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ELECTRONICALLY REPRINTED FROM JULY/AUGUST 2015

## EQUIPMENT REPORT

# Audience Au24 SE USB Cable

No Compromise

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**A**udience is an interesting company. Although this 18-year-old firm offers signal cables, AC power cords, AC power conditioners, and speakers, it doesn't easily fit into any of those particular niches. Audience brings products to market only when it believes it can contribute something unique—no matter the category. Take its 1+1 loudspeaker, for example. With two 3" full-range drivers in a bipole configuration, dual side-firing 3.5" passive radiators, and no crossover, the 1+1 is not your typical speaker. Yet its combination of midrange clarity, transparency, resolution, and naturalness of timbre is sublime.

Audience's new Au24 SE USB cable is similarly distinctive—and similarly impressive. The culmination of nearly two years of development, the Au24 SE breaks new ground in USB cable performance, in my experience.

The first thing you'll notice is that the Au24 SE has two jacketed sets of conductors rather than one. One set carries the signal, and the other, the power. The data conductors are shielded silver-coated OCC copper wires with Teflon insulation. The power conductors are also shielded and made from OCC copper wire with polypropylene insulation. This separation of signal and power conductors is reportedly key to the Au24 SE's performance. The Au24 is available with either one or two USB-A connectors at the source end. In the single-connector version, the power and signal conductors are joined at the USB connector. In the double-connector version, data and power are sent from two different USB busses for greater isolation. I evaluated the dual-connector version.

The Au24 SE is a super-premium design with a premium price: \$945 for a meter with two USB connectors, and \$895 for the single-connector version. Like other products in the Audience catalog, the Au24 SE is intended to deliver uncompromised performance.

I listened to the dual-connector Au24 SE in the link between a MacBook Pro running iTunes/Pure Music and a Berkeley Alpha USB USB-to-AES/EBU converter. This then fed a Berkeley Alpha Reference Series DAC via an AudioQuest AES/EBU digital interconnect. Amplifiers were Soudation 701 monoblocks driving Magico Q7 loudspeakers through MIT Oracle cable. In other words, this is a reference-quality system that lays bare every other link in the chain.

I've listened to a number of top-end USB cables, but none approaches the Audience in sheer naturalness of timbre. The Au24 has an extremely smooth, rich, and liquid rendering of tone color that is a welcome departure from the many USB cables that impart a synthetic, "plastic" character to the sound. Midrange textures through the Au24 SE are rich, dense, dark, complex—even voluptuous. The

tendency for USB to sound a bit mechanical and artificial is replaced by an organic flow and ease with the Au 24 SE in the system. Similarly, the treble is the antithesis of bright, hard, forward, and thin. The top octaves never call attention to themselves; the treble sounds like a natural part of an instrument's timbre rather than a separate component.

I also greatly enjoyed the Au 24 SE's rendering of space and depth. The overall perspective is a bit laid-back, with the presentation taking a step behind the speakers. Concomitant with this relaxed perspective is tremendous depth, expansiveness, and holographic imaging. Instruments within this space are beautifully delineated and defined, surrounded by a richly reverberant field. These qualities were particularly vivid on the 176.4kHz/24-bit Reference Recordings files. Although I've heard these recordings many times, the Au24 SE revealed an even larger and more dimensional spatial perspective.

The Au24 SE's bass is spectacular. The bottom end is extended and powerful, but what makes it so satisfying is the Au24 SE's warmth and richness through the midbass and upper-bass. This quality provides a solid tonal foundation for midrange textures, which partly explains the density of tone color mentioned earlier. The Au24 doesn't bleach or thin the upper bass and lower mids, a quality that contributes to this cable's warmth and texture. Think of a bass clarinet's rich "chocolatey" timbre and you'll have a good impression of the Au24 SE's overall character.

Despite the laid-back spatial presentation and tonal warmth, the Au24 SE is not lacking in resolution. All the fine details are there, but presented in a subtle rather than hyped way. It's the type of presentation that doesn't sound highly resolved at first, but the more you listen, the more you're drawn into the subtleties of the musical performance. The Au24 SE's resolution is achieved by revealing nuances of expression, not sonic fireworks. It's a sophisticated and refined sound that fosters an intimacy with the music and encourages long listening sessions—always a good sign.

Frankly, there's nothing to fault in the Au24 SE. Many USB cables—as with everything else in audio—force you to make trade-offs; this cable has better resolution while another may have greater smoothness and ease. The Audience cable seemingly does it all; it is convincingly superior in every sonic criterion. The Au24 SE is priced at the very top end of the scale, but if you want a no-compromise USB cable, look no further. **tas**



## SPECS & PRICING

**Type:** Dual-conductor USB cable

**Price:** \$895 (single connector); \$945 (dual connector)

**AUDIENCE**

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