

GROUP TEST

hi-finews
GROUP TEST

Hi-Fi News is no stranger to cable reviews and was the first to offer an authoritative account of 'USB cable sound' in 2013. Now, another ten brands are featured and all auditioned blind...

USB CABLES
£10-£999

TESTED THIS MONTH

AUDIOQUEST FOREST	£35	LIGHT HARMONIC LIGHTSPEED	£999
CHORD SIG. TUNED ARAY	£400	NORDOST BLUE HEAVEN	£265
DIGITAL MUSIC BOX LINUS	£495	SIGNAL PROJECTS LYNX REFERENCE	£590
FURUTECH GT2 PRO	£210	STEREOLAB BLACK CAT SILVERSTARI	£139
IN-AKUSTIK PREMIUM USB	£10	WIREWORLD SILVER STARLIGHT	£580



Cutting-edge gear, cherry-picked by the Hi-Fi News editor



The pinnacle of sound quality within its peer group



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This time last year, *HFN* ran a ground-breaking group test revealing audible and measurable differences between USB cables. While every seasoned audiophile knows that different interconnect and loudspeaker cables will impact on the sound of a hi-fi system, this was the first time that USB – a synchronised, packet-based digital interconnect standard – was also shown to be cable-sensitive.

By way of anniversary, this month's group test pitches another ten USB cables into the mix, our measurements once again illustrating clear differences in the 'shape' of the data waveform arriving at the USB DAC [for more see my Opinion page in *HFN* Jul '13].

USB SPECIALISTS

Ten cable brands are represented here, but the presence of very new and specialist contenders reflects a certain maturity in this market. The lengths supplied varied from 1m to 2m according to the availability of stock, so please take note of this when comparing the prices. Some manufacturers offer lengths as short

as 0.5m while the USB standard specifies 5m as the maximum.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

For our subjective comparison we chose a system that would keep the signal path as short and as 'digital' as possible. A battery-powered Sony Vaio laptop running foobar2000 served as our front-end, its USB output driving the USB input of a Devialet 800 monoblock amp combination and pair of B&W 802D loudspeakers. Devialet's SAM bass optimisation regime was engaged throughout [see *HFN* Jun '14]. (You can see the room/set-up by visiting www.hifinews.co.uk/news/article/meet-the-team;-paul-miller/9952.)

As the only change to the system was its USB cable, our listening tests were necessarily performed at a fixed level. Any perceived change in 'loudness' was therefore a direct reflection of the 'sound' of the USB cable itself. Our listeners included *HFN* regular John Bamford, and all were unaware of the names or types of cables in the test or, indeed, of which cable was being auditioned at any one time. The results of each listening session were cross-

referenced to verify the consistency of our opinion.

QUALITY QUARTET

For auditioning we focused on four pieces of music. Two tracks were rips from CDs: the title track from *Just A Little Lovin'*, Shelby Lynne's 2008 collection of songs made famous by Dusty Springfield [UMG/Lost Highway 0602517448254] and 'No Sanctuary Here' taken from Chris Jones' *Roadhouses & Automobiles* released by Germany's Stockfisch Records in 2003 [SFR 357.6027.2]. We also played a 176.4kHz/24-bit file taken from one of Reference Recordings' 'HRX' DVD-ROMs: the opening *Non Allegro* from Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* performed by the Minnesota Orchestra under Eiji Oue [RR HR-96]. And because we found it so telling the last time we auditioned USB cables, we again played the 2009 44.1kHz/24-bit stereo remaster of 'Come Together' from The Beatles' *Abbey Road* album. But how obvious would the differences in USB interconnects really be? Read on...

REVIEWS & LAB TESTS BY PAUL MILLER

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Premium USB
Made by: In-akustik GmbH & Co. KG, Germany
Supplied by: Hi-Fi Network Ltd, Gloucs.
Telephone: 01285 643088
Web: www.in-akustik.com; www.hifi-network.com
Price: £10/2m

AUDIO
FILE

Light Harmonic Lightspeed
Made by: Light Harmonic LLC, California, USA
Supplied by: Anthem AV Solutions, East Sussex
Telephone: 01825 750 858
Web: www.lightharmonic.com; www.anthemavs.co.uk
Price: £999/1.6m

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In-akustik Premium USB

Premium USB says In-akustik, 'transmits data quickly and reliably'. In practice, the data rate rather depends on the standard, which for USB 2.0 means up to 480Mbps, a pipe well in excess of what's required for 24-bit/192kHz audio for example. The cable itself is far from premium priced at £7.65/1m, £9.95/2m, £11.50/3m and £14.95/5m, all terminated in gold-plated A and B plugs with moulded anthracite-coloured shells and a matching PVC jacket.

As we discovered during our review of the LS-1603 speaker cable [HFN Jun '14], In-akustik takes precision

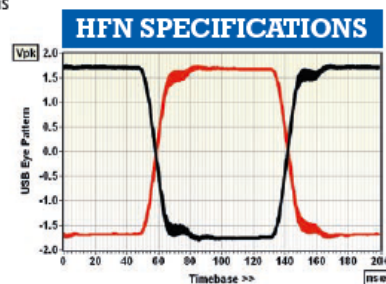
cable manufacturing to heart, so it's no surprise to see this by-the-book USB cable deliver a sharp data waveform, impressively free of deterministic jitter and offering a fast 10.8nsec risetime [see Graph].

TIDY TIMBRES
Our listeners voted this a 'very tidy-sounding cable', for while Chris Jones' voice lacked that last vestige of energy and gusto, the ambience of the recording was still accurately recalled. Similarly, any suggestion of sibilance was kept firmly in check.

While the deepest bass was generally underwhelming there were instances when –

whamm – it would really kick, as in the driving line to The Beatles remaster. Here also, Lennon's voice was well focused but the bite of the guitar was a little muted as was the top-end energy of Ringo's percussion.

Shelby Lynne sounded composed, her voice detailed, the cymbals shimmering, but we still couldn't escape the feeling the performance was just a little recessed, a little too relaxed. If Premium isn't in the top drawer it's still preferable to some costlier cables here and at this price, well, what's not to recommend.



Sound Quality: 75%

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