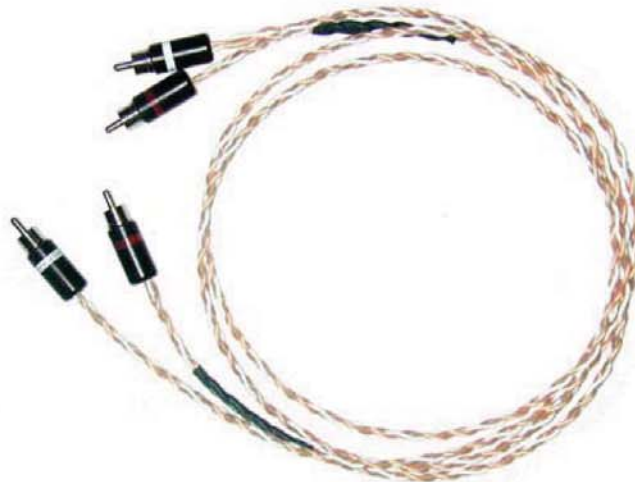


T O N I K By Kimber Kable (Another Budget Contender)

Review by Karl Lozier

Here is Kimber's response to the growing demand for true economy priced products by high-end audio companies. It is also déjà vu all over again, the third time in the past few years for me. A few days after I recently received Harmonic Technology's new economy line of interconnects and loudspeaker cables and reviewed in our September issue, still viewable this month, I received these Tonik interconnects from the Kimber Company. A year or so ago I had received A.C. power cords from both a couple of weeks apart and long before that the same timing with their top line interconnects. In this instance HT had developed a budget priced loudspeaker cable to match/pair with their new interconnect. In fact, they preferred the two identical appearing products to be reviewed together, which I did.



The Tonik interconnect cables like many recent audio product developments is at least partly in response to home-theater development and its popularity. Tied in with this is the fast growing practice of distribution wiring in new home construction. There is a huge amount of wiring going into these thousands of new homes and companies such as Kimber want that wiring to be made by them. Because so much wiring is needed there is tremendous economic pressure on the installers. So Kimber and other companies try to be competitive enough so that their products are used and that listeners benefit as a result. Home theater, home installations and home wiring during construction are now major factors in the audio field. During a discussion with Dick Diamond I found out that Kimber makes custom installation cables named KWIK. Rarely advertised, this UL/CL2 rated loudspeaker cable mates well with these new Tonik interconnects. They feature a soft and slick outer PVC covering that is specifically designed for easier pulling through studs and installation holes.

The Tonik interconnects are actually based on the Kimber's well known 4 VS loudspeaker cables. They share the same type of polyethylene dielectric covering. In the Tonik, the quite different coloring is the braided combination of white and light copper colored braid. That typically results in a smoother or sweeter high-end response than using Teflon while being cheaper to use. The overall thickness of the interconnects is much thinner than usual which may help in some situations. The Tonik uses a cheaper variation of their varistand (VS) wiring geometry technique as used in the 4 VS cables. Here with these new budget interconnects, instead of seven different gauges there are only four, two in the plus side and two in the negative. The male plug of the RCA connector is not split, the outer shield connection is a slightly cheaper design and so on. That is a real turnabout for Kimber Kable Company. Ray Kimber spent years experimenting and researching to make cables sound better for music lovers. Now the efforts are to get costs down as low as possible while retaining much of their well-known qualities. If you are someone who does not believe that different cables affect sound quality, then you are either lucky or do not listen closely or are using a poor excuse for a music system.

I had just finished evaluation of Harmonic Technology's new budget line combination of interconnects and loudspeaker cables. I only listened to them together and not separately as requested. I replaced their loudspeaker cables with my usual reference ones with an immediate and significant increase in sound quality and enjoyment, as I would expect from a very significant price differential. Then the next day I listened for a short interval (the only time used without their companion loudspeaker cables), then removed HT's interconnects and replaced them with Kimber's new Tonik interconnects. It did not take long to notice the difference between Harmonic Technology's Harmony Link model and Kimber's Tonik model. I am not talking about audible response extension at either end of the spectrum. Neither am I referring to differences in apparent detail revealed or covered in various areas of the audible spectrum.

Both interconnects had a rather rough frequency response. It is not common to state it that way, but it is accurate. A good example would be of a fine recording of a piano being played with notes wide ranging up and down the scale. With top notch interconnects, such as Kimber's Select series, there would be a degree of sameness in some aspects such as volume, impact, perspective or "quality". If it all sounds right or reminiscent of a real piano playing then the response is smooth. Using those criteria, neither of these budget interconnects can be said to have a smooth response. Remember that HT's budget interconnect was designed together with their new budget loudspeaker cable and logically complement it as a goal, perhaps more importantly than its performance as a stand-alone component. Therefore it is very possibly not fair to compare it with the new Tonik, as it sounds leaner and tighter in the lower frequencies up to the lower part of the mid-range and as a result the tonal balance is brighter sounding.

The Tonik winds up having a relatively full and rich tonal balance though the relatively rough high end is a factor if you are really looking or listening for it. It would not be expected to hear it described as being bright sounding, but remember when describing tonal balance everything is relative and where is your or somebody else's starting or reference point. Tonal balance is so very important when choosing components in the budget price range. Because of the great appeal and influence of home theater, A.V. receivers have become so common and most of them have added brightness in the treble range but the lower end may be lacking or with some products overly full or rich sounding. In my limited experience and echoed by others I know, the Denon and Marantz models listing around a thousand dollars or more, usually have a pretty darn good tonal balance, though I'm sure others sneak in at times.

Loudspeakers that are commonly used with receivers or home theater setups range from nonexistent low end or bass response to overly full rich and even boomy sounding. The top half of the frequency range is often bright or even harsh and edgy. That characteristic helps them stand out in a crowded showroom audition. Keep the above in mind when choosing items such as interconnects or loudspeaker cables to possibly balance other components. Power cords are typically left till much further along the audio line for music lovers. Beginners should choose which of two paths to follow. If purchasing an entire system with absolutely no plans to upgrade in the future, then remember the adage of the importance of the loudspeakers on the sound quality. Depending on the price range, as much as half the total cost might be allocated to the loudspeakers. On the other hand, if future upgrading is planned, it is common to put the emphasis and money on the front end or beginning of the audio chain. That would be items such as a CD player (or possibly a turntable setup) or preamplifier and really good cables to connect everything. The cheap speakers might wind up someday as surround sound choices or stuck in your bedroom or wherever.

The Tonik interconnects are a true bargain and a 100+ value product in the bargain audio area. They have a fairly neutral tonal balance and would fit in best where a lean bass range or bright treble response is not desired. The cost rises quickly (percentage wise) if ordered with WBT locking connections, which as a very personal thing, I far prefer. If you like the tonal balance of these Tonik interconnects but want even better overall sound quality, I would suggest trying or buying Kimber's Hero line of interconnects which offer a similar tonal balance and are noticeably better in all other respects. The differences are truly significant and readily apparent in direct comparison. Yes, Kimber's Select series is a distinct even further upgrade and its improvement pretty much finalizes that route.

In summary, the Tonik interconnects from Kimber Kable Company are another new entry by a true high-end audio company into the previously unexplored area of genuinely bargain priced products. My experience so far in this area strongly suggests that for most listeners and all music lovers the choice should mainly be decided by needed or desired tonal qualities. These interconnects seem to be close to a neutral balance or very slightly to the rich or full side of it. For very good performance in other areas, a more expensive choice would be necessary.

Specifications

Tonik Interconnects RCA terminations:
With Ultratike standard connectors as reviewed
With WBT-147 locking connectors
Balanced connectors are available

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