

On its mettle

Martin Colloms auditions van den Hul's

The First interconnect and Revelation loudspeaker cable



*van den Hul The FIRST[®]
interconnect*

Since my early taste of The First, (1) the preproduction carbon cable from A.J. van den Hul, my knowledge of this product has been deepened by the release of the orange-coloured production version.

(1): Stereophile December 1992, Vol. 15 No. 12, p. 57.

Moreover, as I received a number of different lengths, I was able to undertake a much fuller exploration of its performance in my bi-amped, four-monoblock replay chain. I also benefited from having enough of the new Revelation hybrid metal-carbon speaker cable to complete the chain from the amplifiers to the speakers.

A couple of reports have reached me from a few listeners who have not had unqualified success with The First. In one case, hum due to the relatively high shield impedance proved to be the problem; for another, the system was felt to be so well adjusted for the sound of normal metal cables that The First sounded too laid-back.

This was not a particularly transparent system, and the change in tonality apparently outweighed other possible benefits. On the other hand, I lent a set of The First to a highly demanding but sceptical colleague who shows no sign of wanting to return them!

I commented on the construction of The First in my initial report and confirm that the production version does have the lower resistance shield claimed, and sounds even better. Although not intended for use as a digital link due to its high 124 ohm impedance (*), The First's huge skin area implies low differential delays over a very wide bandwidth.

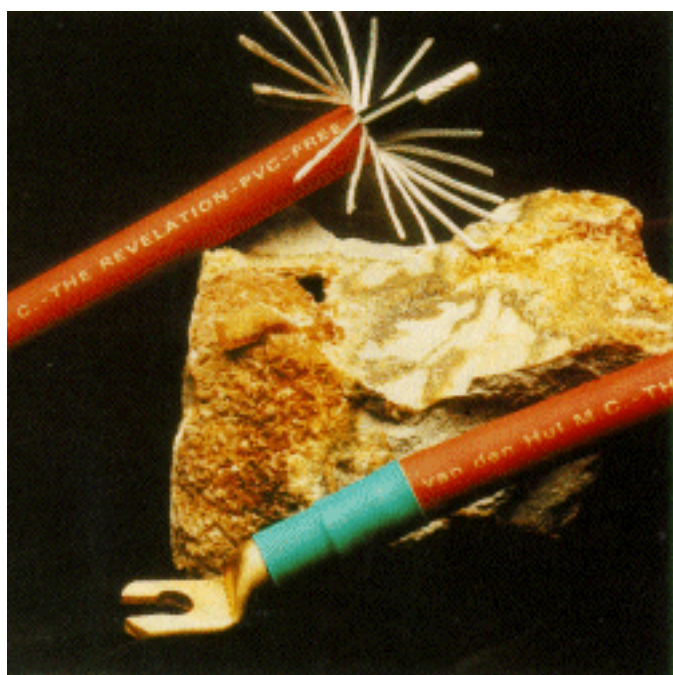
(*) Remark: In the later production version of The FIRST[®] more attention has been paid to its suitability to be also used as a digital interlink. The above stated 124 Ohm impedance is incorrect. —**A.J. van den Hul B.V.**

When used as a digital link, The First's definition was not quite as crisp as my own custom-made reference (twisted pair, single strand silver/Teflon with a full braid), but it did compare very favourably with such commercial references as the Kimber AGDL (2).

(2): See Peter van Willenswaard's report on The First used as a datalink in Stereophile Vol. 16 No. 3, March 1993, p. 53. —**JA**

Completely metal-free speaker cable is impractical (*) since carbon fiber is several orders of magnitude more resistive than such metals as silver, copper, or aluminium.

(*): The above statement now has been proven to be wrong due to our recent introduction of The THIRD[®], the worlds first completely metal-free single lead loudspeaker cable. —**A.J. van den Hul B.V.**



*van den Hul The REVELATION
HYBRID loudspeaker cable*

Consequently, the Revelation is of hybrid construction, combining a heavy coaxial cladding of fairly high-resistance conductive carbon-fiber-loaded plastic extruded over a central multistrand core. Here there are 296 strands of 150µm OF copper conductor heavily clad in silver and arranged as a single rope. A.J. van den Hul speculates that the close contact of the partially resistive outer jacket has some influence on the skin-effect properties of the composite, providing some kind of lossy, dispersed yet contiguous contact with the main conductor, this relevant at higher frequencies.

The cable's conductor array is completed by a spiral 16 polyethylene-insulated bunches of silver clad copper, each 42 strands of 150µm diameter. The whole assembly has very little bulking incorporated, and, with the silicone-based Hulliflex outer jacket (inert, halogen-free), comes out at 0.5" in diameter. Each cable is one leg of a channel; two lightly twisted together by the user are required for each channel, thus requiring four for stereo. A three-turns-per-meter twist helps keep down loop inductance and mechanically holds the conductors together, negating unwanted independent or co-vibration. The 2.5m review length had a loop resistance of just 0.027 ohms.

Not knowing whether to put the cart before the horse, I decided to begin this report with an exploration of the Revelation speaker cable in a couple of familiar systems.

Sound quality: Revelation

Reference cables included old and new Siltech ribbon — long-term favourites — used in short, almost affordable lengths! (Siltech is now distributed in the US by SOTA.) My reference for dynamics is Naim NAC5, while Kimber 4AG is beautifully delicate and transparent. Power amplifiers are the Krell KSA 150B, Jadis Defy 7, and Meridian 605. Initially the WATTs/Puppies were used as designer David Wilson would wish: as a three-way speaker with single input terminals, the “speaker” including its Tail connection to the WATT, this a custom assembly by MIT.

All the cable lengths were 2.5m for this test. Compared with Kimber silver, the Revelation was just a little bright and sparkling, with just a touch more treble gain. Given the very high Kimber performance, this is praise indeed. Midrange was first-rate in terms of tonal quality — a mix of Siltech and Kimber, but more dynamic than either. More on the mids later; this first comment must include the remarkable performance in the bass.

It really did sound as if the Puppy's bass was faster, more extended, and capable of more slam. Thundering bass thundered better; on these occasions, the whole room seemed alive with highly controlled low-frequency energy. The perception on an improved foundation to the music was unmistakable. Given that the test lengths of Siltech ribbon and other cables were also of very low resistance, the changes in bass extension and precision were unexpected. On the other hand, when I assessed the effect of replacing a copper woofer voice-coil with one wound from pure silver, I found a similar result. While the objective in my experiment of replacing copper with silver had been to achieve greater transparency and neutrality in the midrange, I also found that the bass had improved quantitatively — an unexpected bonus.

The review test sequence continued with the wholly successful replacement of the Puppy Tails with 1.5m lengths of Revelation.

In a rarefied cable context, significant improvements in midrange clarity, depth, and dynamics were audible with the Wilson system. Despite a discernible but wholly acceptable increased “brilliance,” the system portrayed perspectives better and was not so forward-sounding (a residual problem with the WATTs in some rooms and/or systems). Higher sound levels were possible.

Somehow, this cable seemed more capable of defining those important silences between the notes. Although dry recorded acoustics were rendered almost painfully dry, the cable's revelatory powers were illustrated by the remarkable atmosphere and ambience recovered with truly reverberant program.

Last but not least, this cable had rhythm. Music was more involving and more exiting. Percussion timing was clearly laid out, lending a winning degree of pace. With that spacious, big acoustic — one which was nonetheless excellently focused — came an involving, upbeat, lively nature.

Unorthodoxy

Like Corey Greenberg, I just have to interfere with my own equipment: I bi-amp the Wilson speakers. (3)

(3): For this heretical installation, the WATT is coupled directly to a second power amplifier, bypassing entirely the Puppy and its high-pass crossover. The high-pass function is accomplished, assuming the usual 50k ohm power-amp input impedance, with a 15nF polystyrene capacitor placed in series in the phono plug to the WATT amplifier. The Puppy is driven, as usual, from a second amplifier channel with its normal low-pass crossover section in place. A little more clarity can be obtained in this mode by placing a plug of polyester wadding in the WATT port.

Benefits include substantially improved clarity and depth, purer treble, and faster, crisper bass. To paraphrase a popular song, I couldn't live without it now.

Thus, for me, the ultimate use of the Revelation involved four monoblock 605 amplifiers. With Siltech silver ribbon Mk.1 used for the amplifier/speaker connections, the WATT/Puppies never sounded better to my ears. Then came the Revelation, setting the stage for The First.

Sound quality: The First

For the initial trial, the Wilsons were used with the Revelation but not bi-amped. Signal sources included Theta Basic II/Data and the Accuphase DP70-V, while passive control included my hot-wired P&G plastic-film potentiometer and the new Audio Synthesis Passion unit. With The First linking source to control and control to power amplifier, the results were exemplary, even in the context of high and exotic cables, where differences are said to decrease with each ever-greater jump in price.

I am now many weeks into the listening process, time enough for any initial madness to have worn off. I can report an enduring satisfaction with this new cable, an increase in listener ease and musical communication. It seems to bring me closer to the original performance, this achieved at all volumes, including the milliwatt level I use catching a deadline at

6:30 am while the rest of the family is still asleep. Even in a populous corner of London where I live, with the help of double glazing, Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* were faithfully reproduced in miniature (barely 0.005 mW peak) at this early hour.

What is interesting with this cable is the remarkable retention of low-level detail and ambience at this low electrical operating level.

It would appear that A.J.'s claims for superior low-level linearity and transparency are entirely credible.

It is hard to subjectively identify distortion in the usual sense in connection with cables. If measurable, differences lie in the -130 to -160dB region for total harmonic distortion, and the results may be influenced by connector performance as much as by the cable itself. Nonetheless, these van den Hul cables consistently gave the impression of lower distortion. Low-level sounds were cleaner, complex sound groups were clearer, and loud sounds were reproduced with greater freedom and power, heard with less compression. It was as if the dynamic window had been increased.

To put this in perspective, consider a well-exercised 50Wpc mid-fi solid-state amplifier with some crossover distortion. Now imagine the effect of replacing this amplifier with 200W of clean class-A power. In my reference system, the use of the new van den Hul cables was consistent with this kind of subjective performance gain. I am not suggesting for a moment that the system actually played louder in a physical sense, but simply that this was my reaction to the observed improvement in dynamics and dynamic content.

All my digital program benefited from the cable change, while the overall quality lift caused me to revisit shelf after shelf of my Lps, the music reward greatly exceeding the relative inconvenience.

The First can at first sound a little withdrawn compared with traditional cable, until you realise that normal cable is unnaturally "forward," with a degree of compressive glare. That first impression is immediately and decisively confirmed when the first real transient arrives, so truly startling in its power and attack. Certainly the carbon cable is not backward; it simply increases the front-to-back ratio, properly illuminating the contrast and perspectives recoverable from the recording.

I can only describe the midrange of The First as rich, luxuriant, and colourful in the detail and gradations of texture, and colourful in the sense of good colour saturation heard in the broad spread of sounds reproduced. Moreover, it is transparent, spacious, and very well focused.

The wonder of the sound is that these qualities are maintained into both the deep bass and the high treble. As with the Revelation, The First conveys this architectural quality well. Music has structure and meaning, and sounds more impressive. With greater dynamic contrast comes superior pace and rhythm. Here clarity and beauty are at last married to a fine sense of drive and good timing. This cable did not produce merely elegant sounds — the music it transmits is also highly involving.

Conclusions

Rereading this review, I'm struck by the descriptive material, which reads more like a report of a new wonder amplifier than a few meters of "wire"! This carbon cable has had quite an effect on me, one which is enduring. I find that returning to my reference cables is possible, but requires a degree of acclimatisation and lowered expectations: I'm very clearly aware that this is how it *used* to be — still very fine, in context, but clearly found wanting in the light of the new technology.

The Revelation speaker cable is clearly a state-of-the-art product. (4)

(4): I would like A.J. van den Hul to design a speaker cable based on the Revelation but comparably priced to The First. In this business, high volume does wonders for cable pricing. Who knows what he may come up with? (*)

(*): At present we have a smaller sized speaker cable based on The REVELATION HYBRID, named The REVOLUTION HYBRID available. —**A.J. van den Hul B.V.**

With very minor reservations — a touch of treble brightness and a tinge of grain in the upper treble — this cable sets remarkable new standards for bass slam and accuracy, focus and soundstage dimension, for pace, rhythm, and timing, for transparency, for midrange tonality, and, not least, for vivid dynamics. Its very low resistance allows it to be used in a variety of applications (where the cost can be borne).

The First interconnect is even more remarkable. My reservation here concerns the fairly high loop resistance of 50 ohms for a 1m length, signal and braid summed. Additional grounding precautions may be required to eliminate chassis loop hum (*).

(*) **Remark:** Some (mainly power) audio equipment exhibits relatively large audio-ground leakage currents, whose balancing-out along interconnect shields can cause hum. We have a POLARITY CHECKER available, using which you can annihilate these effects,

which (note!) also hiddenly interfere with the audio signal in all metal interconnects.

Furthermore, currently The FIRST[®] Ultimate (a low shield resistance version of our The FIRST[®]) and The FIRST[®] Metal Screen (a metal shielded version of our The FIRST[®]) are available. Their respective susceptibilities to chassis loop hum are extremely low and non-existent. They are therefore applicable in the most demanding analog and digital audio applications.

Please note: For transport of weak signals (for instance from phono cartridges or microphones) and/or over longer distances we advise to use our metal shielded The FIRST[®] Metal Screen or its balanced version The SECOND[®]. —**A.J. van den Hul B.V.**

In all other respects I find The First to be excellent; it is wholly musical and natural, rhythmic, dynamically impressive, pure, and transparent. Its benefits are clearly audible, even when used to link a top \$500 digital processor and a preamp in the C-JPF-1 class.

At \$333/pair, what more can you ask?

Stereophile, May 1993

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