

MC 1:

FIRST INTERNATIONAL REVIEW - THE WORLD'S BEST SPEAKER CABLE

***Ray Kimber's Model 88 - 'The Black Pearl' by Martin Colloms
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Arriving in an aluminium alloy Halliburton flight case the review Model 88 speaker cable came as two really heavy eleven foot sets, [2 x 3.33m]. This explained the need for a sturdy case whose cost paled in the light of the cable itself - around £1,000 a foot or £6,200 a stereo metre, the price of a small car! In fact, lying curled like a snake on my listening room floor was the equivalent of £20,000.

Can there be any justification for a speaker cable costing this much? I for one am not brave enough to attempt it, so where might Kimber's Type 88 find employment? The answer is 'in those few systems where such a product, if it does the job, could provide a degree of system refinement, of matching and for want of a better word, 'completeness' unattainable by any other route'. Used sparingly as the link between monoblocks sited locally to the loudspeakers and you might get away with as little as a few grands worth. With a central power amp employed for much of this review, a 3 metre set was just right.

As this project got underway, I was forced to accept that Type 88 could not be considered just as a piece of wire. Its effect on my several tests systems led me inescapably to the view that it was an audio component in its own right.

As with many audiophile cables there's a good technical story. These aren't always plausible. For the Black Pearl the costly materials used, pure silver and Teflon don't go far in explaining the price. For that you have to consider the painstaking way the cable's built such as the six week curing time for the polymer 'gel' which encompasses and supports the helical cross/ insulated signal of conductors. This carefully selected polymer needs rotating throughout the long cure time to maintain dimensional accuracy. Kimber's braided construction of multiple sets of three insulated single strand conductors results in a 'bunch' of high mechanical stability, with conductors crossing and re-crossing to reduce the electromagnetic interaction between them, 10 groups of the braided triple are helically interwoven to form the plus and minus groups, the 45mm array held in the gel matrix, whose mechanical properties include a low dielectric loss, high flexibility good mechanical strength and good damping. There are no air spaces woven or layered into this cable. However the core is a ridged hollow ducting, filled with micro fine lead shot for supreme mass loading and damping . It also acts as an electromagnetic sink. The

individual grains are insulated.

As for the wire, it's a proprietary Kimber formulation enhanced by sub ppm levels of selected, slow drawn silver multiple pass to achieve a mirror, voidless finish on the 25 gauge single strands. The Teflon insulation is applied via a slow feed at high density leaving a tight contact with no voids to the wire surface.

Despite its huge weight, it lays flat and limp and may be arranged near the connection terminals allowing for easy connection via the flexible end terminations.

Sound quality:

While I didn't have my recent review Wilson Grand SLAMM on hand, I did have Wilson's WITT and System 5 plus Quad Electrostatics Even the Spondor SP2-2 was revealing in this review. Power amps included the ARC CT60 and VTM120, Krell KAS-2 and Krell KSA200S with sources the Krell KPS20i/I, Accuphase DP10-V and Mark Levinson 30.5. Analogue disc was via a custom head amp feeding a c.j.PV12L.

Comparison cables included the following : van den Hul Revelation, Siltech Silver Ribbon FTR and LS4-120 plus Transparent's 'Reference.' Matching interconnects comprised Siltech's 4-245 and FTM 4 Gold, van den Hul The First and Second plus Kimber's KCAG and KCTG normal and balanced and Transparent 'Reference' balanced interconnect.

At first I was somewhat underwhelmed. Perhaps I was too aware of the price and was naively expecting some dramatic boost. I went through the motions, comparing and checking, with the certain result that Type 88 was world class and possessed of some special qualities. But was it really as good as it would need to be, if it was to make sense of the whole concept?

I had left 88 in place while fine tuning other details of the main system and was very satisfied with the overall result. Later and without conscious attention I then put the usual reference speaker cable back into the system and settled down for some listening rather than measuring. Immediately I sensed a major change - I felt deeply the absence of the 88 cable - and only then did I fully appreciate its achievements : the deep, clear, noiseless sound stage, the unexaggerated ambience, air and atmosphere which this cable set free in so many recordings. I knew my reference cable had a touch of forwardness and could not be perfect but despite this, it's seen off many contenders. The Black Pearl cruelly revealed it to sound strangely noisy and glazed, somewhat grainy in the treble, too forceful and even a touch metallic in the mid range, lacking subtle aspects of detail and timbre.

The 88 was truly pre-eminent in these respects, with an ability to provide

coherence and homogeneity, as well as a wholly natural, musical quality. Without softness or any perceptible weakness at the frequency extremes, this cable had a character akin to that most prized in amplifiers, namely a low feedback, SE triode sort of flavour; alive and yet relaxed, free from glare and yet capable of great intimacy, the kind of sound that doesn't merely impress you but actually leaves you smiling. The Black Pearl goes further, it keeps the faith over the entire frequency range.

In absolute terms, at the 3.3 metre ;, this cable is a shade 'soft' in the bass and yet the low range remains extended, tuneful, highly articulate, the shade of difference between the very good bass performance of a c.j. Premiere 8 and a Krell KAS-2 for example. Yet paradoxically you can still hear what a KAS-2 can and cannot do via the '88.

The mid form this cable has a wonderful tonality but is a little backward, quiet sounding, giving the effects of slightly muted dynamics. The effect is of a slower, less frenetic approach to the music. With that natural tonality comes a richer, broader purer and more even mid range which somehow makes moving coil drivers sound more like good electrostatics - an extraordinary finding.

In the treble, it proved peerless. It left the rest of the cable pack standing and sounding relatively grainy and exposed. In this respect The Black Pearl managed to encompass the best aspects of pure carbon fibre conductor technology.

Conclusion:

There are no tricks here. On the bench the 88 recorded utterly negligible values for resistance, inductance, capacitance and dielectric loss [per metre, 0.0123 ohms, 0.525 uH, 512pf.] I feel that I can agree that the highly accurate sound has resulted from long experience, fine low microphony design, superb materials and painstaking manufacture.

Such is this cable's contribution to the finer points of good sound reproduction that its effect can be heard in quite modestly priced systems. In High End setups it deserves to be considered as an audiophile component in its own right. Hearing of many Wilson X1 Grand SLAMM installations being equipped with The Black Pearl I can now understand what high degree of engineering and sonic synergy would result from this combination. Of the non bi-wire speaker designs the big Wilsons do benefit from a single run of superlative speaker cable and Ray Kimber's Type 88 is just that sort of product. I'll be very sorry to see it leave but it must sooner or later.

The experience is wonderfully revealing but must not be allowed to corrupt if such a costly product were to remain in my system.

This is by far the best speaker cable I have heard, strongly recommended

to those with matching systems.

C 1995 martin colloms , reset 2008

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