

## Product Review...

# Audience Au24 Interconnects and Speaker Cables, and powerChord Power Cord

April 2004



Nothing chills the heart of the seasoned audio critic like the words “I have a new audio cable— would you like to review it?”

There are the practical considerations: You just know there’s going to be a lot of crawling around on the floor, connecting and disconnecting gear in bad light at awkward angles. Then there’s the fear: What if this is the time you finally *don’t* hear any differences? Some would claim that that would signal a return to sanity—but, of course, just as many ‘philes would see it as proof that the critic has finally lost it.

Then there’s the whole reputation thing: Once it gets out that you’re willing to audition cables, *everybody* will offer to send you theirs. After all, you’ve already established what you are— all that’s left to negotiate is how often you’re willing to do it. Besides, as John Atkinson once confided to me over a spirituous beverage, “Cables are for rookies—you can’t easily persuade an experienced reviewer to ever do *that* again.”

But I kept hearing about Audience’s Au24 line . . . *It’s good . . . it’s affordable . . . it’s flexible*. Flexible? Now *that’s* different. So I asked for the full kit: interconnects, speaker cables, and power cords— er, *powerChords*.

I’m such a glutton for punishment.

### Flat and flexible truths are beat out by every hammer

Audience’s literature assures us that “the Au24 cables are constructed of Ohno continuous-cast single-crystal copper conductors with polypropylene insulation and cross-linked polyethylene jacket material.”

*Ohno?* That’s a joke, surely?

Turns out it’s very serious. I Googled “Ohno + copper” and was directed to [www.musicpoint.nl/Furutech/furutech\\_occ.htm](http://www.musicpoint.nl/Furutech/furutech_occ.htm), where I was given a quick lesson in copper. Normal copper, Furutech explained, has about 1500 grains, or individual crystals, in each foot. This means that, while traversing a 1m cable, the signal must “cross the junctions between these grains” some 5000 times.

I had no idea of this—nor do I know why that’s a problem. But the company insists that it leads to “the same type of irritating distortion as current crossing from strand to strand.”

That’s “normal” copper, of course. Copper comes in grades. There’s *oxygen-free high-conductivity copper* (OFHC), which more properly should be called *reduced-oxygen copper*. But here’s the important part about OFHC copper: The way it’s cast and drawn into wire reduces the presence of copper oxide within the wire and makes the grains “longer,” a combination

that minimizes the number of grain boundaries— and, presumably, the distortions they cause.

You’ll often see references to the purity of OFHC copper—99.99%, 99.999%, even 99.9999% (aka “six nines”) pure. It does make you wonder how much better 99.9999% pure is than the street-level 99.999% stuff.

But there’s better stuff out there: *linear-crystal oxygen-free copper* (LC-OFCC), which is drawn in a process that results in only about 70 grains per foot. In 1986, the Ohno Continuous Casting (OCC) process was developed by Professor Ohno of the Chiba Institute of Technology in Japan. The process has been patented as the Ultra Pure Copper by Ohno Continuous Casting Process (UP-OCC). Furutech has a picture of the machine that produces what it calls “single crystallized copper” through a process involving heated-mold continuous casting. That machine turns out small rods of OCC pure copper, from which wire can be drawn with copper grains over 700’ long.

But that’s just materials— if all it took to design a good-sounding cable was good materials, everybody would be using ‘em. Audience determined that they also needed to focus on reducing eddy-current resistance. They explain it thusly:

“This is the key electrical characteristic for good time response. Eddy-currents are created by the magnetic field found around a cable when an electrical signal is present. This magnetic field builds up and collapses as the signal varies. When the field collapses it induces an opposing voltage back into the cable. This opposing voltage causes eddy-currents in the conductor. If they could be seen, eddy-currents would look like swirling water in a river. This late arriving, opposing voltage disrupts the original signal by inducing a time-smearing artifact.”

That doesn’t mean that Audience ignores the effects of capacitance or inductance, however. In order to properly balance sound reproduction, the company claims, inductive and capacitive values should be minimized, while optimizing the ratio of inductance to capacitance (L:C). However, Audience observes, “by designing for the lowest possible eddy-current resistance at the correct specific frequency, proper L:C ratio is naturally arrived at and both of these properties are minimized.”

### A happy and gracious flexibility

That rumor of flexibility proved to be the gospel truth—the Au24 cables are all slender and very bendable. While “everyone knows” that loudspeaker cable must resemble a garden hose to sound good— and have low DC resistance in order to provide good bass response—it seems that no one has informed the audio signals themselves of this. According to Audience, DC resistance is relatively unimportant. What really matters,

they claim, is the cable's characteristic impedance (AC resistance).

Audience: "Most of these large diameter/low DC resistance cables have excessively high characteristic impedance anywhere from 100 to 600 ohms, with some measuring in the 1000s of ohms." With a diameter of 1/8", the Au24's DC resistance may be higher than that of the audiophile-approved hoses, but its characteristic impedance is only 16 ohms. Audience maintains that musical signals pass through its cable with less *actual* impedance than through a cable with a lower DC resistance.

Audience uses an advanced, unprepossessing RCA connector on its single-ended interconnects. They connect snugly and easily and are said to have low contact resistance. The balanced analog and AES/EBU digital interconnects employ Neutrik XLR connectors. The speaker cables are terminated with rhodium-plated spade connectors— simple, and a pleasure to use after some of the unruly designs I've wrestled with.

The powerChords aren't quite as svelte as the Au24 interconnects and cables, but they *are* flexible, thanks to their multistrand construction and lack of shielding. Audience states that it avoids shielding because that raises the cable's impedance. The powerChord's insulation is low-dielectric, meaning that it does not store electrical energy (capacitance), which might then be released back into the conductor in an uncontrolled manner. The powerChord is wrapped in mesh vinyl and sports a Marinco plug on one end and a Wattgate IEC socket on the other.

I did say *affordable*, didn't I? A1m Au24 interconnect is \$502/ pair; a 3m speaker cable is \$1313/pair; powerChords are \$449/6' (all prices USD).

Well, affordable by high-resolution audio cable standards, anyway.

### One needs a flexible virtue

I used the Au24 cables in a system that included my Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista preamplifier and CD player, the Linn Klimax Twin and dartZeel NHB-108 Model One power amplifiers, and Aerial Acoustics Model 20T loudspeakers. I also used the powerChords in a headphone system comprising Sennheiser HD 650 headphones, a Musical Fidelity CD Pre 24, and HeadRoom BlockHead.

### Give us things that are alive and flexible

The Audience Au24 and powerChord cables share a family resemblance—they balance tonality extremely well, have superb detail (again, in balance; neither too much nor too little of it), and they're *smooth*. Not colored-smooth, but just-right-smooth.

Should scales have fallen from my ears? Should veils have fallen? Should notes have shone like diamonds on black velvet? Well, I've been doing this for a long time. Yes, in the past, scales and veils *have* fallen, notes *have* shone, backgrounds *have* been impressively flat-black. But my system's steady-state resolution is pretty high, thanks very much. And while, like a surgeon, I can just bury my mistakes, I also get to live with my successes—and the cables I currently rely on are pretty darn good.

So the absence of drama in my listening sessions did *not* mean that the Audience cables weren't impressive. They were, and kept up with the best I have— for about half the price of my current reference Shunyata Aries and Lyra cables.

The Au24 interconnect was silent as the grave. David Russell's *Plays Bach* [CD, Telarc CD-80584] sparkled in its portrayal of harmonic overtones—

and the decay of those harmonics was extended and gradual. The woody warmth of the Peggy and Yale Gordon Center for the Performing Arts clearly embraced Russell's notes, supporting and sustaining his guitar's sound. Detail, warmth, truth— what's not to like?

The Au24 speaker cables may not have had the depth of the tomb, but that's only because I didn't feed 'em anything with bass that unnaturally prominent. On more normal material— like that music stuff— they did just fine.

I like to use Steve Swallow to test bass response because he always plays so rhythmically and so in tune. When Swallow lays down a walking beat, as he does on "The National Anthem" on Carla Bley's *Looking For America* [CD, WATT/31], it doesn't just *walk*— it saunters, swaggers, struts.

The Au24 speaker cables reproduced Swallow's loosey-goosey bass line with impact and precision. And swing? They sure didn't sound as if they were storing any energy. In that respect, based on the way they caught Swallow's drive and slam, they were mighty close to the state of the art.

The powerChords were a tad harder for me to get a handle on. Maybe it's me— I just don't hear day-and-night differences between well-designed power cables. When they do work for me, they seem to reduce steady-state noise and grunge. But I'm guessing at that—what I notice primarily is that it's easier to hear the music, so I assume I'm hearing less noise. In this, the powerChords were at least as effective as my current favorites, Shunyata Research's PowerSnakes Sidewinder Venom 2 (\$998)— an awfully nice neighborhood to be in.

### Access— your flexible option

Are the Au24 interconnects and cables as good as the very best I've heard? Pretty darn close. The Shunyata Aries and Lyra allowed me to hear a tiny smidgen deeper into the recording venue than the Audience combination, but "deeper" is not an absolute value. On even days, I view it as necessary detail; on odd days, I wonder if it's not a bit too much. Cables aren't tone controls, but hi-fi isn't rocket science— what I choose might not be what you'd choose. Heck, it might not even be what *I'd* choose on a different day, or in a different room, or with a different rig.

Of course, when you add its ease of use (flexible!) and the ease of affordance (that's *got* to be a word, right?), I wouldn't necessarily say the Audience cables *wouldn't* be my choice. I liked 'em a lot.

Not scared of nothing— that's me!

...Wes Phillips, wes@onhifi.com

### Audience Au24 Interconnects and Speaker Cables, and powerChord Power Cord

**Prices: Au24 interconnects, \$502 USD per one-meter pair;  
Au24 speaker cables, \$1313 USD per three-meter pair;  
powerChord power cord, \$449 USD per six-foot length.**

**Warranty: Lifetime parts and labor.**

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