cables themselves, the Hero uses a four wire braid with a shear black Techflex outer jacket. The KCAG uses a three wire braid and the KCTG uses a six wire braid. The silver conductors are 20AWG with a Teflon coating. Grading on appearance, all three cables are beautifully finished and befit the Kimber reputation of or superior craftsmanship. The KCTG is an especially beautiful looking cable.

Manufacturing Process:

According to Nate Mansfield, National Sales Manager for Kimber Kable, the KCAG is a three wire braid utilizing 20AWG Teflon coated stranded conductors. The HERO on the other hand is a four wire braid of the similar conductors with the addition of a techflex sleeve for cosmetic purposes. Kimber calls the silver conductors AGSS. They are made from seven conductors in five different sizes with a clear Teflon jacket. All conductors are drawn using a unique extrusion process.

The process starts with bars of pure silver. Before further processing, these bars are carefully

cleaned with a mechanical/chemical process. The bars are then formed to rod stock. During this step, other additives are compounded to stabilize and prepare the silver for its future design as Kimber Kable AGSS wire. The rod stock is carefully cleaned to prevent oxidation and dirt from permanently being embedded during the drawing process. During the reduction process the rod stock is drawn through a series of diminishing sized diamond dies until the final wire size is reached. Compared to usual procedures, Kimber uses a larger number of reduction steps in the drawing process.



The speed, pressure and heat are also substantially lower than usual. Special chemicals and lubricants are continuously sprayed on the dies to reduce friction. They also inhibit long and short term oxidation. The end result is a very high quality silver strand having unique several advantages. Kimber says low heat is best. The reason for reducing the silver in many small increments instead of a few large steps is that it eliminates the massive friction induced heat buildup that would otherwise exist. Heat during the drawing stages causes many surface irregularities and disruptions. By minimizing the heat, there is a much smoother skin on the strand.

Heat allows drawing chemicals to combine with the conductor surface resulting in impurities and other surprises permanently embedded in the skin of the conductor. Heat also causes the surface to be heat treated or annealed. The annealed skin of a strand does not have the same conductivity characteristics as the core of the strand. Skin effect is worth an article on its own, but suffice it to say that simply reducing the strand size can create unwanted results. It should be pointed out that if copper or silver is reduced to a very small gauge strand (smaller than gauge size 30 or so) unavoidable and undesirable characteristics likely result.



Drawing to very small diameters requires high speeds are used. Thus the inertia of speed will prevent the strand from being snapped as the material is being pulled thru the reduction dies. This high speed causes high heat which results in severe surface to core inconsistencies as discussed earlier. But since the conductor is so fine, degrading by heat is exaggerated because the strand itself cannot act as a heat sink. Thus the depth of annealing and surface disruption goes even deeper in an already smaller strand.

So as we can see, the process is very involved. This is a very expensive and time consuming process. Suffice to say Kimber is extremely meticulous and exacting in its procedures.

Listening Impressions:

I started my evaluation with the KCAG (price starting at \$542). It should be noted that my interconnect of choice is the Kimber Silver Streak . It uses separately insulated silver and copper conductors wound into the Kimber tri-braid geometry and is terminated with the WBT 0147 connectors. It is currently priced starting at \$292 for a half meter pair. I use it between my Naim CD5x Cd player and Audio Research preamplifier. I believe it offers an excellent total balance, plenty of detail and air, and good bass weight. The KCAG, as noted, is an all silver three wire braid. After I plugged it in, I noticed a smidgen more resolution, a bit more bass definition, and smoother transients. The difference was not huge, but easily noticeable. The KCAG also had the advantage of the silver WBT connector.



I next moved to the Hero Ag starting at \$767. I wondered if an extra conductor would be an obvious improvement. Well, the added resolution, bass articulation, and depth of soundstage was clearly noticeable, but very subtle. Sibilants were less metallic and transients were speedier. The overall presentation was more relaxed and natural, especially with acoustic music. Acoustic guitars shimmered, percussion instruments were woody, brassy, or muted where appropriate. Well recorded vocals were ever so beautiful. Any added studio ambience was easily detectable. Closely miked, dry vocals were eerily present. Now, keep in mind, the KCAG is a superb sounding cable, the Hero Ag only builds on this foundation.



I am a big fan of West African pop and traditional music, and one my recent favorite acquisitions was *Tchamantche'*, by Malian singer Rokia Traore'. Besides being a gorgeous, analog sounding recording, the music is spellbinding. Her velvety voice is accompanied by acoustic percussion, drums, electric and acoustic guitars, and traditional Malian instruments. There is a lot of space between the musicians in the mix, and the Hero Ag rendered this modern masterpiece in absolute holographic beauty. I kept coming back to track four, "Aimer", a sultry, exotic ballad sung in French. I felt transported into the recording space, an experience I have rarely get to enjoy. Simply stunning.

I spent multiple listening sessions with the Hero Ag trying to cover many musical bases. Some Jethro Tull remasters, U2's *Unforgettable Fire: Deluxe Edition*, Frank Sinatra reissues, some Tindersticks, and a bit of Celtic folk. I was never disappointed. At this point I was really wondering what I could expect from the KCTG, the most expensive Kimber cable below the Select series. Could it be better? And if it was, would it be worth the extra dollar layout? I was about to find out.



I installed the KCTG, starting at \$952, and spun the same assortment of music used for the KCAG

and Hero Ag. First up, Rokia Traore's "Aimer". My first reaction was an unequivocal "wow". Images were more defined, the level of refinement is the best I have heard in my system from an interconnect. "Organic" is a word I admit I tend to overuse, but the reason I think it applies here to the KCTG is that the sound it produced was anything but mechanical, artificial, or fatiguing. "One White Duck" from Jethro Tull's masterful *Minstrel in the Gallery* (2002 remastered version) was presented in a way that I have not heard before with other cables installed. Acoustic guitars were more wooden sounding, piano notes were more easily distinguishable, and Ian Anderson's vocals and flute were more defined. This was a real eye opener, or maybe more accurately, a real ear opener.

One disc that really defined for me what the KCTG could do for a system was the latest offering from Norah Jones, *The Fall*. I had listened to it a bunch of times on my systems and in the car and never really lit a fire for me. However, I was quite surprised when I put it on after installing the KCTG and it seemed to come alive, with the performances having real dimension, emotional impact, and fidelity. Unless my ears were deceiving me, I even heard some tape hiss, a relic from another era, on the track "Back to Manhattan", which if I am correct, indicates this was recorded to old fashioned analog. The KCTG also revealed to me that the producers used a bit too much compression on the mixes, trying to make them "louder", I guess hoping poor Norah could compete with the "shouty" records out there. In my opinion, there was no need, as her arrangements are always classy and full sounding. This is an example of how a superb component or cable can wipe away the window to the music, warts and all.

Conclusion:

Kimber Kable has not been around for some 30 years for nothing. Since the company was born after Ray Kimber's noise canceling braided wire experiment, they have been making universally lauded products at all price points. I personally own some entry level Kimber products, including the 4VS and 4TC speaker cables, and the Tonik interconnects (which start at \$65!) and they all perform well above their price point. Now having been exposed to the pricier, all silver interconnects, I realize that Kimber absolutely does give you more as your budget increases. They are uncompromising in their choice of materials, manufacturing processes, and finish. The KCAG with WBT Ag connectors out performs my Silver Streak, but not by a huge margin, as a matter of fact it took some critical listening to hear differences. The Hero Ag and KCTG were another matter. They distinguished themselves from the get go, and to my mind are probably the best value in the line. Keep in mind I have not heard anything from the Kimber Select series at this point.

The KCTG is the finest cable I have heard in my system. It is in a class by itself in relation to cables near its price range, and offers a level of performance that for me at least, is as close to state of the art as I can afford. I say for me, because even I win the lottery tomorrow, the notion of paying mid to high six figures for an interconnect audio cable does not register for me. The KCTG represents the very top end of my budget, and for me, would be the end of the road. I think even the very fortunate among us could easily live very, very happily ever after with the KCTG.

Kimber offers several termination options from WBT. But if I was going to spend between \$600 and \$1000 for one of these cables, I could not imagine not going for the WBT top of the line WBT-0102-ag. Not doing so would be akin to putting cheap tires on a Maserati. Finally, these are hardly “budget” cables, but far from anywhere near the top end of cable pricing. I can conclude the survey by saying you are getting exactly what you are paying for here, superb sounding cables, beautifully made in the USA. I can’t recommend the any of these three cables highly enough.



Q & A
with Nate Mansfield,
Sales Manager for Kimber Kable:

Q: Kimber is among a small group of cable companies that has hit the 30 year mark. What do you think the secret to the longevity of Kimber Kable?

Not quitting...

I think this is a question that lends itself to grand standing and bragging. I will put it to you plainly. The ultimate flattery is the fact that we have been around for that many years. The reality is that we have simply put our heads down and tried to do our best work without ever letting up. The same fire and intensity that propelled us into the market continue to prove popular with our consumers. The concept that we have simply not quit could be yammered on for pages, but these are the things that I think would be most telling about us as a company:

We have not quit taking care of all the people who make us great. Customers, dealers, employees and vendors. We have a nearly 30 year history with people on all those fronts. Just last week I had a customer send cables back that were over 20 yrs old to be re-terminated. The same employee who made that cable is still here and serves as our operations manager. The same vendor that we bought the copper from for that exact cable is the company we deal with to this day. While “not quitting” seems overly simple I trust that the details are not lost on you or ultimately our customers. We have not quit showing up every morning, answering the phone, taking orders, building product, shipping product, and taking pride in all we do. This is what allows us to not quit standing behind everything we have ever sold.

There have been pot holes along the way and we are not without our flaws. Mistakes are inevitable, but the manner in which a company steps up to the plate in owning and dealing with mistakes is much more revealing than how we behave when everything is perfect. There are many aspects to business that are not as glamorous as one could assume. Our unyielding integrity is really the reason that we are still around. Ray will often say that everybody cares and everybody matters. The importance of this concept is critical to our longevity. We treat people the way we expect to be treated and we have great products. We’re looking forward to the next 30 years.

Q: Your company offers cables across all price points, and is known for providing high quality products even at the entry level . Do you think your customers move up the line over time as their budgets increase and and they audition higher end Kimber wires?

Absolutely! We consider our least expensive products to be entre to real high fidelity, it is very serious product for discerning customers at any price range. We are music lovers and that passion can be ignited, shared or enhanced at every level. Our focus has always been to deliver the absolute best “bang for the buck” in product that can be scaled with the listeners level of addiction. TONIK is our gateway drug, often a customer for this product may be experiencing the proof that cables do make a difference in system performance and more importantly in musicality for the first time.

The desire to stay put or settle when you have just witnessed a system wide improvement by swapping out a simple cable defies human nature. The most interesting thing about your question was the concept of auditioning cables. This is where we really put our sales and marketing on display. Our products are meant to be auditioned. Our dealers encourage a person to take the product home and let the music do the selling. This willingness to let our product go out into the world and speak for themselves is either absolute arrogance or absolute humility – you decide based on our dealings with each other.

Q: The high level of care put into assembling the KCAG, Hero Ag, and the KCTG is evident. How uncompromising is the production process in terms of quality control?

Every product is built by very happy and very skilled craftsmen. Every product passes through at least three different people before it goes out. These methods allow us to offer our lifetime guarantee without any fear of incurring great expense. Simply put our expectation is perfection. We’re still working on it. (We’ll never stop).

Q: Can you give us an idea of your reference system?

I’m simple. I like tubes and point source drivers. I have both analog and digital going at all times. This is what works best for my house and my musical taste, which are also quite simple. So much music has been “improved to death” I am more inclined to stick with less is more. In the composition, the recordings and the play back – less is more for me. The more true to the original I can get in my space the more involved I become in the performance. Here at the factory we have MORE. Eight enormous SOUNDLAB panels, stacks of PASS LABS amps and a virtual product museum from EMM LABS. The system is incredible and most deserving of the title of reference system. I like them both.

Q: Lastly, Vinyl or Digital, or both?

I have heard the best examples in all formats and I cannot claim a singular superiority to any. Vinyl has a certain romance to it that is hard to duplicate. Digital has a convenience that gets me listening to more music more often. Which is better? I don’t know. For my money I just want the music, how I get there is secondary.

Special Thanks to Nate Mansfield for his cooperation.

Company Info:

Kimber Kable www.kimber.com

2752 South 1900 West

Ogden , UT , 84401 USA

801-621-5530

Reviewers Associated Equipment System 1:

- CD Player: Naim CD5x and CD5 XS with Flatcap 2X
- Preamp: Audio Research SP16
- Amplifier: Audio Research VS55, Perreaux Eloquence 150i.
- Speaker: Harbeth Compact 7ES3
- Cables: Kimber/QED/Acoustic Zen (AC)/Transparent (AC), RS Cables, Element Cables,
- DH Labs, DecWare.
- Accessories: Symposium Rollerblocks, Shakti Stone, Sound Anchors stands.

Reviewers Associated Equipment 2:

- CD Player: Marantz 5003
- Music Server: Squeezebox 3
- DAC:CIA VDA-2 with XPS
- Preamp: Belles Soloist
- Amplifier: Revox A722
- Speaker: Spondor S5e, Spondor S5R
- Cables: Kimber/QED/Transparent/Shunyata(AC)/PS Audio(AC), Pangea Audio
- Accessories: Atacama Stands