

MAINS GOES DUTCH

Van den Hul's carbon technology comes to the mains. Does it raise the power bar?

We've seen many and varied signal cables from Dutch manufacturer van den Hul, but this is the first mains one. In fact it's been available in other countries for a while, but lack of a UK mains plug with a big enough cable entry held things up here. Even the Duraplug fitted to the review sample showed signs of minor surgery to accommodate the cable's 12.5mm diameter - and this is the thinner version of the 'full' Mainsstream!

Why so big? Yes, there's quite a lot of copper in there, though other mains cables offer even higher current capacity. This one's not just about brute force, as it includes some of van den Hul's 'Linear Structured Carbon' (LSC) along with its silver-plated oxygen-free copper. The original rationale for LSC was that, lacking the crystal junctions of metal conductors, it should give improved conduction of ultra-low-level signals and hence better low-level audio resolution. In a mains cable we're talking primarily about 240 volts, which could redefine 'low level'.

But what concerns vdH over and above the obvious requirement to pass plenty of current readily and safely, is how it deals with radio frequency signals (RF). Any piece of wire sitting on the floor is potentially an aerial for RF, and this is indeed a low-level signal, which can cause subtle audio modulation. Presumably the LSC, and the weaving of multiple live and neutral conductors within the cable, is intended as a guard against this - as is the braided screen which vdH has added. vdH refers to the cable as an 'embedded powerline filter' and supplies a minimum length of 1.5m (review sample 2.5m) to make sure the filter properties are maintained. It's all well made, reasonably flexible despite its size and terminated in a top-quality Marincos-style IEC outlet.



SOUND QUALITY

Mains cables are notoriously variable in their effects between different items of equipment, so the Mainsstream BS was tried with various items including a Chord DAC64, EAR (valve) and Bryston (transistor) amplifiers and even a Revox open-reel tape deck. The last of those showed the smallest benefit, with just a hint of opening up of the soundstage but no substantial change to the character of the sound. The Chord also benefited in a fairly subtle way, though in addition to a similar soundstage improvement (a common sign of lowered levels of background 'hash') it seemed to develop a slightly sweeter treble (*).

Most noticeable, though, was the cable's effect on power amps. There was a consistent firming up of the bass and more definition in the treble, which made images really snap into better focus and added an extra level of detail below that previously heard. Pink Floyd's *The Wall* revealed even more hidden subtleties on a mint-condition LP copy than ever, no trick of memory as repeated swapping between the Mainsstream and regular mains cables showed. By contrast, a recent piano recording came that bit closer to the true bass weight, and also the image, of the piano as remembered from the sessions.

Just to be perverse, we also tried the cable with an amp costing less than the wire itself (a good one of its kind). The difference was if anything even greater.

In fairness, these differences are themselves quite slight compared with grosser changes, say from one speaker to another, and should be put in the context of a familiar system in a familiar room - but that's exactly the context in which an expensive mains cable like this is going to be heard, in most cases. This is certainly among the most effective mains upgrades we've tried and is recommended for systems with high aspirations. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

sound >> 91%

practicality >> 80%

build >> 87%

value >> 71%

overall score >> 83%

^ PRO

Subtly improves low-level resolution, revealing hidden details and bringing images into sharper focus. Also seems to tighten up the bass.

∨ CON

Expensive and not equally effective with all equipment: experiment to find the best placement within the system (*).

CONCLUSION

In an already well-sorted high-grade system, one or more of these may provide a satisfying upgrade, providing a final polish to the sound. Despite its size, more practical than some specialist mains cables we've seen.

* Manufacturer's remark:

The review mentions that low power equipment (here a DAC and an open-reel tape deck) showed the smallest audible benefit from receiving mains power through our MAINSSTREAM BS cable. Consequently the review verdict's contra point states that this cable is not equally effective with all equipment.

We would like to point out that our The MAINSSTREAM HYBRID and The MAINSSTREAM BS HYBRID AC power cables are heavy 16 Ampere types which have been specially designed for power distribution to whole setups as well as to individual power components (e.g. power amplifiers).

In the mean time our program has been extended with The MAINSSERVER HYBRID mains cable. The MAINSSERVER HYBRID is a more affordable 6 Ampere version which has been specially designed and optimised for mains supply to individual lower power components (up to 250 Watt at 120 Volt mains or up to 500 Watt at 230 Volt mains). Its slimmer design allowed us to incorporate improved powerline noise filter characteristics which lead to a better performance at mains supply to lower power equipment (like the review's mentioned DAC and open-reel tape deck).

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