

Cable Shootout at the Enjoy the Music.com Corral by Karl Lozier

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Review by Karl Lozier

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Kimber Select KS 1011

It started out so innocently at CES 2001.

Dick Diamond of Kimber Kable and I were discussing a possible review of the company's high profile "Select" interconnects. When I mentioned it to Steve Rochlin he responded by saying, "fine, but expand the proposed review and make it a "cable shootout" among a number of companies; you choose the companies". I trembled at the mere

thought of such a project. So I countered with, "I don't think the cable companies would agree to such a project". Steve instantly counterattacked, "Karl just try and see if they'll agree or not; "you may be surprised". When I next talked to Dick Diamond and relayed Steve's proposal, Dick said, "fine with us, we're happy to have any cable made compared to ours just as long as the playing field is reasonably level". *(Steve sez: Why is it that when i hear the name Dick Diamond i think about it being an adult movie star?)*

I decided to not try to review more than five brands of single ended (RCA type) interconnect cables. Since it was my personal choices I was free to let my personal prejudices influence me greatly. I immediately forgot about any company that used any sort of black box connected to or with the cables. That didn't help me narrow the selection field significantly. Obviously Kimber, starting this effort was included. Checking around, more than a dozen names were suggested to me. One of them was repeated more than the others, Harmonic Technology, a relatively new company. I then let my personal bias slant to some local companies. Within a thirty-mile radius of my southeast Florida home are three well-known cable companies. I don't remember reading any reviews about any of their products recently; so preconceived ideas played



no part in any aspect of their selections. The companies are Wireworld, Discovery and Straightwire, making a total of five. Phone calls to all five companies resulted in verbal approval for all except for one tentative approval.

The Kimber Kables arrived so soon after my call that I was truly surprised. Kimber enjoys the reputation of having the most extensive research section of any company in the cable field and their customer support department is certainly impressive too. Jim Wang of Harmonic Technology made an offer that I could not refuse. He "burned-in" all the cables before he sent them to me. He is definitely a believer in long burn-in or break-in times for his cables. I'll mention here that every cable I listened to had a minimum of fifty hours break-in time done by me, and most of them far more. I specifically remember that one model of his cables I received got more than a hundred and fifty hours as a result of an added long weekend I was away.

As time passed I had not received cables from two of the Florida companies, Wireworld and Straightwire. I sent a notice/reminder to each company, which I'm basically repeating here as it lets you know exactly what parameters I chose for his review. As per previous phone calls to your company, this reminder is a request for samples of your interconnect cables for my review for *Enjoy the Music.com*[™]. I want .5 meter, 1.0 meter and 2.0 meter pairs of your products that have a retail price of close to five hundred dollars for a one-meter pair. You may also send samples of any model that offers a particularly good value and sound quality for substantially less than five hundred dollars a pair or you may send samples of your best sounding cables. Any of the "other" cables may or may not be mentioned in this review and may be reviewed separately in the future.

David Salz of Wireworld called almost immediately after receiving my e-mail. He was extremely apologetic and I received his samples the next day. He and his company were very busy completing their relocation to larger facilities and I had forgotten that I had prior knowledge it was to be occurring. I never received a final response from Straightwire Company. I was disappointed to not be able to include all three major Florida cable companies. Then I thought very seriously about requesting review samples, as per above limitations from Purist Audio Company. Some time ago I had reviewed their very impressive top of the line Dominus model cables. They were very smooth and sweet sounding and very expensive and I would hope those qualities would carry down to our stated price range. Unfortunately time to add them to my list expired while I was giving Straightwire a little extra time. I had a personal deadline I had to meet with this review. The .5-meter lengths were to connect my tubed phono amp to the preamplifier, 1-meter lengths to connect the CD player to the preamp and the 2-meter lengths from preamp to the monaural power amplifiers.

To determine the effect that the cables have on an audio system should be pretty simple, right? Basically have the engineer use perfect microphones (ones that add nothing, no fuzz, brightness, distortion nor subtract anything) to make the master tape. Then go through a perfect disc mastering process - you know, no added sibilance, no high-end roll off and no bass distortion. Then you hook up your fault free CD player to your near

perfect preamplifier and in turn to your latest state of art power amplifiers. Ultimately the chain ends at your loudspeakers, unfortunately. None of us think we have perfect or even penultimate loudspeakers. Now pop in that near perfect CD you bought (which one was that?) and listen very intently. Oh, oh there's a bit of exaggerated sibilance on that vocalist's upper range and some of the brass instruments have a faint but definite added leading edge to transients now. Aha, the interconnects are the culprit. Or are they?

How can you prove it, even to yourself? What if the cables' manufacturer says, "our transient perfect cables are now revealing what your old cables were hiding by rounding off the leading edges of high intensity treble notes combined with a high end roll off". Now it gets you to thinking about how nearly perfect is that CD or amplifier, etc. Is one brand cable more revealing than another or is it that one brand simply masks fine details? Masking of some fine details is not always a negative as far as plain old musical listening pleasure goes.

I'm writing this before final rounds of listening comparisons are finished. If any changes are needed to these introductory paragraphs they will be added and noted below. My guess is that I'm not going to find a clear-cut winner in this cable shoot-out, maybe not even a definite winner for my own system as it now stands. I have to present you with comparisons as very few if any dealers are going to handle more than one or two of these fine brands. Yes, the final decision will have to be in your own listening room. I'm not bashful or reticent, but I can only go so far and your loudspeaker/listening environment would be a brick wall to any sort of absolute recommendation.

The Einstein-Lozier Theorem was postulated during the extensive comparative listening sessions. To extremely briefly paraphrase Einstein's Theory, we could simply say "everything is relative". My postulation is that the degree of relativity varies according to the order of comparative relativity. For example during the listening tests going from a "good: to "very good" to "excellent" was like two very distinct degrees of changes. However, in reverse order, I often found after extended time with the "excellent" that returning to the "very good: seemed like two distinct degrees of change down instead of the anticipated one degree of change. Hence, the new Einstein-Lozier Theorem of the order of relativity. There's a famous saying, perhaps by Voltaire that goes something like, "The excellent is the enemy of the merely very good". I had to go back and forth in different order many times and I'm still not positive of any rankings of order. Too often a previous "very good" after an "excellent" sounds as if it were merely "good" until listened to for a substantial length of time.

It didn't take long to simplify things and then stick with the same components for the remainder of listening tests. I had been using the new Vince Christian loudspeakers, having received early production models for review purposes for The Audiophile Voice magazine. These rather small attractive (gray) loudspeakers were musically addictive and I hated to part with them. However, for review purposes my far more expensive Genesis model V's with their renowned little ribbon tweeters were more revealing of

minute differences in cables. The Denon DVD 5000 just back from the factory played the CD's and most, but not all, of the various 24-bit/96kHz discs I brought back from the Las Vegas CES. Grado's The Reference cartridge was the reference for vinyl, but I don't know if I'll get enough time to finish properly and complete evaluations including the half meter lengths of the cables received for my Herron phono amp to Herron preamplifier connection. If you missed my recent review of them, simply go to our archives section and scroll to find same.

Those rather plain looking tubed units turn into beautiful music makers with unforced abundant detail. I had also received samples of Herron's new solid state (bipolar) amplifiers from an early production run, so did Michael Fremer of Stereophile magazine. After calling to discuss my impression of leanness or lack of the solid richness present in Herron's tubed gear, he told me that the "early run" of units was shipped with misadjusted bias (too low). I returned the units and when I got them back they were very obviously much more musically satisfying without losing any of their highly detailed, and revealing high-end response. Herron later sent the parts to implement a newly developed tweak.

Listening right after I soldered them in place wound up making an almost instant transformation so great was the resultant improvement. All factory production now contains these changes. The Herron amps are going to be a force to be reckoned with and are still cool running. Because of their overall greater clarity and lack of any obvious masking distortions, I used them exclusively in place of my older model BEL amplifiers. Just last week Herron called to tell me to return the amplifiers for a final upgrade revision that supposedly will at least equal the others sonically. I sometimes wonder if there's any end to the improvements possible to any high-end electronic equipment - oops, didn't mean to leave out the transducers, the least perfect links. It is so interesting to hear a design engineer confess that he had to get a new generation distortion analyzer because the previous model was unable to measure any distortion whatsoever because design work (without global feedback) had dropped it so low. And yes, you will be getting a review of the Herron amplifiers within two months if editor Steve does not blow up our headquarters with his July Fourth celebration. (*Steve sez: Karl, rest assured all will be fine. Why? Because i'll be in Florida for the fourth getting a dark tan and chasing bikini clad 20-25 year young ladies. It's a hard job but someone has to do it :-)*).

Other equipment used throughout the lengthy review process included Kimber's Select #3035 hybrid silver-copper loudspeaker cables (unlike their interconnects here the hybrid is a combination of both metals in each of the legs, positive and ground/return of the cables) not silver for the positive and copper for the return. The PS Audio Power Plant was always used, as were Purist Audio's superb A.C. power cords, which improved even the sound offered by the Power Plant.

If you don't believe that cables make an audible difference, fine that's your prerogative. If you do not hear differences between cables then I say to you that something's definitely wrong. It is possible to have one or more components in your system that in

one way or another are in effect masking differences. For one specific personal example look at my Weavers Reunion DAD-1041 review in the May issue of *Enjoy the Music.com*™ and now securely resting in this month's archives section. A second example occurred during this review process. While I was listening, my wife Pat was ironing some clothes in her favorite spot, which affords her a scenic view across the lake.

Her position was about twenty feet away from the nearest speaker and fourteen feet off axis from it. She claims some hearing loss as a result of a government stint in quality control jet engine testing. After I switched cables, with her back turned to the speakers she chimed in, "these cables don't sound as sweet and smooth as the previous ones". She was in complete agreement with my thinking. Don't ever bother trying to tell me there are no audible differences between cables. I will agree that some of the best ones are coming toward a common point and it's often tough to put into words what some of the more subtle differences are. Enough, enough already!

Kimber Kable is Knighted

First up is Kimber Kable's new Select series #`1011. They also included samples of the new Select hybrid #1021. The changes to these new models may result in even less tendency to pick up any RFI. All Select models have the impressive WBT locking connectors. Their top model the all silver Select #1030 remains unchanged. The previous #1010 and #1020 will still be available for the time being. All three now are identical in every respect of cable geometry and construction, etc. The only difference is the actual metal in the wires. The reviewed #1011 features Kimber's "Hyper-pure molecularly optimized" all copper conductors.

Their model KS #1021 simply substitutes silver for the signal conductors; the far more expensive and unchanged KS #1030 uses only silver for both conductors. They sent samples of the #1021 though its price puts it well above our arbitrary limit. Two asides I want to mention here are: one, that some pictures do not make clear "the block" through which these cables pass and are held together is simply a piece of nice wood engraved with the cables model number and suggested direction of signal flow - no magic box here. Two, their Select series of cables come in very impressive containers that are water and air tight and which you will use for something. Neither of these two mentioned items has anything to do with sonics.

Kimber Select KS 1011

I listened to the Select #1011 longer than any of the others; remember the Kimbers were first to arrive. My first impressions remained consistent from beginning to the last day (which I wondered if it were ever to come). It's impression on me seemed little affected by comparative order as espoused in the Einstein-Lozier Theorem. Two possible reasons would be

that either it was unique in some respect(s) or it was either at the top of the comparison group or at the bottom. They're definitely a bit fuller and richer sounding in the upper bass to middle of the mid-range. Above that all is smooth and sweet yet not lacking in detail retrieved. The fuller quality is pretty much a constant, and seldom noticed with the other models. It was readily apparent with Dusty Springfield's voice as well as the drum strokes on the outstanding Copland recording.

Initially I thought the high-end had a bit of a roll off; I eventually decided that was simply not true. Something true was the lack of added distortions, or even a hint of hard edginess in the upper two plus octaves. I'd characterize it as having a pleasing relaxed bloom, with an extremely smooth and sweet top end and musically satisfying. I became convinced that the added rich bloom apparently made the higher frequency notes seem rolled off by comparison. Classical music lovers who like to sit about half way back in good concert halls should love it. So will anyone with speakers a bit on the "lean side" of neutral. The companion model KS #1021 cables exhibited none of the "added bass/richness" effect and in addition seemed to be a bit brighter or at least even more revealing (almost hyper detailed?) in the upper end. Sibilants definitely were more clearly revealed. Here the best match would seem to be speakers that sound a bit rolled off in the highs. Playing around let me make my phono and CD outputs audibly close in tonal balance by using all copper Select #1011 with the CD and the #1021 with the phono output.

Party Hearty Harmonic Technology

Harmonic Technology, a relatively new company, was up next, as in order received. Like Kimber, they also sent two complete sets of cables, Pro-Sil-Way MKII and Truth-Link Silver. I was a bit confused about the pair of pairs though. I thought the Truth-Link Silver was the competitor in our \$500 target price range for a one-meter length and that the Pro-Sil-Way MKII was their more expensive model that I'd give a relatively brief tryout. Yes, I was correct, the Pro-Sil-Way MKII is the more expensive model, but it is the one sent for review at well under our target price area. The Truth-Link Silver is the



value model at only \$300. What's more surprising is the fact that they appear almost identical except the color/pattern of the covering. Personally, I can't even make up my mind as to which appears to be either better made or better appearing.

Both feature very impressive connectors, much like a heavy-duty version of Kimber Kable's WBT connectors. As with the Kimber's the connectors are counter-intuitive left-handed threads. Takes time to get used to them, but for most users you put 'em on and leave 'em. While on, they're real confidence builders; they simply do not want to come off no matter what. For reviewers they can be a pain at times. Can you guess how many hundreds of on/off connections I've done in the course of these reviews alone? The coup de grace comes when dealing with tightly spaced connections on the back of preamps and heaven help us with some of the receivers. Some of us fat fingered reviewers find it unbelievably tough to twist the outer sections once inserted - but I still really like them for home use. Jim Wang claims the degree of tightening can actually subtly change the sound.

Harmonic Technology Pro-Sil-Way II

The difference between the two lines of Harmonic Technology cables may be as simple as the following: the original Truth-Link cables featured 6N (6N means six nines, all except the last are nines = 99.9997% purity) single crystal (more about that phase shortly) copper. Truth-Link Silver literature states that some silver strands have been simply added to the original model - which is still available at an even lower retail price. The Pro-Sil-Way II model features the highest quality single crystal silver, 7N (99.99997% purity as its original design that also included some single crystal copper. I believe our readers should have a basic oversimplified introduction of "single crystal" technology. Think of any piece of copper or silver wire and as you can imagine, it is composed of thousands if not millions of individual particles - now call the particles crystals. Each one is microscopically touching dozens of others and each contact area can be thought of as a kind of barrier = crystal barriers. In their special metallurgical process think of the crystals now becoming perhaps a hundred or more times larger. Now we microscopically see a much smaller number of crystals (let's call them single) with far fewer crystal barriers resulting - voila, single crystal technology.



I seem to remember the name Hitachi associated with the introduction in the audio field, of this concept in the early nineteen eighties. Martin Colloms absolutely went overboard in his appraisal of the technology in a "shoot-out review", I believe, of speaker cables in a British magazine. He predicted that in a few years all wiring in audio equipment would feature this new long crystal copper, right down to wiring in speaker coils, electrostatic speakers, etc. I don't remember how, but I did get hold of some of that speaker wire but was not impressed at that time, neither were most other American reviewers. Anyway, evidently here it is again, déjà vu?

Harmonic Technology was started in 1998 and I don't know how they could be so competitive with the best in the business in such a short length of time. There's no obvious cost cutting anywhere. I don't remember anyone else putting on such superb connectors on such moderately priced interconnects as Harmonic Technology's Truth-Link Silver model. Both their models sent to me are relatively, but not excessively stiff. This appears to be a necessity. I hate to use the word brittle because it is not quite accurate. Do take a bit of extra care with them as the "long" single crystal technology does result in wires that can be more easily damaged when making sharp or right angle bends. And, definitely don't have any single crystal wires of any type lying where they can be stepped on. While not in the same exalted league as its more expensive brother, the Truth-Link Silver is a bargain. Like the Discovery Signature, any flaws are relatively minor and are usually only apparent when comparing them to better and typically more expensive cables.

On direct, "after" comparison with its more expensive brother, the Pro-Sil-Way MkII, it sometimes adds a bit of edgy fuzziness to higher frequency notes and sibilants. This is, as would be expected, particularly noticeable when the overall level increases greatly such as with forte passages with voices or massed horn sections. It is also not as detailed as the superb Pro-Sil-Way MkII. As with the other "additional cables" you're only getting some brief highlights. I must say it is the "hands down" bargain in this particular review group though not outstanding in any particular respect. It would have been very interesting to have heard the original Truth-Link all copper (single crystal of course) design also. Harmonic Technology's Pro-Sil-Way MkII looks much like its far cheaper stable mate. The main difference is a very subtle woven pattern effect on the outer covering. It was almost immediately impressive by simply not seeming to draw particular attention to itself in particular areas.

That characteristic it shares with the Kimber Select #1011; they also share honors for the smoothest, sweetest top two or three octaves of response in the musical range. I don't imagine either company likes me putting it this way, but to a limited extent the Pro-Sil-Way MkII comes close to combining the high-end of Kimber's #1011 with the bottom five octaves or so of Kimber's #1021. This statement is meant as a compliment to both companies. On an absolute basis Harmonic Technology's Pro-Sil-Way MkII, in my system in my listening room seems to tread a straight and narrow neutral audio path. My speakers and room may interact to offer a relatively lush and full sound quality. It would not surprise me if some listeners may find that these cables to them be oh so slightly to the lean side of neutral in their listening rooms. They will not offend your ears with harsh or fuzzy vocalists or horns unless your system or recording has that quality present. Sibilants are not covered over nor exaggerated; they're simply naturally presented.

Silver filaments or conductors are still very controversial in the cable field. I know many individuals who pretty much make sweeping statements praising or condemning silver. It is probably true that very few manufacturers of electronics and loudspeakers use silver cables for listening as they develop their components. The most common rap on

silver is "it tends to be bright or edgy". I don't know if anyone has a "handle" on the reason why this should be true. Do remember, copper is a very good conductor of electrical signals, but silver is measurably a bit better.

Contrary to common opinion among many audiophiles and music lovers, gold is not as good as either silver or copper. It is often used to lightly plate connections simply because it is so resistant to oxidation and change which could very dramatically affect the sound. Meditate on the following statement by the Harmonic Technology Company. "The remaining two (of four total) filaments consist of Single Crystal copper and optimize the bass range, adding a fuller tone quality." It was a pleasure to be introduced to a new company with such an auspicious start.

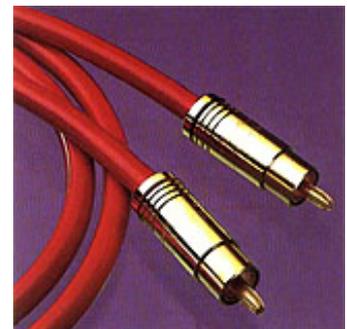
Discover the Possibilities

Discovery cables made quite a name for themselves some years ago. As cable prices were skyrocketing, Joe DePhillips introduced the Discovery Signature cables. I recall that most of the audio reviewers had pretty much reached a consensus regarding these cables. Their reputation was for honest value received. They would give listeners good sound quality for much less cost than the very best and far more expensive cables being introduced then. These cables have remained basically unchanged for seven years now - like why mess with a good thing? So when a satisfied listener recommends them to a friend they both know what's being obtained.

They do not have the fancy locking connectors as does Kimber Kable and Harmonic Technology. In my system the connections often felt subtly loose and simply not as secure feeling as most others, locking or not. Anyone can tighten the connection with judicious use of needle nose pliers. Still, I would suggest consideration of new connector design, though that would violate the "leave that time-proven design alone" philosophy. I called their covering color a rich orange. Joe DePhillips considers it red. My wife Pat says it is a reddish orange. Even though I have an orange tree in my yard, since I did my undergraduate work at Florida State University, it was natural to intensely dislike the color orange. Our two biggest rivals were University of Miami (orange and green school colors) and University of Florida (orange and blue school colors).

Discovery Signature

The cables are very user friendly being very flexible; you can almost tie them in a knot (not recommended). Starting a listening session with them typically revealed nothing amiss. Following some of the other cables, at times it seemed as if the volume/gain had lowered just a small fraction of a decibel. In addition there was a mellow quality overall and on some vocal recordings there was an improvement if a vocalist's sibilants were over emphasized in a recording. However, at times a massed horn section wound up being slightly smeared resulting in not being able to closely follow any individual instrument.



Notes from a number of separate sessions repeated words such as relaxed, mellow and easy listening. Ella's voice a touch richer, Oscar's piano a bit mellower, etc. Backgrounds, so called inter-transient silence, were not quite as dark as with some other cables. That could indicate some pickup of RFI. That in turn often creates a slight smearing effect overall. Not desired, but it sometimes can subtly hide certain reproduction flaws.

Notes also revealed occasions where the very highest musical notes had a "fuzzy edge" to the transients, which was disconcerting. It was not a winner in the "applause category" for those of you who believe that the greater number of apparent claps, or is it clappers, is indicative of quality or at least transient response quality.

At the "last hour" I received a new model cable from Discovery's Joe DePhillips, the Discovery Essence. I only had the one-meter length available to connect the CD player to the preamplifier (after a fifty hour burn-in time). In a relatively brief listening session, which ended near midnight, it appeared as though they are on to some significant changes. Impressions included less smearing of high level high frequency passages, compared to the Discovery Signature, along with a generally brighter more open high end. These impressions are definitely not etched in stone.

Wow 'em With Wireworld

Last, but definitely not least in order of quality, just last in order received is Wireworld's Eclipse III+ interconnects. First impressions were of a very spacious soundscape in all dimensions including vertical. Rich, full, solid very open and low in audible distortion were additional comments in the first couple of sessions (after 75 to 200 hours of burn-in time). General appearance impressed me; relatively subtle with a touch of class describes it for me. Connectors appear to be a "heavy duty" design, a very solid and snug fit in my system though of course not quite the equal of so called "locking designs" such as WBT offers. Their sound offers a strong mid-range sense of presence. It offered some similarities to the Kimber Select #1011. One listening session notes that the Eclipse III+ was a bit fuller in the mid-range giving it a bit extra fullness with some horns and the Kimber having a touch more "bite" in the upper range of some brass instruments. Reflecting on the preceding surprised me.

Later listening sessions attributed a very slightly "louder sensation" overall to its reproduction. More dramatic than some, at times it seemed to be a bit "hi-fi-ish" on some recordings and with a hint of added sibilance. Probably as a result, late listening sessions revealed that Wireworld's interconnect was particularly revealing in the upper mid-range and beyond. However, there was a touch of smear in massed applause sections such as the Weavers Reunion live album. There are two more expensive models in David Salz's line of interconnects, both of which feature silver conductors as contrasted with the reviewed Eclipse III+'s all copper construction. They have a total of seven less expensive models; obviously they're doing a great deal of commercial business.

When up first in order in listening sessions, the sensation is of tonal neutrality and no obvious failings. When the order is changed some subtle characteristics can be noticed at times. My speakers are extremely flexible and adjustable in every respect in the bottom two and a half octaves (20Hz to 120Hz) through feeding multi-bipolar woofers into a rather warm room with some inherent bloom. I never adjusted my system's bass in any way during the weeks of subjective testing.

The "flip side" of my situation is that some listeners could find my "tonally neutral observations" in any cable's comments to be a bit lean sounding in their environment. Who can predict that accurately? I can only give you what happens with a number of different cables, relative to each other, with my equipment in my listening room. My electronics have become extremely revealing lately. This has probably affected my observations on a number of the cables under review to some extent. Six months ago, some of my negative implications would not have been observed. Remember at least two things:

- 1.) Cables do make an audible difference if you bother to listen for differences.
- 2.) Enjoy the music.

CDs Used In Listening Session:

Casino Royale - Classic 24/96 DAD 1033

The Weavers Reunion - Classic 24/96 DAD 1041

Copland - Reference Recording HDCD RR-93CD

Beachcomber - Reference Recording HDCD RR-62CD

Mega Movies - Telarc CD 80535

Ella and Oscar - JVC XRCD 60097

Sinatra Reprise - Reprise 26501-2

Diana Krall - Impulse IMPD-233

Gilels-Reiner Tchaikovsky - RCA 09026-68530-2

Fennell Eastman Wind Ensemble - Mercury 434322-2