

VAN DEN HUL 'THE THIRD'



The world's first carbon speaker cable

HAVING launched his carbon audio cable series with a coaxial interconnect named The FIRST, A.J. van den Hul followed this logically enough with another interconnect called The SECOND. This proved effective for unbalanced working, although designed to provide for balanced use, where both signal poles are transmitted by the multitude of separately-insulated carbon fibre strands. Now we have The THIRD, a costly carbon speaker cable.

For me van den Hul cables have stood the test of time; although moderately priced for audiophile-grade products, they in fact compare with the very best when good system matching and tonal balance are achieved.

It was always known that building a carbon speaker cable would present a far greater difficulty due to the relatively high electrical resistance of the carbon conductors. 10 or 20 ohms in an interconnect is neither here nor there when load matching impedances are 10,000 to 100,000 ohms, but for a speaker cable a 0.1 ohm per metre target is worthwhile, and metal-conductor cables often achieve 0.01 ohm.

But extended research into improved carbon fibre conductivity has resulted in The THIRD, a very costly creation some 20mm in diameter, with two separate conductors per side. These may be twisted together for tidiness and the best sound. As before, inside is a soft lay of carbon fibre rope — Litz — literally millions of separate conductors terminated in gold-plated spade terminals. Loop resistance per channel is about 0.75 ohms (*), certainly not negligible but usable nonetheless. Many well-respected valve/tube amplifiers have source impedances significantly higher than this.

(*) Remark: This loop resistance concerns a 3m stereo set in which each speaker signal travels 6m of The THIRD[®] —**A.J. van den Hul B.V.**

One of the most expensive speaker cables ever made, The THIRD is thus many times the resistance and price of, for example, van den Hul's top hybrid cable, the metal/carbon REVELATION — which was used as a reference. The THIRD costs £1800 per metre (for four conductors) so a 3m stereo set costs £5400 including terminations.

The THIRD's 0.75 ohm resistance (*) had to be accounted for, since with a nominal 8 ohm speaker (the Wilson WITT), it results in an audible 1dB lost in loudness, and would otherwise result in sound quality differences for this reason alone.

The effect of adding a discrete 0.8 ohm resistance (a high quality type) added to The REVELATION was also assessed. This is not the place to go into a long discussion about the effect of finite resistance between amplifier and speaker, in particular on amplifier distortion and stability; but with these precautions, I could be more confident about determining the intrinsic sound of 'The THIRD'.

Working with my references, including Transparent and Siltech designs, 'The THIRD' speaker cable has the character, liquidity and grainlessness of The FIRST and The SECOND (balanced) interconnects, a familiar hallmark of pure carbon conductors.

Through the mid and treble this cable is quite simply pre-eminent. It sounded very natural, highly resolved, unexaggerated, grainless and with a finely-balanced tonal quality. In particular, treble images appeared to hang in the stereo range, almost ghost-like. By contrast, most cables in the upper treble tend to locate more clearly at the tweeter positions, often with a touch of false sheen.

It's in the bass where there's scope for argument. A tough lightweight (compared with The REVELATION) it was tuneful, articulate and well-resolved, but also lacked in slam and speed, an area where The REVELATION is pre-eminent. The bass was a touch slow; comparatively different to The REVELATION as it rocks with fine rhythmic control. 'The THIRD' was slower, lusher, less syncopated, relaxed and more of a low feedback tube/valve sound. Preliminary tests with bi-wiring suggested that The REVELATION on bass and The THIRD on mid-treble was a combination of unrivalled sonic power.

Overall, the degree of bass 'grunt' and the analysis of rhythm bluntly falls somewhat below the standard set by the astonishingly natural and highly resolved sound available over the best of the frequency range.

Depending on the chosen system it may be an appropriate choice, for example with full range electrostatic speakers; however less so with dynamic designs such as the Wilson Audio. Smaller high-end speakers may well suit, such as the Sonus Faber Guaneri with tube amplification.

For those who enjoy massive budgets, bi-wiring offers a route to sampling the best of both worlds. Indeed if the cost of 'The THIRD' is believable then the expense of matching bass cable can be considered a mere accessory!

Most of the sound available from this cable is heavenly, a challenge to future cable designers. In view of the other aspects, the recommendation here is shaded by caution, partly weighted by the very high cost of this unique product.

Martin Colloms

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