

Soundstage! - Todd Warnke
Kimber Silver Streak
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Pure emotion. Words so heart-felt, so direct, and sung with a singular voice so expressive that it cuts to, and through the fabric of my soul. On the very good (stereo) days this is how Joni Mitchell comes across to me. In many ways this is the acid test each and every component in my system must pass. Added detail, a larger and more precise soundstage, deeper bass, more air, all come for naught if Joni (and Miles, and Bruce, and Van, etc.) is not rendered with greater emotional realism. So, after giving Kimber's new Silver Streak wire a suitable break-in period, I dropped in "Court and Spark" to see if this was going to be one of those good days. It was.

Most of us have heard of Kimber Kable, and I'd bet most of us have tried at least one of Ray's designs. His speaker wire, starting with the very good/ridiculously cheap 4PR/8PR (about \$1 and \$2/ft), extending to the fantastically popular/even better 4TC/8TC (about \$5 and \$9/ft) and reaching to the all silver/incredibly priced/and even better sounding 4AG/8AG (about \$100 and \$180/ft), have been universally praised and well received in the marketplace as well. His interconnects have also been well reviewed and received. The PBJ, at \$68 a meter pair, is so good for the price that many audiophiles have never felt a need to audition more expensive wire; and when they have (and when their pocket books have allowed it), many just jumped straight to the all silver KCAG at \$350 a meter pair.

Ray's designs have found a place in my system in the past. For about 18 months I used Kimber's PBJ, and was quite happy with it in the system as it was then configured. However, as the system changed, I began to feel that that some of the problems I was trying to solve weren't being addressed by the components I was changing out. There was a persistent upper midrange/lower treble glare, and try as I might, it would not go away. Eventually I auditioned a bunch of wire and found that when the Kimber was out of the system, so was the glare. After solving that the next difficulty was in finding a wire that let me keep the resolution, dynamics and imaging of the PBJ, without costing me 3 to 4 times its price. Eventually I found the MAS Black which seemed to keep 99% of the Kimber's virtues,

while removing the glare, and adding a couple new virtues on it's own, one being an emotional directness which made the PBJ sound analytical in comparison.

During this time I tried out the KCAG for kicks, knowing the price would keep it out of the running. The KCAG, unlike most of my previous encounters with silver wire, seemed to offer excellent detail retrieval without sounding etched. In fact, I found it to be both an emotionally direct and an intellectually satisfying wire, which quite surprised me. It kept everything good about the PBJ, and added emotional impact and a great deal of refinement as well. At the time I was upset that Kimber didn't offer a step between the PBJ and the KCAG (except the KC1 which is just a shielded PBJ, or rather PBJ is a non-shielded KC1). Apparently enough other people felt the same way and told Ray. The result of this is a new offering by Kimber Kable, the aforementioned Silver Streak.

The Silver Streak is constructed similarly to the PBJ and KCAG. All three are solid core, braided designs, with one positive and two negative conductors, unshielded, and terminated with Kimber's own RCA jacks. The difference is the wire inside the insulation. The PBJ sports high purity copper, while the KCAG is an all silver design. The new Silver Streak keeps the 2 copper negative wires (... la PBJ), but uses the KCAG's solid silver positive conductor. The negative wires are encased in black, while the silver wire has a clear covering. It retails for about \$175 a meter pair, neatly splitting the price between the PBJ and KCAG. The wire looks quite good. Though like its siblings, the lack of a shield or common covering does make you treat it with gentleness.

After breaking in the Silver Streak and spending some time listening to just it, it was time to set up a shoot-out. I gathered up a couple of competitors. Mike Fenech flew in from Austin to critique my system, to convince me how much better his speakers are than mine, and to deliver his Music Metre Signatures (\$250 a meter pair) to the OK Corral. Magnan Illi, my current sub 2 bills champ (\$195 a meter pair), was the other competitor. To establish a baseline I used a pair of PBJ, and also managed to borrow a pair of KCAG at the very end of my time with the Silver Streak (I really wanted to check out the KCAG to see how close this hybrid comes to its big brother). All set,

we started listening (Mike hung in with me for several days to help keep my ears honest, as well as to participate in the reality test, a trip to see the Hal Galper Trio at Vartan Jazz).

The good news is that there were no losers in this shoot-out. I don't mean to say that there was little significant difference between these interconnects, rather that each of the 3 main competitors had their own set of advantages that would make them a preferred choice under certain circumstances. It was also obvious that each of the three was superior to the PBJ. As I said earlier, the PBJ has always given me the impression of great detail, but in an analytical manner and with an upper mid-range glare. Each of the three other wires (and the KCAG as well) did a much better job of communicating both details and emotion. That said, let's move on to their differences.

The Music Metre Signature impressed me as a fine wire. It had an immediacy that was very beguiling. Recordings were presented without veils or obvious timbral mistakes. On the other hand, there was a persistent dryness that bothered me. Bass offers the best way to describe the Music Metre's benefits and drawbacks.

Richard and Linda Thompson's Shoot Out The Lights offers lyrics dealing with the breakup of their marriage in terms so emotionally harrowing as to turn Fleetwood Mac's Rumors into a "Dick and Jane" tale in comparison. And, in the Rykodisk AU24 format, it offers fantastic sound as well. The title track is driven by bass line and bass drum accompaniment. With the Music Metre the bass was both deep and powerful. It was easy to lock into and ride along with. I would have thought it was darn near perfect till I dropped the Kimber in. With it in place the drum took on more life. The drive it imparted to the song became considerably easier to feel. And how the drum lit up the original recording venue became much easier to hear. In short, it became much more tangible.

This dryness can also be seen in the treble. On the same Richard Thompson track the drummer rides the cymbals down to a whisper at about the 1:15 mark. With the Music Metre, the cymbals turned into a hissing sound as the volume lowered. The Kimber's greater accuracy never lost the feel of real cymbals. Once again, much more believable.

That said, please don't over emphasize my comments regarding the Signature. With the exception of the above mentioned track its highs were excellent, midrange was always vivid, and it portrayed the soundstage better than any of the other wires included in this short survey (including the KCAG). It had a very nice snap to the bass (as the British would say, "tuneful"), but try as I may, I could not get past the dryness. If asked to rank the Music Metre, I would place it third of the three main competitors, but oh so very close to second. And, if I had a system that needed a little off the bottom, it would rise to the top of the list.

I would place the Magnan second, which surprised me a lot (I expected it to win). From the first time I heard this wire I fell in love with it. It is so grain and glare free that it sets an almost impossible standard. Its presentation is relaxed, refined, and yet very involving emotionally. The stage is clear and widely laid out. And it has no obvious timbral errors (although it could reach a little lower in the bass). Yet with all that, the Silver Streak seemed a better cable to me.

In comparison to the Kimber, the Magnan sounded a little thin. That thinness was both harmonic and visual, so to speak. The very highest overtones on cymbals sounded lean compared to the Silver Streak, as did piano. Joe Pass's guitar also showed evidence of this thinness, lacking the body I've heard with other wire, especially my Cardas Cross. As for the visual side of the equation, the harmonic leanness seemed to take away from the solidity of images as compared to the Kimber cable. Still, this is an excellent cable, and in a slightly rich system would be a perfect fit.

As for the Silver Streak, yep, it won. While some elements of the other two cables bettered it (the Music Metre was less veiled, the Magnan very slightly more refined) it had an unbeatable combination of virtues. First of which is the ability to present instruments with a sense of reality. In spite of the Music Metre's deeper bass, the Kimber made bass guitar and drums sound more natural. And in spite of the Magnan's slightly greater soundstage, the Kimber gave every instrument a stronger sense of place and action. In fact, that may be the part of its presentation that struck me first and greatest impact.

Miles Davis' So What from the Kind of Blue album is my single favorite track, and the first time I played it with the Kimber in place was a delicious experience. Each instrument had a golden glow of sound surrounding it, and yet each instrument was as precisely delineated as it had been before. This type of presentation seems to me far more like what I hear at a jazz club. Detail, with bloom, makes it easier to follow instrumental lines, and this was precisely what the Silver Streak delivered.

As I pointed out earlier, the Music Metre seemed more immediate, less veiled, and yet less accurate when compared to the Kimber cable. Previously I had associated greater immediacy and less veiled sound with greater accuracy, but in this case the Kimber taught me a lesson. It's essential tonal accuracy, coupled with fantastic harmonic retrieval more than compensates for a slight veiling. As for the Music Metre's greater bass extension, the dryness it had as well gave the richer Kimber the edge again.

As for the KCAG/Silver Streak comparison, the KCAG was more refined (the Magnan and KCAG being equal in this regard), slightly less veiled, and slightly more extended at the frequency extremes. Other than that, they were just about a push, at least in my system.

In summary, would I buy this wire? You betcha! To me it would be THE killer mid-budget cable to drop into any system where its only real flaw wouldn't be a problem (the very slight veiling both Mike and I noticed). It's dynamic, involving, accurate, detailed and harmonically pure. Am I going to buy this wire? Well, compared to the Cardas Cross (\$398/meter pair) I would still go with the Cardas for its superb staging, even richer harmonic retrieval, killer dynamics and to die for top end. But at less than half the price, the Silver Streak sets a new standard for me. Anyone spending less than \$200 a meter pair for wire needs to check this out. Heck, I'd even recommend that should you be budgeting less than \$100 a pair that you try this out first, I'd be willing to bet you'll find a way to increase your budget. It's that good.