Voodoo Labs Unthinkable

Hamburg's Voodoo Labs is one of those manufacturers whose next move you'd be hard pressed to guess. Jan Hendrik Geschke, an art connoisseur who has worked with several distinguished hi-fi brands over the years, evidently feels little obligation to honour received ideas about what a cable ought to be made of, or how one ought to go about making it. After the rather space-hungry Witchcraft, the carbon-based Carbon Age and the materially curious Dark Matter comes another variation on the theme of that elusive Holy Grail, the transmission of a musical signal. He calls it Unthinkable, a name in which, by his own account, he has tucked away a little play on the word 'thin'. Because thin is a somewhat unexpected thing for a cable to be in the uppermost reaches of the high end.

The Unthinkable, you see, dispenses with the customary visual demonstration of just how much material your money has bought you. It's a slender affair in a red jacket, with separate runs for the two polarities and equally slight banana plugs at their ends. Once again, appearances have evidently had to defer to the design brief – Geschke himself, with disarming good humour, speaks of his connectors as not too handsome little things. Such luxury as there is this time is meant to be mostly on the inside.

The jacket is polyethylene, or PE. PVC fell out of favour with the designer on account of its dielectric properties, and anything exotic or specially concocted for the occasion was evidently surplus to requirements. Geschke says that for his purposes PE offers dielectric properties comparable to those of PTFE, while being hard-wearing, practical and cheap. Which, in the context of the price of the finished article, does rather raise a smile, though the manufacturer's view is that the lion's share of the budget belongs in the conductors themselves. The jacket has a job to do. It needn't have a story of its own.

There is a fair bit of spring in the Unthinkable, so that here and there, the designer says, it will naturally lift itself clear of whatever it is resting on. The company's preference for as little contact as possible with the surroundings (floor, walls, equipment rack and so on) holds good here too, although installation is a less exacting business than with the carbon models. The occasional touch is apparently of little consequence. Nor is the distance between the two runs said to be critical – Geschke's advice amounts to leaving them untwisted and keeping them off harder surfaces. Measuring out precisely ordained intervals is, on this occasion, one ritual the owner is spared.

The more substantial point of departure, though, lies beneath that red skin. The manufacturer speaks of eight individual conductors made from a material whose precise composition it keeps to itself. All it will say is that it has six valence electrons. The design as a whole carries the designation RARE EARTH, a reference to the rare-earth elements.

Quite which elements, and in what proportions, remains Geschke's secret. There is more to this, incidentally, than a loudspeaker version of the familiar Dark Matter. Geschke traces the thinking behind it to his patent for that interconnect, though the elements used here are said to be entirely different, and arriving at the eventual solution took roughly a year of experimentation.

What's particularly interesting is the direction in which the designer has taken his search. The familiar contest over copper purity, silver content or sheer cross-sectional area holds little interest for him. His attention is on the inner structure of the conductor and its relationship with the crystal lattice. Central to his explanation are the interactions of electrons with phonons, the quantised vibrations of that lattice. In conventional copper and silver conductors, he says, energy exchange and scattering take place, and his working hypothesis is that the microscopic processes of energy storage and release involved contribute to a smearing, in time, of the finer information in the musical signal.

With the Unthinkable, the very choice of conducting material is meant to alleviate this problem. J. H. G. invokes the idea of the Fermi sea and the different electronic arrangement of his chosen material, in which he sees a more stable environment for transmission. What he hopes to preserve are those tiny relationships in time between the onset of a note, the unfolding of its harmonics and its dying away. In

other words, getting a certain quantity of detail from one end to the other is only part of the ambition. The details ought still to belong to one another when they get there. That, at any rate, is how he puts it.

Alongside the material, considerable importance is attached to the geometry of the conductors, which the company describes as patented, though it offers no precise account of how they are arranged. The result is said to be an exceptionally low susceptibility to electromagnetic coupling with the surroundings, achieved within those very modest external dimensions. Jan attributes this to an electromagnetic field concentrated close about the conductors, and speaks, too, of very low inductance and capacitance. Figures and measurement conditions have yet to follow. In practice, the promised dividend is precisely that freedom to be a little less particular about where the cables lie.

The company's own RARE EARTH Quantum Bananas are a chapter unto themselves. These slim plugs, with their conspicuous contact leaf, are in the manufacturer's view an integral part of the design, with rather more to contribute than the mere convenience of being able to plug a wire into a binding post. Among the things Geschke takes issue with in conventional connectors are magnetic materials and the layer of nickel beneath the gold plating, both of which he considers detrimental to transmission. In his design the contact leaves are inserted by hand in such a way that they bear directly on the conductors themselves. By his account, this extends the rare-earth contact path right out to the termination. Preparing the plugs for a single pair of speaker cables apparently takes several hours, but it does give him the continuity of materials he is after, those contact 'wings' meeting the inner conductor itself.

Our review sample had a single such leaf in each plug. For the production version the manufacturer specifies four, to ensure a reliable contact – a small but significant distinction between what we heard and what is intended to go on sale. The handwork, incidentally, extends from the plugs to the entire cable.

On the precise composition of the contact parts, or the mechanical details of how they are joined, the company offers no further particulars.

The Unthinkable has no prescribed direction of connection, either. The designer says the material he uses exhibits no anisotropy, and accordingly sees little reason to decree which end belongs at the amplifier and which at the loudspeaker.

Even so, he says he takes measurements to check each individual conductor. Here again the approach is fairly down to earth. You can spare yourself the hunt for arrows when hooking things up and give a little thought instead to letting the two runs lie free.

Of the physical specifications, the one the manufacturer gives is a diameter of just 6 mm, perhaps the most eloquent expression of how little the Unthinkable announces its presence. The available literature gives no weight, cross-sectional area for the conducting material itself or dimensions for the plugs.

We had the Unthinkable for several weeks, long enough for it to see service with a good ten pairs of loudspeakers. Our principal impressions, though, came from listening against the Nordost Frey 2 in the main system, with the Métronome DSC, Norma Revo SC-2 LN and Norma Revo PA 160 MR, and the KEF Blade One Meta at the far end of it all. Out of curiosity we also let it make music with the Eversolo DMP-A6 Gen 2, Cambridge CXA81 and XAVIAN Unica, where it took the place of the Dynamique Audio Horizon 2.

The bass on Bromberg's 'The Saga of Harrison Crabfeathers' ('Wood' | 2006 | recorded 2001 | Artistry | ART 7009) is deliberately dominant, miked up close, big and boisterous. Through the Nordost cabling it sounds focused, taut and emphatic, while the Unthinkable brings into the room that peculiar handwriting in sound, so recognisably the brand's and so elusive in objective terms – a sense of freedom, of air that breathes, of lightness of being. It just plays, easily, and all the 'facts' of the sound

are still accounted for. The instrument still dominates, digs deep and has energy to spare. Only it all happens with such ease, so little sense of machinery at work. As though the amplifiers had acquired a little more headroom and the system a little less of a signature, leaving the notes sounding truer to themselves.

That, as it happens, was the impression we kept coming back to – the character of the systems, insofar as one could put a finger on it, seemed almost to disappear. What the Nordost, say, tends to pick out and bring forward, the Unthinkable lets slip from your attention. And so you find yourself listening more closely to the colour of Sophie Zelmani's voice on her 'Going Home' (2014 | Oh Dear | ODRCD01). You could say the singing is clearer, and much the same goes for the accompanying guitar, with rather more 'metal' to its strings. Yet somewhere along the way the pleasing richness of the KEFs disappears, as do the concentrated neutrality of the Normas and the sheer scale of the Métronome, until the music, or more precisely the recording itself, is the main thing and the only thing. It's closer, more tangible, more ordinary in the best sense of the word, and it's hard to account for that by pointing to some newly prominent detail or a sense of greater transparency or anything of the sort. You can't put it down to any one change. The music 'untangles' itself, plays freely, under no pressure, and there's something genuinely human about the feeling it leaves.

The metallic chimes on Domnérus's familiar 'Limehouse Blues' ('Jazz at the Pawnshop' | 2000 | recorded 1977 | Prophone | FIM SACD M 034) rang out somehow more neatly, too. The Unthinkable has a remarkably calming influence on proceedings, with no rounding over of the sound or loss of definition – if anything, quite the reverse. And yet, for all the ring and penetrating bite of metal, for all that lovely richness of texture, there's no roughness anywhere. Just a fresh, very quick, vividly lifelike chime with a long, lingering decay. As though that audible instant at which the system 'ends' a note had somehow gone missing. Here the fragile thing hangs in the air for as long as it lives on the recording.

Even the grandeur of Saint-Saëns's 'Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 78' (Charles Munch / Boston Symphony Orchestra | 1993 | recorded 1959 | BMG | 09026-64500-2) seemed, on the whole, to come rather more willingly. Perhaps it's the way the air caught around that great orchestra takes a breath and pulses, the emphatic notes carrying with them a larger sense of the space they inhabit. With the Unthinkable, the orchestra's shifting dynamics are simply a matter of course, as though the amplifiers had a little more steam in reserve, a little more authority.

If anything about the detail stood out on Hopkins's 'Emerald Rush' ('Singularity' | 2018 | Domino | WIGLP352X), it had little to do with the number of nuances one could count. More with the harmony with which the individual threads could weave a picture whole. Everything finds its place quite naturally, in complete harmony and without the slightest insistence. There's nothing mechanical about the music, yet it's exceptionally easy to follow. Even in the dense, layered passages, with any number of musical ideas playing off one another, things never seem to 'thicken'. That extraordinary ease of following it all, and the feeling that everything is as it should be, lend the music a wholeness of its own, quite detached from the system and its character.

With that stamp of the real comes a stereo image of beautifully sculpted solidity. 'Mining for Gold' (Cowboy Junkies | 'The Trinity Sessions' | 1988 | SONY) consists of Margo Timmins's voice and the answering reverberation of the church, which, caught by a single microphone, conjure up an imposing sense of space all about you. With the Unthinkable, cues to that space emerged from further back as well as further out to either side, giving the image more relief and making the raw space of the church feel that much more real.

Prince's 'Kiss' ('Parade' | 2007 | recorded 1986 | Warner | WPCR-13537), in turn, was terrific rhythmically. It really strutted, and the cable seemed to do a good deal for its flow and energy. There's something quietly irresistible about it, something that keeps you listening. It's fun, and everything works. The Unthinkable really does dispel that particular species of audiophile restlessness that has

you wondering if this might be adjusted a little better, that swapped out, or something else given a more judicious footing. Because suddenly there's no call for any of it. It's just music, and it's great.

Of course, you might say a cable is just a cable, and in something as intricate as an audio system, with its dozens of constituent parts, it's one more piece of the puzzle. And yes, so it is. Except that the unorthodox thinking behind the Voodoo Labs Unthinkable seems to give it a curious capacity to draw things together – the music is easier to listen to, certainly, but there's also the sense that the character of the individual pieces has appreciably less say in the experience of the whole. It's a hard thing to get into words, though if pressed for one I think 'freedom' comes fairly close. The Unthinkable really does give you the feeling that the music has been set free, and expensive as it is, this is a speaker cable that owners of substantial high-end systems of commensurate ambition ought to want to hear. Chiefly because it draws your ear away from the sound of the components and towards the music itself, and that's something you seldom hear.

EUR 12,000 / 2 m

approx. CZK 291,000 / 2 m

PHOTO GALLERY

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LISTENING PLAYLIST: https://tidal.com/playlist/b32e5755-32c2-4147-9bff-460af3b03552

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PROS

+ practical construction – durable and easy to handle

+ brings that peculiar freedom and ease to the sound

+ somehow manages to 'rub out' a good deal of the system's own character

+ with this cable in place, attention seemed to settle on the music all of its own accord

CONS

- the price tag is, of course, hardly negligible

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MANUFACTURER: Voodoo Labs | www.voodoolabs.org

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