

The Entry Level

stereophile.com/content/entry-level-19

July 5, 2012



It was unusually warm for early spring, without a cloud in the big, blue sky to tame the sun's dazzling light far too beautiful a day to be indoors, but Uncle Omar and I had already planned a little listening session, and I was determined to show him that high-end cables would make a difference in his system. I wasn't necessarily feeling bullish about the task, though. It had taken me a couple of years to convince Omar that he should replace his old boom-box speakers with something better, and it was only dumb luck that finally made it happen: I was with him when he found a gently used pair of B&W DM602 speakers at a junk shop in Jersey City. When they were new, the DM602s sold for around \$600/pair, but on this happy day they were tagged at \$50. "Do it," I begged him. "*Dooooooo* it!"

He did it thank goodness and, a couple of weeks later, we made a trip to Audio Connection in Verona, New Jersey, where affable store owner John Rutan accomplished what I thought impossible: He sold Omar a cool, new Rega P1 turntable to replace his beat-to-death Salvation Army record player. Of course, this smart purchase soon led to another (Ortofon 2M Red phono cartridge), another (Bellari VP129 phono preamp), another (Oppo DV-980 universal player), and another (Harman/Kardon HK3390 receiver). But for some damn reason I could never get Omar to invest in new cables. His decade-old spool of RadioShack 16-gauge zip cord, diligently carried from one rented apartment to the next, served him just fine. "I know what cables do," he would say, "and I just can't see why high-end cables would make a difference."

In the past, I might have mumbled something about high-purity copper or Teflon insulation, but Omar would easily see that I was out of my depth. This time, I would come prepared with Kimber Kable's 4PR and 8VS loudspeaker cables (\$150 and \$280 per 10' pair, respectively) and let *them* do the talking.

Three demo tracks

I met Omar at his front door, where we performed our usual greeting: a patented high-five routine of over the top, down low, fist-bump, blow it up, perfected long ago over beers and a Mets game. Upstairs, Omar poured two cups of Puerto Rican coffee (strain through a sweat sock, add five pounds of sugar) and we got to work. To keep things simple, we listened only to CDs through Omar's Oppo DV-980. From the discs available on Omar's racks we selected three demo tracks with which we were equally and intimately familiar: "One Armed Scissor," from At the Drive-In's *Relationship of Command* (Grand Royal/Virgin 49999), recorded by Chuck Johnson; the title track of Jay-Z's *The Blueprint²: The Gift & the Curse* (Roc-A-Fella 063381-2), recorded by Gimel "Young Guru" Keaton; and "Becuz," from Sonic Youth's *Washing Machine* (DGC 24825), recorded by John Siket.

First, we listened to Omar's system with his usual RadioShack wire connecting his B&W DM602s to his Harman/Kardon HK3390 receiver. "One Armed Scissor" sounded just as I remembered: urgent and dramatic, with pleading vocals, heavily distorted guitars, and furious rhythms, but needlessly loud and compressed. Aside from the recording's common deficiencies, the overall sound was entirely fine. Nothing sounded particularly wrong. I began to worry. *What if we don't hear an improvement?*

"Sounds pretty good," Omar said.

"Hmm," I cautiously replied, reaching into my bag of cables.

Kimber Kable 4PR

Kimber Kable's 4PR, the company's very first product and its most affordable speaker cable (\$150/10' pair), was introduced in 1979, when I was two years old. Like Kimber's popular PBJ interconnect (\$110/1m pair, reviewed last month), the 4PR has gone practically unchanged since its release. It employs the same braided geometry found in Kimber's more expensive 8VS speaker cable (\$280/10' pair, reviewed last month), but instead of the 8VS's eight gray and eight black conductors, the 4PR has four pairs each of black and brown conductors in an apparently looser braid. I've always loved the look of the 4PR. Brown? *Brown?* It's so understated it's almost bold.

My samples came with Kimber's high-quality SBAN banana plugs at the amp ends and their confidence-inspiring PostMaster 33 spade lugs at the speaker ends. When I unpacked the 4PRs and held them in my hands, I was immediately impressed by their overall build quality it takes only a moment to recognize the high level of craftsmanship in any Kimber product but, beyond that, I felt as if I were holding a piece of hi-fi history. Few hi-fi products can match the 4PR's longevity; anything that sticks around

our fickle world for thirtysomething years has got to have a lot going for it. The 4PR deserves respect and attention. But what would it offer over the typical RadioShack wire in terms of sound quality?

As Omar sat in the sweet spot, I quickly swapped the RadioShack zip cords for Kimber 4PRs, made sure the pluses and minuses were properly matched, took my seat, and started "One Armed Scissor" from the beginning. Again, I wondered: *What if we don't hear an improvement?* I shouldn't have worried. The 4PR's sound quality was just as immediately obvious as its build quality. Five seconds into the song, Omar and I turned to one another. I smiled and nodded. Omar looked pale. He blinked. He frowned. He said, "Wow."

Most apparent to Omar was an increase in overall clarity and low-level detail. "I could hear those backing vocals better," he said. "The sound was muddy before." In addition to that clarity, we both enjoyed the Kimber's tighter, better-controlled bass. Bass is music's foundation; as it goes, so goes the sound. With the Kimbers in Omar's system, there were more subtle gradations of texture and tone in the song's opening moments, the bass now working as a proper anchor to the heavy electric guitars and quickly shifting drum patterns. It all created a sense of swelling, purposeful movement, steady momentum, and enhanced drama all good things.

Turning back to the RadioShack cable confirmed its much more simplistic overall sound. Unlike the more-nuanced, better-detailed Kimber, the RadioShack served up all the musical elements at the same time, with less regard for tonal color and momentum, creating a less interesting, less involving listening experience fine, but easily forgettable.

Still using "One Armed Scissor," we compared the 4PR to Kimber's 8VS. All the earlier improvements were there again, but now they were even more dramatic, inspiring Omar and me to dissect parts of the song. At around 2:25, as drummer Tony Hajjar moves from his crash cymbals to a circular tom-tom pattern, guitarists Jim Ward and Omar Rodriguez-López shift from heavily distorted power chords to moderately phased open chords. The band continues in this mode for about 30 seconds before returning to the verse. Through the RadioShack cords the subtleties of this section had been almost entirely lost, and while the Kimber 4PRs had brought those subtleties back to life, the 8VS cables presented them with even greater urgency, drama, and purpose. Those 30 seconds became a memorable and emotionally compelling bridge exactly what the band intended, I imagine.

We continued our tests using Jay-Z's "The Blueprint2" and Sonic Youth's "Becuz," and the results were similar: improved clarity and low-level resolution; tighter, more musical bass; greater overall enjoyment. "It's like the music gets here sooner," Omar said. And it was around that time in our listening that he opened his MacBook, launched an Internet browser, and began searching for prices of specific lengths of Kimber Kable. I was surprised to hear him say that the 8VS was "cheap" and the 4PR "super cheap," but I guess I shouldn't have been the quality and value of Kimber Kable's products speak loud and clear.

"I knew this would happen!" Omar moaned. "I'm not gonna be able to go back to the RadioShack cable!"

I badly wanted to laugh. *My work here is done*, I thought.

Polk Audio RTi A3 loudspeaker

Back at home, however, my work had just begun. I'd recently set up Polk Audio's RTi A3 loudspeakers (\$399.95/pair), which, at 14.75" H by 8.58" W x 14" D, are by far the largest bookshelf models I've had in my listening room. Right out of the box, the RTi A3 impressed me with its fit and finish. In Polk's Damped Asymmetrical Hex Laminate Isolation (DAHLLI) cabinet design, five layers of MDF are glued together to form a damping system, then topped by a real-wood veneer of black ash or, in the case of my review samples, an impeccable cherry. The gracefully curved cabinet narrows in width from 8.58" at the front to about 5" at the rear, and is said to create a stronger, more rigid, more acoustically inert enclosure. (Knocking on the speaker's side panels resulted in a hollow resonance.) In addition, Polk boasts that the RTi A3's drive-units a 1" silk-dome tweeter and a 6.5" polymer-composite woofer are Klippel Optimized and Dynamically Balanced. According to Polk, the former means that the speaker should perform well at both high and low levels, while the latter means that the drive-units have been designed to avoid deleterious colorations. Finally, the RTi A3 uses Polk's Power Port, a system in which two ports one at the front and one at the rear work together to reduce noise and distortion for clean, powerful bass (footnote 1).



But would all this fancy-sounding stuff make sense in my room? I was beginning to worry. I knew the Polks were big wheeling them along Newark Avenue and carrying them up the two flights of stairs to my apartment had been more of a challenge than I'm used to but I didn't fully appreciate their size until I placed them in my listening room. The Polks completely dwarfed my reference PSB Alpha B1s (\$299.99/pair). Would they overwhelm my little (13' by 10' by 8') room? More important, would they look ridiculous? What would girls think?

I shouldn't have worried. Once I'd set the Polk RTi A3s on my speaker stands, they looked surprisingly good. In fact, they seemed right at home, blending in perfectly with my furnishings and lending the entire room a mature, sophisticated look. But what about the sound?

Initially, I connected the RTi A3s to my NAD C316 BEE integrated amplifier (\$380) using the Kimber 8VS speaker cable. Source components were my Rega P3-24 turntable (\$1295, discontinued) and my NAD C515 BEE CD player (\$300). When playing vinyl, I used the outstanding Parasound Zphono USB phono preamplifier (\$349). All interconnects were Kimber's PBJ. I spent some time experimenting with speaker placement, but found that the Polks performed best when placed exactly where the PSBs had been: about 8' from my listening position, 30" from the sidewalls, and 42" from the front wall. I began with the speakers' grilles removed simply because I wanted to expose their pretty baffles.

Over the first few days of listening, everything I played from Pantha du Prince's wonderful *Black Noise* (LP, Rough Trade RTRAD LP544) to Ricardo Villalobos and Max Loderbauer's *Re: ECM* (CD, ECM 2211/12) to Tenniscoats' enchanting *Papa's Ear* (CD, HÑpna H.48) sounded unusually lively and present, with fast transients, lots of detail, and well-extended highs. While this sound was exhilarating, it could also be a bit too much to handle. Recordings that are already bold and forward, such as "Ni See Ay Ga Done," from Sidi Touré's excellent *Koïma* (CD, Thrill Jockey 301), sounded unnaturally fast and detailed the Malian guitarist's bluesy riffs were granted extra measures of pluck and shine, but were stripped of all their soul. I could soften things up a bit by putting the speakers' grilles in place, but only at the expense of that beguiling presence. Just when I thought hope was lost, I saw the answer right in front of me, neatly coiled on my listening-room floor: AudioQuest's Rocket 33 speaker cable (\$299/10' pair). Swapping Kimber's 8VS for the Rocket 33 finally resulted in the best balance of detail and body. I used the Rocket 33 for the rest of my listening.

From the very start, I had expected more bass from Polk's RTi A3, and it certainly gave it to me but I noticed that increased bass only in direct comparisons with the smaller PSB Alpha B1. The Polk's *overall* sound was just as tonally correct and well balanced as the PSB's, with clean, clear mids and vibrant highs. What most impressed me about the Polk, however, was its presence and physicality. The larger speaker offered a muscularity, weight, and solidity that made listening to well-recorded rock an absolute, fist-pumping joy. "Road Dog," the second track of Dope Body's outstanding new album,

Natural History (CD, Drag City DC513), opens with gently brushed chimes, some well-placed snare hits, and a slowly building tom-tom beat. As that beat grows in speed and intensity, two electric guitars, panned hard left and right, enter with quick raking sounds. The Polks presented each of these elements with startling jump factor and precision, easily turning my small listening room into a hot, crowded basement in the suburbs, with 50 or so sweaty teenagers jostling for a space in the mosh pit. The effect was *extremely* physical and compelling. The PSB Alpha B1 lacked the Polk's *oomph* and scale, and just couldn't infuse "Road Dog" with the same frightening presence and power a shame.

For years, I'd thought that a good minimonitor speaker with a 5.25" woofer was all I'd ever need to fully enjoy music in my small listening room. But after hearing the Polk RTi A3, with its 6.5" woofer and Power Port Plus and all that other stuff, I'm not sure I can go back.

Damn. Now I know how Omar feels.