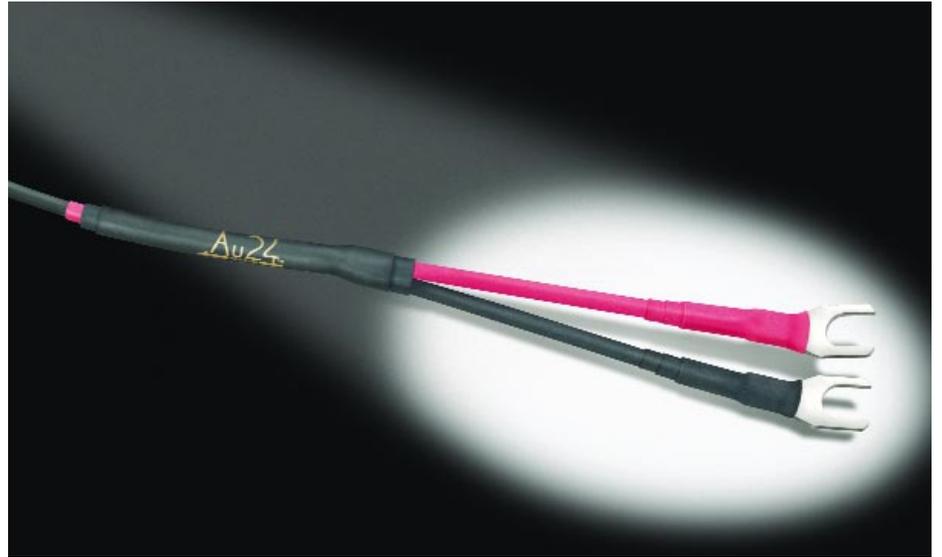


Audience Au24 audio cables & powerChord AC cord

We've all got our pet peeves, and one of mine is stiff, unwieldy audio cables that simply refuse to bend to my will—or to bend at all. Instructions like “carefully bend to final configuration, ensuring that no bend is sharper than a 36" radius” make my blood boil. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Audience's willowy Au24 cable and wonderfully flexible powerChord positively warmed my heart when I encountered them at the 2002 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.

The Au24 interconnects and loudspeaker cables, Audience's top models, both use the same basic wire. It consists of an unshielded coaxial configuration with conductors made of Audience's “OHNO Continuous Cast, Single Crystal Copper.” Polypropylene insulation is used, and the bundle is encased in a 4mm-diameter shield of cross-linked XLPE polyethylene. According to Audience, a major Au24 design goal was to reduce the cables' propensity to charge and discharge a surrounding electromagnetic field and thus reduce the eddy currents created in the cable, in turn lowering their distortion. To achieve this, Audience concentrated on minimizing AC impedance and getting the “proper induction/capacitance” ratio, rather than focusing on low DC resistance.

The powerChords were designed to minimize both impedance and resistance, and the secret of their flexibility is their use of multi-strand rather than solid conductors. The powerChords are unshielded because Audience feels that shielding does little to insulate the cord from surrounding magnetic fields, and can actually be detrimental to the cord's properties—specifically, by raising its impedance. The powerChord relies on low-dielectric-constant insulating materials and the cable's inherently low impedance to minimize the noise absorbed—and radiated. The assembly is wrapped in a soft vinyl mesh and terminated with a Maringo plug on one end and a Wattgate IEC socket on the other. The powerChords look like a lot of other audiophile AC cords, but are far more flexible, which makes them much easier to use in tight quarters.



Top: Audience Au24 loudspeaker cable; bottom: Audience powerChord AC cord.

Au24 interconnect

The Au24 interconnect may be unobtrusive and easy to use, but so is zip cord; the proof of this pudding is in the listening. Fortunately, the Audiences were solid performers, as unobtru-

sive sonically as they were physically. The Au24s had a neutral, relaxed sound, with good extension at the frequency extremes and a wide, deep soundstage. I ended up listening to a lot of jazz during the Au24s' tenure, and they

Description: Interconnect and loudspeaker cables, removable IEC AC cord. Interconnects available in single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) configurations. Loudspeaker cables available in single- and biwired configurations.

Prices: Interconnects, unbalanced: \$417/1m

pair, \$300/additional meter. Interconnects, balanced: \$776/1m pair, \$600/additional meter. Loudspeaker cables, single-wire: \$1115/3m pair, \$300/additional meter. Loudspeaker cables, biwire: \$1916/3m pair, \$500/additional meter. powerChord: \$379/6' length. Approximate number of dealers: 25.

Warranty: lifetime, unconditional against defects.

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proved a good match for vivid, live discs like the JVC XRCD of the Bill Evans Trio's *At Shelly's Manne-Hole* (JVCXR-0036-2). Evans' piano was vibrant and three-dimensional, and Chuck Israel's bass was clean and articulate, with just the right amount of bounce and a warm, woody resonance. Larry Bunker's drums were sharp and crisp, and his cymbal was beautifully reproduced. The bell-like ring led and centered its image, followed by an expanding, shimmering halo, every nuance of his stick and brushwork clearly inscribed in space.

The Au24 acquitted itself well in comparisons to my two reference interconnects, the Nordost Valhalla and the Nirvana S-X Ltd., but didn't quite match their performance in the areas where those wires truly excel. The Au24 was vivid, for example, but lacked the density of tonal colors and the *n*th degree of inner detail that the Valhalla produces. Nor did it quite match the Valhalla's incredible speed and precision—though the Au24 was no slouch itself in those terms.

On the other hand, the Au24s were slightly faster and more dynamic than the Nirvana S-X Ltds., with a slightly more forward soundstage and sharper definition of image edges. The Au24s didn't, however, match the Nirvanas' continuity, or their incredibly natural soundstage reproduction and ambience retrieval. Compared to the Au24s, the S-X Ltds. sounded a little laid-back, but with a huge, open soundstage and a "just right" way of portraying space and images—in particular, how the images blended into the surrounding ambience to create a seamless, natural whole.

On "Dance of the Rose Maidens," from the Antal Dorati/LSO performance of Khachaturian's *Gayne* ballet (Mercury Living Presence 434 323-2), a muted trumpet—way down in level and deep in the soundstage—provides a counterpoint to the melody throughout much of the piece. This trumpet line was more obvious—brighter and more sharply etched—with the Au24s. With the Nirvanas, however, it blended more naturally into the surrounding space. And

that space, its ambience, and the surrounding walls—all low-level details and subtleties—were better portrayed with the Nirvanas. The Au24s were no slouch in this regard, just a bit off the standard set by the very best I've heard.

Au24 speaker cable

The slender Au24 seems even less likely as a speaker cable. After all, speaker cables have to be massive to pass all that current, right? Apparently not—it was as a speaker cable that the Au24 really shone. I spent quite a bit of time going back and forth between the Au24 and my reference Valhalla, and ended up preferring the Au24.

The Au24 had a slightly warmer tonal balance—double basses and cellos were reproduced with more authority, and a more realistic weight and resonance. Images were a bit more dimensional with the Au24s, and slightly more solid and dense. Part of it was a slightly better resolution of inner detail. The xylophone at the opening of "Dance of the Rose Maidens" was more distinctive with the Au24s, with a slightly woodier bite and a better sense of the instrument's shape and configuration. Another component was the way the Au24s seemed to fill in the images and give them solidity and mass. In comparison, the Valhallas seemed to slightly overemphasize image edges, like a video image with the contrast set a smidgen too high. And last, the Au24s produced a slightly larger and more open soundstage, and did a better job of resolving the spaces between images, particularly from front to back.

powerChord AC cord

I recently moved cross-country, into my fiancée Trish's suburban California home, and let me tell you, the power here sucks. I'm reluctant to pay for an electrician to install a dedicated circuit or multiple grounds because we're house-hunting, so I've been doing a lot of experimenting with aftermarket power conditioners and AC cords. The setup that has evolved includes AudioPrism QuietLine filters scattered around and an MIT ZCenter conditioner for the preamp and front-end gear. I used the Audience powerChords to run from the ZCenter to a VAC Renaissance Signature Mk.II preamp and a Simaudio Moon Eclipse CD player, and to feed my VTL Ichiban amplifiers directly from the wall.

Each component of this treatment setup yielded significant and similar improvements, lowering the noise floor and removing layers of grunge. Dynamics were cleaned up and the resolution of inner detail was noticeably improved, making images seem more realistic and much more dimensional. Spaces between instruments or orchestral sections were opened up, where before it seemed as if instruments were being run together.

A big benefit was an improvement in how the system reproduced the ambience of the recording venue—the space around the muted trumpet in "Dance of the Rose Maidens" was a great example. Rather than being mired in a nebulous sea of grunge, the trumpet (after AC cleanup) was now suspended in a holographic image of the stage rear, complete with back

wall, side walls, and overhead space.

Triangulating in on the powerChords, I found that their biggest contributions were opening up the soundstage, expanding it and clearing out inter-image congestion, and dramatically improving the resolution of low-level and inner detail. Images were more tangible with the powerChords in the system, more life-like and alive—even in the farthest corners of the soundstage. With the stock power cords installed, I could follow the low-level trombone lines woven deep into "Dance of the Rose Maidens." With the powerChords, I got a sense of the space *around* the trombones, and of multiple instruments playing together.

When I compared the powerChords to a few other brands I had on hand, I found that they were very similar in performance to my long-time fave AC cords, Synergistic Research's AC Master Couplers. The two brands' contributions to cleaning up the sound were similar, and both significantly improved detail and dimensionality. Overall, however, I preferred the Synergistics—they offered better senses of space and of the recording venue's ambience. That trombone section was definitely a group of individual instruments with the Synergistics; I could begin to follow the individual instruments. On the other hand, the powerChords were very nearly as good, and a whole lot easier to integrate into a system, than the unwieldy A/C Master Couplers.

Summary

The Audience Au24 and powerChord cables are well worth checking out. They were excellent performers, reasonably priced, and, best of all, incredibly easy to use in any system configuration. As an interconnect, their performance was well above the best bargain cables from companies like Alpha-Core, Kimber, and Nordost, and not too far removed from that of the best, most outrageously priced cables I've heard. And as a speaker cable, the Au24 held its own against the very best I've heard—cables that cost several times as much.

The wonderfully flexible powerChord, too, was a winner, significantly cleaning up the sound by lowering the noise floor, opening up the space between instruments, and significantly improving the system's resolution of low-level and inner detail.

The Audience cables are definitely recommended—unless, of course, you really *do* need your cables to do double duty as chin-up bars or towropes! ☒

Manufacturers' Comments

Audience Au24 & powerChord

Editor:

I would like to thank Brian Damkroger and *Stereophile* magazine for reviewing the Audience Au24 audio cables and powerChord. It is apparent that Mr. Damkroger took the time to make a careful and thorough evaluation of our cables.

We have recently made significant upgrades to the powerChord. This has resulted in audibly improved performance from top to bottom. We are offering upgrades of older powerChords to our customers at \$50 to \$100, depending on vintage. *Richard A. Smith*

Director of Product Development, Audience LLC

Associated Equipment

Analog source: VPI TNT Mk.V-HR turntable and tonearm, Grado Signature Reference cartridge.

Digital source: Simaudio Moon Eclipse CD player.

Preamplifier: VAC Renaissance Signature Mk.II.

Power amplifiers: VTL Ichiban monoblocks.

Loudspeakers: Magnepan MG3.6/R.
Cables: Interconnect: Nirvana S-X Ltd., Nordost Valhalla. Speaker: Nirvana SL, Nordost. AC: Synergistic Research A/C Reference Master Couplers.

Accessories: Merrill equipment stand; Bright Star Big Rock, Little Rock, and Air Mass isolation devices; Nordost ECO3 and Diskolution CD cleaning/treatment fluids; MIT ZCenter power-conditioning and delivery system.

—Brian Damkroger

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