

Science Yields Magic?

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Audiophiles know that cleaning up their AC supplies can yield a cornucopia of sonic benefits, including a quieter background, better retrieval of detail, and a subjectively wider dynamic range. The phenomenon is so well-recognized that it has spawned an entire industry devoted to making electrical conditioners, line filters, noise suppressors, and specialty power cords.

This last category has been the subject of a year-long research and development project at Ogden, UT-based Kimber Kable, where engineers have been working to correlate subjective auditory impressions with the electrical and chemical characteristics of AC supply lines.

Kimber debuted its results in late October: PowerKord, as the trademark has it, is a line of audiophile power cables in 10-gauge and 14-gauge sizes, available in lengths of 4' and up. The PK series' three stranded conductors are terminated with WattGate 330/350 connectors, and are covered in a flexible emerald green jacket—"surface dyed, because we discovered that colorants alter the dielectrical properties of the insulator," said Dick Diamond, Kimber director of sales and marketing. The PowerKords are said to help generate an "ultra quiet" noise floor, and are optimized for transfer of 50/60Hz AC current. Suggested retail prices vary from \$150 for a 6' PowerKord 14 to \$300 for a 6' PowerKord 10 Gold.

Audiophiles with very high-resolution systems may be more intrigued by the PowerKord "Palladian" cables, each of which bears a molded, heavy metallic noise-damping device in the middle of its length. The damper is said to improve audio system performance through "special standing wave ratio enhancement technology" that eliminates reflections and parasitic oscillations in the cable. In the interest of fairness, let me point out that such claims are standard stuff in the specialty cable market.

Test drive: I was therefore skeptical when I got a call from independent audio consultant Ed Sheftel, who raved about what a "huge difference" the Palladian cables made in his system. "Even FM reception got better," Sheftel asserted. His enthusiasm persuaded me to give the Palladians a try, and a sampler kit arrived from Kimber a couple of days later. I listened to a few recordings to get my bearings, then replaced the removable IEC cables from preamp (Parasound P/LD 2000), mid/high power amp (Red Rose Model II), and line-level gear AC conditioner (SineLock) with 4' Palladians. I was astounded by an immediate improvement in detail, separation of voices and instruments, soundstage width and depth, and most especially by a huge increase in bass articulation. Sudden musical synergy—as if by magic.

I can understand how decreasing wideband noise in the power supply can improve the first characteristics, but have no explanation for the bass improvement. There are details lurking in recordings that no one ever wanted you to hear: musicians turning pages or shifting in their chairs. The Palladians brought all of it to the surface. This isn't the work of my hyperactive imagination, however; repeating the process with friends as hi-fi guinea pigs provoked the same impressions from them.

It's spooky how much is revealed when the Palladians are in the system. The effect can only be compared to cleaning a picture window until it's absolutely transparent, or adjusting a lens until the focus is razor-sharp. There's a further "additive effect," as Diamond described it, in that using multiple Palladians can produce too much of a good thing. Replacing the main cable that feeds the entire system with a Palladian made everything sound too astringent. Restoring the old one brought the magic back. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen you do that," said a decidedly non-audiophile actor friend.

In my brief (one-week) experience, the Kimber Palladian proved its worth in helping extract the last bit of performance from what I believe is an already excellent audio system. The only drawback is the price: The Palladian sells for a thousand bucks—give or take a bit for length—and three or four of them might be required to really fine-tune your system. Dick Diamond says they also improve video gear, making images "more solid." I haven't had a chance to verify that. Consider this a preliminary report, but for those with reference-level audio systems, the improvement will be money well spent.