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Product Review

Audience Au24 S/PDIF Digital Cable Review Follow-up

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A decade ago, before SACD and DVD-A, choosing a digital cable involved almost as much deliberation as choosing any other part of a high-end audio system. This was the heyday of the separate DAC and transport for CD playback, and audiophiles were *into* connection formats as well as brands of digital cables. I was an AT&T glass man for a while, migrating to AES/EBU and eventually settling on S/PDIF with RCA connectors. I owned Wadia, Purist, TARA Labs and Marigo digital cables, which I used between Timbre and Wadia digital separates—and I experimented with dozens of other digital cables from well-known and obscure makers.

Nowadays, CD is still *the* digital format (in terms of numbers sold if not sound quality). There are still a few of us stalwarts out here using separate DACs and transports, but the single-box CD player or universal player is king—and the digital cable is nearly superfluous.

Audience is the maker of the well-known Auric Illuminator, a kit for treating and improving the performance of discs in all digital formats, and a few different cable lines. I also recall hearing Audience speakers a few CESes ago—tall, rounded towers that sounded very good. Doug Blackburn reviewed Audience's top interconnects and speaker cables, from the Au24 line, calling them "commendably neutral and natural." Earlier this year, Audience prez John McDonald asked if I'd be interested in hearing any of his products, and I immediately seized on the Au24 S/PDIF digital cable, which I requested with BNC connectors. In this configuration, the cable costs \$390 USD per meter length.

I've used Chris Sommovigo-designed I2Digital X-60 and Stereovox HDVX digital cables along with Darren Hovsepian's DH Labs' D-75, all terminated with BNCs, and after much experimentation, I've found that the Zanden Model 5000 Mk III DAC I use as my reference sounds its very best connected to a transport with a fully BNCed digital cable. My guess is that the connectors are the main reason BNC sounds so good. BNC connectors are spec'ed at 75 ohms, the standard for S/PDIF transmission, while

with RCA connectors you never know what you are getting—often the same RCAs used for line-level interconnects.

The Audience Au24 cable line was designed around the goal of providing the lowest possible eddy-current resistance, which Audience claims is a more important consideration than inductance or capacitance. The BNC connectors used for the Au24 S/PDIF are "very special" according to Audience. They're made by Tajimi and feature One Touch Lock push/pull connection—no twisting required. According to Richard Smith of Audience, the "Au24 digital or video cable is capable of a voltage standing wave ratio (VSWR) of 1.2 for frequencies up to 1GHz." The closer the VSWR is to 1, the better—and the closer to perfect transmission. The Au24 S/PDIF cable uses solder connection "to ensure good reliability."

The Au24 digital cable is thin and somewhat springy—it bends in a broad arc, not at a 90-degree angle. It takes a bit of fumbling to get the BNCs to make the connection, but once you get the hang of it, they're very easy to use.

I've come to understand the sonic differences among the BNC-terminated digital cables I have on hand, and over time I have enjoyed most the I2Digital X-60. Its sound is fast, open and transparent. The Au24 S/PDIF cable proved to be something of a sonic enigma—its signature was only identifiable in relation to the other cables. On its own, it offers a large portion of every positive attribute and no discernible sins. Most notably, compared to the I2Digital cable, the Au24 portrays density along with speed and openness. Images are full and weighty; in video terms, I would say that the picture is more color-saturated. All of the detail is there, but the perspective is different—the music is portrayed in a more tangible way.

The Audience digital cable pays big dividends through the midrange. I spent one afternoon swapping digital cables and listening to the work of various female jazz vocalists, a process that invariably led me back to Cassandra Wilson. The dusky character of Wilson's voice on *Belly of the Sun* [Blue Note

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7243-5 35072] was best served by the Audience Au24 digital cable. When Wilson croons "Wichita Lineman," her voice takes on added roundness and presence with the Audience S/PDIF cable that the I2Digital cable translates into a slightly better sense of space. Some listeners will prefer the lighter, more lithe sound of the I2Digital X-60, and others the more lush and colorful presentation of the Audience Au24. To each his own. The distinction is important, however, as it will undoubtedly steer listeners toward one digital cable or the other.

If you are a cable skeptic who believes that digital cables *can't* sound different, get your hands on Audience's Au24 S/PDIF cable. You will hear a difference with the Au24, and you may decide, as I have, that different in this case means better.

Company Info

Audience Au24 S/PDIF Digital Cable

Price: \$390 USD per meter length with BNC termination.

Warranty: Lifetime.

Audience

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