



Audience

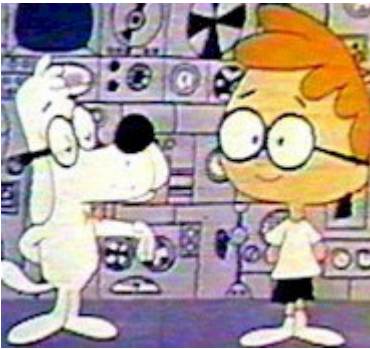
Au24 Cable System

reviewed by Greg Weaver

Cognitive Dissonance

This had to be a mistake; I mean the box looked like one for a small pizza. Though it was labeled "Loudspeaker Cable - 2.5m bi-wire pair," at 2 ¼" by 13 ¾" by 14 ½," the unassuming white box from Audience weighed just a few pounds. The last set of bi-wire loudspeaker cables I received had arrived in a package over 10 times that volume and weight! A still smaller 2 ¼" by 6 ½" by 8 ¾" box, also weighing next to nothing, was labeled "Balanced Audio Interconnect Cable—1.5 meter pair." This was surely some faux pas, and a large one at that. Yet when I opened the diminutive packages, they revealed their extremely thin (1/8" diameter) black cables that were in fact terminated in a fashion as to be consistent with what was claimed on the package label.

Although I knew from that moment this cable evaluation would be interesting, I had no idea that my experiences with the Audience Au24 products would completely change how I listened to cables from that fateful day forward.



"Sherman, set the Way-Back machine for..."

My fascination with wire in general, and loudspeaker cable in particular, commenced nearly three decades ago. Even then, there were two distinct camps; objectivists (or measurers) and the subjectivists (or listeners). While I have always found measurements to be useful as a starting point, my empirical experiences have left me leaning toward subjectivism overall. The reasons are simple and clear. I have always been able to hear things that cannot be circumscribed *exclusively* by measurements. I have long believed that we most likely suffer from a combination of obstacles when we try to rely solely on measurements; insufficient granularity with our current measurement tools or techniques and/or we aren't necessarily looking for/at the germane attributes.

Something many younger audiophiles will not know is that in those early days it was standard procedure for a "stereo" shop to include a length of 18 gauge "zip cord" with your new speaker purchase. Once you said, "I'll take 'em," the salesman would ask you how much speaker wire you needed, disappear into the service shop, warehouse or store room, measure off that amount, cut it, coil it up and hand it to you along with your receipt—free.

For the next step along the cable upgrade path, though dealers continued to include zip cord free, they began to offer an *upgrade* to 14, or even 12, gauge cord for something on the order of \$.20 a foot initially. But it was in 1977, when Monster Cable burst upon the scene, that my cable quest became a formalized expedition.

When introduced, a 10 foot pair of Monster Cable speaker cables (they didn't make interconnects yet!) sold for around \$40, or 10 times the cost of "typical" speaker wire of the same length! Forty bucks could secure an awful lot of music in those days! I can't speak for all of us who share this hobby, but to me, the equipment is merely a necessary means to an end, the music. So blowing that much music buying power on something almost everyone acknowledged would make no difference was not an easy choice.

But I simply had to know. Semi reluctantly, I bought my first blister packaged pair of Monster Cable's. This was clearly a new approach; shining sturdy gold pin terminations, thick yet highly supple stranded conductors, all in a clear vinyl jacket (rather than brown, black or white), permitting you to view the bright, high-purity copper inside. And the sound! Though I had replaced a supposedly passive link in the audio chain, what I heard indicated I had certainly not wasted my money. Immediately evident was extended, clearer treble, deeper, more defined bass, improved vibrancy in the mid-band and greater nuance and detail in every aspect of the recording. Thought I didn't spend any time thinking about wire, its properties or construction at that point, I had proven to myself, beyond any reservation, that cables made a difference; the game had begun.

Over the next 10 years, I examined most commercial offerings and, after I exhausted that route, I moved on to numerous D.I.Y. projects, many of my own design. I had futzed with bare stranded wire, solid core wire, multi-gauge configurations, "Litz" wire, tubular arrangements, parallel multi solid core wire, golden ratio wire, Rectangular Solid Core™ constructions, even different types of flat cables, including ribbons. One of the best cables I tinkered together in those DIY days made use of a tubular Litz construction for the plus run and a twisted pair solid core return. The result was sonic heaven; ask anybody who heard my modified Acoustat 2+2's back then.

But by the mid to late nineties, as both material sciences and construction techniques had gathered speed (i.e., "single crystal" conductors, network designs, etc.), I found that I could no longer come up with affordable D.I.Y. cable designs that bested these new and much pricier offerings. For under a hundred bucks, my D.I.Y.'s could kick butt on most of the more typical commercial offerings, some costing up to 5 or 10 times that price. But I found that I could no longer keep pace with the cost-no-object designs. Fast forward to today.

Thin Black Lines

My initial thought when seeing the Au24 designation was that this top-of-the-line product from Audience was yet another in the growing list of cables utilizing gold conductors - Au is the atomic symbol for that precious metal. Over numerous communications with Audience CEO and President, John McDonald, as well as Richard Smith, the Director of Product Development at Audience, I came to learn that the Au24's conductive materials are not drawn from gold. Rather, they are fashioned from OHNO continuous case single crystal copper, now a virtual staple in the high-end cable business, and for good reason.

My assumption, based on their slight diameter and moderate stiffness, that the products employed a coaxial geometry proved correct, with the OCC copper cased inside polypropylene insulation and a cross-linked polyethylene jacket material. Richard says that the Au24 products are designed to optimize the *ratio* of inductance to capacitance (L:C) to allow for the lowest possible eddy current resistance at the specific frequencies, rather than to just have the lowest inductance or capacitance achievable. This brings us to the fulcrum of the Audience design—eddy current.

An eddy current is a swirling current set up in a conductor in response to a changing magnetic field. Following Lenz's law, the current swirls in such a way as to create a magnetic field opposing the change; to do this in a conductor, electrons swirl in a plane perpendicular to the magnetic field. This magnetic field grows and collapses as the signal varies through the conductor. As the field collapses around the conductor, it induces an opposing voltage back into itself. This opposing voltage creates the eddy currents within the conductor.

It is this late arriving, opposing voltage that disrupts the original signal by inducing a time-smearing artifact. The argument is that these effects are clearly audible, and I would have to concur. Richard suggests cables that sound "detailed" or "powerful in the bass" are usually victims of high eddy currents. His contention is that eddy currents, especially when combined with high capacitance, can cause a cable to sound overly "relaxed." He also asserts that the particular type of coloration caused by eddy currents is dependent on the materials, construction techniques and the geometric configuration of the cable.

Another unique adjunct with Audience cables is the 2 cc single serving size tube of Caig DeoxIT D100 contact cleaner with each cable. Though it would seem obvious that clean and solid connections would have an enormous impact on the resultant sound, you would be surprised at just how few take advantage of readily available, highly effective, and terribly affordable methods for maximizing this constituent of their system. I won't digress further here, but I have addressed this subject repeatedly over the years. My hat is off to Audience for the inclusion of a \$5 tube of assurance with every cable.

While the accompanying product literature goes to great lengths to beseech the novice user of an Au24 cable (the entire line, in fact) to not be negatively influenced by its insignificant physical appearance, it was all just so much preaching to the choir. I have *long* known that dimension alone cannot forecast the characteristic sound of any cable.

Taken to its essence, bigger isn't *necessarily* better. For an overview on loudspeaker cable characteristics, you may find more than you want to know at my reprinted 1992 Positive Feedback essay, *Loudspeaker Cable: Simple Passive Connection or Complex Dynamic Component*. Low DC resistance can be relatively unimportant, taken on its own. As music is, after all, a complex AC signal, what is more important to this discussion is the AC resistance of a cable, or its characteristic impedance. Scores of those large diameter/low DC resistance speaker cables have excessively high characteristic impedance—many ranging from 100 to over 600 ohms, with some even measuring in the 1000's of ohms. While the Au24 cables are only 4 mm (1/8") in diameter and do offer a slightly higher DC resistance than the garden-hose variety speaker cable, their characteristic impedance is a low 16 ohms. This permits musical signals, from the deepest of bass to the most complex upper octave overtones, to pass through this cable with less actual impedance than those cables possessing *only* a lower DC resistance.

And think about the positive aspect of the size issue. Though slightly on the stiff side, their 1/8 inch (4 mm) diameter means that they are both easily routed and ridiculously lightweight. The upside here should be easy to recognize. Their visual impact is minimized and they are remarkably easy to install and route in the typically tight spaces behind today's component stands.

Another close-to-home issue the included Au24 product literature broached was that "few people" are aware of just how strong a role the cable construction geometry plays in its resultant sound. Once again, I was already on that wagon; have been since 1990 (see the above referenced loudspeaker cable article—again). I have found that the type of physical construction used can make *at least* as large a contribution to the resultant cables sound as do the quality of the conductors themselves. See? I told you this would get interesting!

The Au24 product literature touches on the honest attempt at keeping it simple. Fancier, more massive, more impressive looking connectors and layers of cosmetic sleeving might have made the cable look more expensive, and thereby, more marketable. Richard reports, however, that every time he tried such things it resulted in degraded sound. He went on to exclaim how truly amazed he was at the sonically detrimental effects caused by bulky, high-end connectors and decorative sleeving. As a result, Audience uses an exclusive connector, minimalist in design, with excellent grip and low contact resistance, on all cables requiring RCA terminations. I have noted and commented on this very property in a number of my DIY cable articles.

One last technical note I need to make, this one about run in time. The literature states that the Au24 cables begin to improve after 2 to 3 hours playing time, but that they will continue to improve for approximately 50 hours. I can verify this assertion, and will say that in my system, the magic commenced almost right out of the box. By the end of the first several hours of listening I knew something quite special was happening. By the end of the first week, it was full on glorious.

After moving from my four-box digital playback system to the inveigling McCormack UDP-1, I no longer had need of the Au24 digital cable, which was the first Audience cable I auditioned. However, the next move in *Audience'ing* my system would be the replacement of the single ended interconnects. This change wrought more of the characteristics I had so happily noted with the installation of just the digital cable; more complexity to harmonic texture, greater clarity, darker backgrounds and increased rhythmic coherence. The change was without question for the positive.

My next step would to replace the 6-meter balanced interconnect between my preamp and amplifier. Before installing the Au24, I wanted to try out the larger diameter and considerably less expensive Conductor and was, in just a few minutes and a word, confounded. With a retail of just \$350, this 6 meter XLR terminated Conductor slaughtered my previous \$1600 reference, particularly in the areas of bass definition and timing. Given what I had heard from the Au24's to this point, I was sure there was still more to be realized, but expect a more detailed report on the way affordable Conductor in the future.

Inserting the 6 meter balanced Au24 between preamplifier and power amplifier, an enhancement in almost every musical category occurred. This ride was remarkable! No more foolin' around, it was time for the full Audience, so in went the Au24 bi-wire loudspeaker cables. To be honest, I have to admit that I was prepared for the possibility of retrograde performance with their insertion, as the bi-wired loudspeaker set I was using was the finest I had heard to date and carried a \$3500 retail. Well, I don't know why, but I was surprised yet again. These skinny, lightweight black cables kicked the stuffin' out of my monstrous, heavy, expensive bi-wires—and I was the leader of the design team that developed them! I have to say that, though it was a pleasant surprise as my system has never sounded more musical, it was somewhat unnerving. Once the whole system was Au24'ed and properly run in, this is what I noted...

Making Music

First and foremost, their timing is near flawless... I can hear no obvious disparity in arrival times across the audible spectrum. Everything arrives coherently, yielding an unbelievable sense of "pace" and "drive." To that end, they have an almost organic balance, meaning they are the most natural and musical sounding cables I can ever recall hearing at home. No other cables I have experienced in my system have ever released the music with such remarkable realism of measure and beat. You just want to get up and dance.

Bass with the all Au24 system is not so much deeper as it is fuller and more harmonically abundant. This results in a more notable "heft" in the bottom-most octave, with no smearing or bloating. It offers greater individuality to the 20-80Hz bandwidth, providing remarkable enhancement to both pitch definition and timbre.

Vocals are more specific—in both size and in their sense of "body." To make a visual comparison, it is as though the performers have stepped out of a pall of smoke that was previously clouding the venue. This is NOT because of a more forward presentation; it is truly a more "refined" view. Mic'ing techniques are MUCH more obvious, as are venue signa-

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Strings, brass, winds, cymbals, et. al., are more vivid in tone. Guitar strings are more clearly discernable. Gut more "guttier." Fingering work cleaner—more "in the spotlight" in its execution. Brass and reed instruments have more of that signature "bite" and more complex underlying overtones. Cymbals have a "creamier" bronzy sound, much more like the real thing, again pointing to a more correctly recreated harmonic texture.

Those who see staging and imaging attributes as merely "artifacts" of stereo recording haven't been 5th row center at an orchestral performance or had a table near the stage for a James Cotton show. They probably haven't attended much live music, in fact. Spatial cues with the Au24 are rendered both more openly and with unmistakable delineation. Q-Sound effects on recordings like Roger Waters' guilty treasure guilty treasure, *Amused to Death* or Pink Floyd's *Pulse*, offer more pronounced locations, both in terms of lateral placement through the listening room and in the reconstitution of that disembodied voice (be it human or instrument). The size and scale is more lifelike and less "sound-effect," focus is more precise and the overall sense of body is greatly augmented.

Backgrounds are quieter, especially on older analog recordings. Micro dynamic events are rendered with superior detail and in more realistic scale, and thereby take on a greater musical significance, most likely attributable to the enhanced sense of the "darker" background. There is a general sense of ease and organic-ness to the overall presentation; it is akin to the sound of good analog in that respect. Whether that is due to an overall coherence the cable offers, or perhaps a very good impedance match, I can't say. But, it offers a more nuanced presentation, much closer to live music than I have had with ANY other cable I've auditioned; and believe me, I've played with more than a few.

Overall, it was demonstrably apparent to me that I had significantly moved away from an electro-mechanical system and closer to a musical event. While this cable neither highlights nor restrains any specific bandwidths, it does seem to offer a more detailed view at the same time that it renders more harmonic complexity and musical richness. Relaxation and involvement are both heightened. That to me is a paradox, as I cannot point to a significant number of other products that can do *both* those things at the same time. It is a fundamentally *musical* change, not just a sonic difference... Welcome to the Audience, my friends.

Have a Cigar...

I would like to speak to the company itself, Audience, LLC. Both the principal players have grown to capture my respect and admiration. In fact, I awarded my first ever Positive Feedback Online Writers Choice Award to them in December 2004. Every Audience product I have experienced, budget or pinnacle cable product, the inventive new adeptResponse AC conditioner and the Auric Illuminator disc enhancement treatment, has moved me decisively closer to my beloved music. This is a company to both support and admire. My hat is off to Richard Smith and John McDonald, two of the most professional and personable industry members I have the pleasure of knowing.

Though my initial assumption proved wrong about the nature of the conductive material, it did prove correct about their precious musical nature. Installing the Audience Au24 cables in my system, it is as if I have uncovered the musical mother lode. The nuances and balance the Au24s communicate are so immediately apparent and welcomed that I am completely taken by their music making ability. I have never noted a *greater* step toward musicality with ANY other cable product at any price. This may sound clichéd, but it is as if I am hearing my music collection anew with this splendid rebel from Audience. **Greg Weaver**

