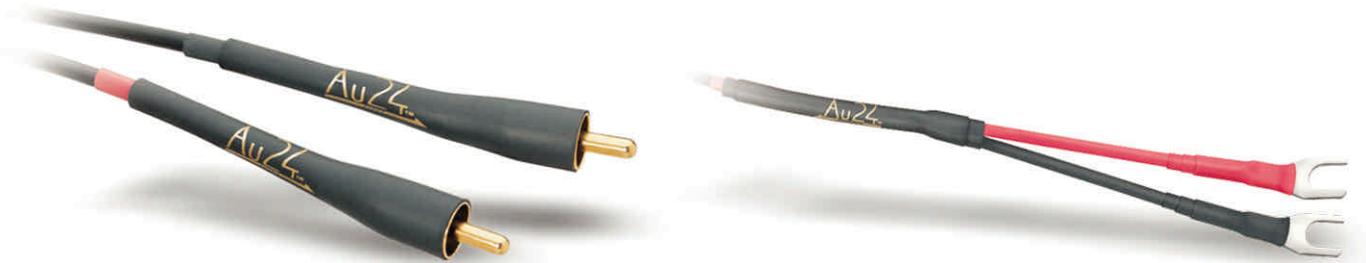


SoundStage!™

Product Review

Audience Au24 Interconnects and Speaker Cables

by Doug Blackburn
db@soundstage.com
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Review Summary

Sound

"Relaxed, neutral presentation without any injected drama"—"less 'audiophile' and more 'music lover'"; "definitely in the smooth, round, musical realm" but also "considerably more linear than that of some similarly priced cables"; remarkable bass performance from such tiny cables.

Features

Small-diameter cables designed to reduce eddy-current resistance and thereby be more accurate in the time domain.

Use

In terms of speaker cables, "with the Belles/Power Modules 350A amp and Vandersteen 3A Signature speakers, biwire was obviously the better-sounding choice"; but Audience maintains that often single-wire speaker cables sound better.

Value

"Commendably neutral and natural, and they help you forget about chasing the pot o' gold at the end of the audiophile rainbow."

Audience has been making its mark in audio accessories for several years and is even in the loudspeaker business with the Au24 line-source loudspeaker. I reviewed Audience's Auric Illuminator surface treatment for CDs in March 2000 and found it offered the most improvement of any surface treatment I had tried—and it remains so to this day.

Audience's other products, the Au24 line of speaker cables and interconnects, take a different tack from many other cables in the same price range. Their construction is intentionally low mass—connectors, insulation materials, and conductors. The conductors are so-called "single-crystal copper" with polypropylene insulation and a cross-linked polyethylene jacket. Audience says the geometry of the conductors lowers eddy-

current resistance compared to other designs. Eddy current is produced in conductors when the electrical field around a wire collapses. This happens constantly with audio cables as the signal varies continuously between negative and positive. Each time the signal heads towards and reaches zero volts, the field collapses around the wire. This collapse induces a current in the wire. Audience believes the reduction or elimination of this induced current is one of the keys to making a good-sounding audio cable with excellent performance in the time domain. Audience found that in achieving low eddy-current resistance, they also minimized inductance and capacitance in the cables. Audience also believes that low eddy current is one of the keys to accurate time-domain performance: All frequencies are delivered from one component to another at the same speed, so there is no smearing in time caused by high frequencies traveling faster than low frequencies, as could happen in some conventional cable designs.

While the Au24 interconnects (\$418 USD per single-ended pair, \$776 per pair balanced) look slight as interconnects go, it is the 1/8"-diameter speaker cables (\$965 per single-wire pair, \$1632 biwire) that really look tiny. The thin speaker cable contains both the positive and negative conductors in its single jacket. "Too small for the job," many would assume. Audience found that large cables with low DC resistance would end up with AC resistance in the hundreds of ohms. Since music is an AC signal, this would be the opposite of what you want. So Audience focused on reducing the AC resistance and eddy currents. They believe that while the resulting cable may be higher than many others in DC resistance, the improvement in AC resistance more than makes up for it.

During the development of the Au24 cables, Audience found that using fancier and heavier connectors, larger conductors, and cosmetic sleeving or jackets made the cables sound worse. It became obvious to them that the minimalist approach produced what they thought was the best-sounding cable.

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System

For this review, I used digital front-ends consisting of a Panasonic DVD-RP56 DVD player feeding an Assemblage D2D-1 jitter reducer/upsampler/interpolator. The 24/96 output of the D2D-1 went to 24/96 MSB Technologies Link II or Perpetual Technologies P-3A DACs. Preamps used were the Audible Illusions Modulus 3A with Gold phono boards and the Belles/Power Modules 20A; both are tube designs. Amplifiers were the Belles Power Modules 350A and 150A Hot Rod as well as a Bryston 6B-SST, all solid state. Loudspeakers were Vandersteen 3A Signatures. Power conditioning products by VansEvers, Equi=Tech, Furman, Richard Gray's Power Company, Quantum Life, and Monster Power were used during the review period.

Other speaker cables used were Magnan Signature, Nirvana S-L, Nordost SPM Reference, JPS Labs NC, and Analysis Plus Oval 9. Other interconnects in use were Nordost Quattro-Fil, Magnan Signature, Magnan Vi, Nirvana S-L, and JPS Labs Superconductor 2. Power cords were the AudioPrism Supernatural 9.5, JPS Labs Power AC, Magnan Signature, and Analysis Plus Power Oval.

Listening

The very first observation I made was that the sound of the Audience interconnects and speaker cables was completely identical in every way. This isn't often true because many companies design their interconnects and speaker cables very differently. Because of the identical sonic character, my listening impressions will apply equally to both the interconnects and speaker cables.

The Au24 cables reached peak sound quality after a very short three-day break-in period, and there was less of a dramatic improvement than I have experienced with many other cables in the first week or two. Listening to favorite recordings revealed a relaxed, neutral presentation without any injected drama. There was no hype to the sound of any instrument. The Au24 listening experience is less "audiophile" and more "music lover." You won't find yourself deconstructing each recording in minute detail—you'll be having too much fun re-listening to your music collection. Leo Kottke's acoustic guitar on *Ice Water* [One Way Records S21-18458] contains passages of rapidly played notes in a dizzying array of tonalities. At times the notes come so fast that the playing seems not to be humanly possible. Yet the Au24 cables sort out all the incredible acoustic-guitar mayhem into a complex musical dervish of a performance that can be followed and appreciated in a different way each time you listen to the recording. This is heady performance for interconnects in the \$400 price range, but \$1600 biwire speaker cables really should be able to deliver this level of performance, and the Au24s *do*.

Cymbals give many cables fits because they can be made to jump forward of the rest of the drum kit if all is not sonically right. With the Au24 cables, the cymbals stayed right back there with the rest of the drum kit no matter whether I was

Audience powerChord

I used the very flexible Audience powerChord with its Wattgate IEC and Marincos power plug on preamplifiers, amps, DACs and transports. Regardless of the component the powerChord was connected to, the sound quality had similar characteristics. However, I found the sound of the powerChord a bit different from that of the Au24 interconnects and speaker cables. It seemed more dynamic and exciting and gave a sense of transparency to components that I haven't experienced from other power cords in its price range. The powerChord was not overwhelmed by the 250Wpc Belles/Power Modules 350A stereo amp as some lesser power cords have been.

The powerChord doesn't have a color to its sound—it's more of a *feel*. With the Au24 cables but without the powerChord, Willie Nelson's *Across the Borderline* [Columbia 52752] is a languid listening pleasure. Add two powerChords, say on the amp and preamp, and you stay in the "languid" zone, but there is a little more energetic presentation. What elements of the sound actually change is difficult to identify. It seems to me the change is a small "uplift" of everything across the audio spectrum from top to bottom—a little more transparency, a little more dynamic kick, and just a bit more detail in each note. It's a subtle thing, though, and this description almost overstates what happens.

When used with amplifiers, the powerChord was slightly more restrained and not quite as powerful in the deep bass as the boisterous JPS Labs Power AC. With preamps and digital components, the AudioPrism Supernatural 9.5 was warmer and more relaxed, but not more transparent or detailed. The Analysis Plus Power Oval was zippiest and more detailed, but the powerChord sounded more natural and didn't have the bass bump of the Power Oval had.

When the powerChord is used with the Au24 interconnects and speaker cables, synergy happens. A powerChord or two or three will pump up the excitement level without undoing any of the good things the Au24 cables do for the sound. The Audience powerChord gives the presentation a sense of dynamic drive and rhythmic pace that is perfect, not overdone or overpowered.

I don't think \$379 is cheap for a power cord, but as prices go, the Audience powerChord acquits itself very nicely and has become my favorite sub-\$400 power cord by a considerable margin.

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listening to a modern masterpiece like Don Byron's *Bug Music* [Nonesuch 79438-2] or Leo Kottke's *Ice Water*.

While the Au24 sound is definitely in the smooth, round, musical realm, from the upper bass to the bottom octave it is considerably more linear than that of some similarly priced cables and displays no trace of boom or bloat. The Au24s avoid the artificial warmth some cables impart due to an emphasis in the bass or upper bass. I was able to hear the remarkable bass extension, power, and control of the Belles/Power Modules 350A amp with complete neutrality through the Au24 cables. It took some getting used to a 1/8"-diameter speaker cable delivering this kind of bass performance.

The Au24 midrange has no obvious shortcomings or colorations of any kind. You could pick nits all day about whether it sounds dynamic enough or detailed enough, but many listeners, including me, will find the Au24's midrange to be perfect. Others will think the midrange is a bit laid-back because it isn't as hyped as with some other cables. Leo Kottke's baritone-and-below vocals on *Ice Water* are appropriately chesty and full, while the higher nasal tones are without harshness or artificial edge. Emmylou Harris' vocals on *Wrecking Ball* [Electra/ Asylum 16854] have great top-to-bottom balance that gives the feeling that what you are hearing is her voice exactly as recorded by king-of-atmosphere producer Daniel Lanois. Harris' lower register is full and rich, while the higher notes refrain from sounding thin or weak. Cables like the Au24s, which properly execute echo, reverb, and decay, make this recording quite a listening experience, even if the recording isn't the last word in natural sound.

The psychological score of the Au24 cables is very high. What I mean by this is that these cables produce a sense of calm and unquestionable quality when you listen to them. I don't know if you've noticed this before, but some components and cables never let you relax when you are listening to music. Your mind constantly wanders over the sonic aspects instead of involving you in the performance. The Au24 cables are the opposite. They make you want to forget about the mechanical and analytical aspects of listening to music at home. You are free to let the music envelop your consciousness and forget about all the distracting technical details and audiophile paranoia and anxiety. I didn't really *care* if there were cables that were better in one way or another. I could just listen with the Audience cables without worrying about whether they were the best in the world. The music was compelling, and I just wanted to listen.

Single wire versus biwire

Audience provided both single-wire speaker cables with jumpers and a biwire set of speaker cables for evaluation. They believe that in many systems single-wire cables can sound better than biwire. Well, I can tell you without hesitation that in my system, with the Belles/Power Modules 350A amp and Vandersteen 3A Signature speakers, biwire was obviously the

better-sounding choice. Was the improvement worth almost double the cost? Probably not on an absolute scale, but once I experienced the difference between the single-wire cables and biwire, it was biwire or no wire for me. Keep in mind, however, that Vandersteen loudspeakers are designed from the outset to be optimized for biwire connections. There are subtle details in the crossover network that anticipate the use of biwire cables. This isn't the case with all speakers. Some speakers with biwire connections may have the connections because dealers demand them on "serious" speakers, whether the speaker actually benefits from the biwire connection or not. Single-wire connections should be compared to biwire connections whenever and wherever possible to determine whether your system is better served by one or the other.

How did the sound change? In my case, the biwire setup was more open, more transparent, more detailed, and more harmonically rich. The enjoyable characteristic of being sucked into the performance was enhanced. The single-wire setup seemed closed in, was less interesting, and left me feeling as though I was on the outside looking in—disengaged from the music.

Comparisons

It's always difficult to have around worthy comparably priced products for comparison when it comes to cables. I have Magnan Vi interconnects and Analysis Plus Copper Oval that bracket the Au24s in price. The Magnan Vi gives richer harmonic content, greater transparency, and a sense of delicacy and precision that the Au24 doesn't quite match. The Oval 9, in my system, is not as linear or well-balanced top to bottom as the Au24. The Au24 had more natural-sounding sibilants and a more integrated soundstage. The Oval 9 produced a wider soundstage with more detail compared to the Au24.

The Magnan Signature speaker cables are close in price to the single-wire Au24 speaker cable and more expensive than the biwire Au24 speaker cables. The Magnan Signature has a slight edge in harmonic richness and transparency, but is surprisingly similar to the Au24s in other areas of performance. The Magnan Signature is awkward to use with its 5"-wide copper ribbon conductors, while the Au24 is the epitome of easy-to-use speaker cables. Picking one of these cables over the other would be very difficult on the basis of sonic performance alone.

Conclusions

All of the Au24 cables are painless to use, though their appearance won't satisfy those with a music-hose fixation. The Audience Au24 interconnects provide excellent performance at a price point that's serious but not out of reach. They have been difficult to remove from my system—only a few of the more expensive cables I have on hand make satisfying substitutes. It's easy to recommend the Au24 interconnects to those looking for high-end performance without ultra high-end prices. The Audience Au24 speaker cables sit at a higher, more

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competitive price point, but they could be your ticket off the hamster wheel of constant cable and equipment changes. I used Au24 speaker cables with three different amplifiers, and they sounded essentially the same with all of them. I expected a cable so tiny to limit dynamics, but nothing like this happened—even with amplifiers up to 250Wpc. Also, spouses and decorators are going to find a small-diameter cable like this a lot more domestically acceptable than a music hose or other visually distracting cables too.

The Audience Au24 interconnects and speaker cable may not be the best cables money can buy, but they are commendably neutral and natural, and they help you forget about chasing the pot o' gold at the end of the audiophile rainbow—these are attributes that the best cables should embody. They are also characteristics I value highly, so the Audience Au24 interconnects and speaker cables get a hearty recommendation from me.

Company Info

Audience Au24 Interconnects and Speaker Cables

Price: Interconnects, \$418 USD per pair single-ended, \$776 per pair balanced; speaker cables, \$965 per pair single wire, \$1632 per pair biwire.

Warranty: Lifetime.

Audience

1525 Brian Place

Escondido, CA 92025

Phone: (800) 565-4390, (760) 743-1997

Fax: (760) 743-2192

E-mail: ed@audience-av.com

Website: www.audience-av.com

Audience responds:

Thank you for the review of our Au24 cables. I doubt I could have described our cables better. Good job of relating the product to the readers. I would like to comment on a couple of points.

First, while the Au24s are designed for the lowest possible inductance and capacitance, it is important to note that tuning a cable for the lowest possible eddy currents also has the effect of balancing the inductance and capacitance ratio for optimum audio performance. Years ago, the Bell telephone companies found that using "load coils" spaced at specific distances along a telephone line balanced the LC values and kept the frequency response closer to flat. This also improves the overall phase response or group delay. Some cables are known for low capacitance and others for low inductance. We find that it is important to keep both values low, but the proper balance may be more important.

Also, you are correct in your finding that the Vandersteen 3A's sound better biwired. The Vandersteens seem to be different in this respect. Steve McCormack was the first person to bring this to our attention. I think it is important to note that most speakers sound better single wired. We have offered many customers the option of trying it both ways before purchasing. Nearly all of them preferred the single-wired option when using our jumpers. The following link offers some interesting insights on biwiring:

www.sonicdesign.se/biwire.html

Thank you once again for the insightful interpretation of the Au24 cables. Explaining the design concepts of a complex product is an important service to readers and is too often overlooked or ignored completely.

Sincerely,

Richard Smith
Audience