

# 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 SILVERSTAR!	£139
IN-AKUSTIK PREMIUM USB	£10	WIREWORLD SILVER STARLIGHT	£580



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



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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](http://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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# Chord Company Signature Tuned Array



Taking its cues from Chord's 'tuned' Array Sarum USB cable, this Signature version also employs four separate but identical conductors for the differential data pair, +5V and ground. The coaxial conductors are heavily silver-plated, insulated with a superior PTFE dielectric and separately shielded with a high-density double braid.

All four conductors are gently twisted together and held in a woven black jacket and while this geometry may deviate slightly from the USB standard, the accurate waveshape and fast 11.9nsec risetime [see Graph] suggest its characteristic impedance is

not unduly influenced, at least at these data rates/frequency.

## MATURE MUSIC

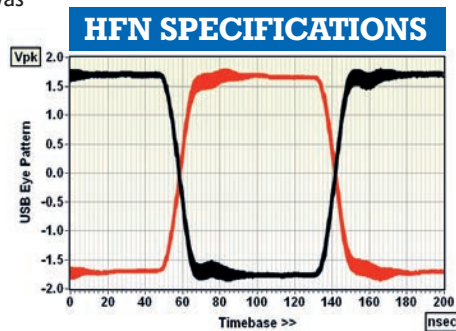
From the outset, it was patently clear we were auditioning a very 'mature' sounding cable, possessed of great control – delivering energy and passion when required as slickly as it revealed subtle details.

The limited bandwidth of The Beatles' remaster did nothing to dissuade us from the fun conveyed by this tightly integrated quartet, the vocals neatly counterpointing Ringo's rattling percussion.

The percussive intro to Shelby Lynne's 'Just A Little Lovin'' also sparked a

cavernous acoustic, her voice slightly more forward with a 'headphone' intimacy that spoke to each and every listener. Her enunciation was very precise – tidy but convincing and free of the fuzzy quality that had infused the In-akustik and Furutech. Indeed, it was the only time in this test where her voice was genuinely 'breathy'.

Chris Jones enjoyed a similar vocal presence, the rich sound 'talking' so very expressively to our audience and earning the highest rating in this year's USB cable test.



Sound Quality: 85%



# GROUP TEST VERDICT

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With the experience of last year's USB cable group test already under our collective hat, we began 2014's digital voyage with a degree of expectation. And we were not disappointed, for the differences between this crop of proprietary USB cables were no less audible. The Linus USB from Digital Musical Box and the Signal Projects Lynx Reference were arguably the most 'different' sounding cables here, and certainly the least conformant on test, but our panellists' concluded they were both 'distinctive but ultimately relentless', the Lynx marginally less oppressive.

## TRADE-OFFS

Furutech's GT2 Pro also proved up-beat but with an illuminating quality that highlighted percussive details and studio reverb. It can sound a little unrefined, perhaps, but that's the trade-off. By contrast, Inakustik's budget-priced Premium USB is a bit of a smoothie. What you gain in civility and composure you lose in the liveliness of both extreme bass and treble. The music is not quite as colourful as possible, but 'Premium' could be perfect for taming the over-exuberant budget system.

There's nothing 'budget' about Wireworld's Silver Starlight and it does offer an appropriately big if

slightly blowsy sound, lacking the focus and instrumental precision we enjoyed with other cables here. It did fare rather better with our classical selection, it must be said.

## SHINE A LIGHT!

Extravagantly-priced, Light Harmonic's LightSpeed cable sounded very, very tidy, rendering the likes of Chris Jones with a dry clarity. Similarly, The Beatles remaster was delineated like no other in this test, Lennon and McCartney's voices revealed in seemingly explicit detail while Ringo's drum-work was pristine. This is very nearly a 'great cable' but where is the emotion?

Stereolab's Black Cat Silverstar! certainly 'emoted' more convincingly and revealed what was described as the 'big musical picture' really well indeed, even if it didn't let us right into the fine detail of the performance. Recommended, nonetheless, as is the more affordable Forest from Audioquest.

## THE CREAM RISES

The latter has a vibrant energy that held our attention and kept our feet tapping. It's a lively-sounding cable but one that can withdraw slightly in the face of the busiest material, sounding slightly sat-on and compressed. It's a lot of cable for the money though.

We also appreciated the quiet poise offered by Nordost's Blue Heaven. Guitars had body and substance while percussion typically brought a refreshing sparkle and air to the

richest-sounding tracks. Lacking only that last drop of very deep bass, Nordost's Blue Heaven is otherwise a superior USB cable, delivering a very neutral, measured and inherently musical performance.

## UNEXPECTED WINNER

Chord's flagship Signature Tuned Aray cable sounds richly detailed and very expressive and while on first exposure it may seem to lack some 'bite', in practice there's no lack of colour or contrast to its richly hued performance. The timpani from Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* enjoyed a thunderous energy and strings thrilled just as the percussion sparkled in the depths of the soundstage. Vocals had a wonderfully breathy quality too, but was this necessarily the best 'in the round' USB cable we'd heard?

Returning to Chord's own USB SilverPlus (last year's winner) suggested not, for this latter cable – still a current item at just

£55/1.5m – was arguably better integrated still, detailed, insightful and inherently musical. The USB standard has not changed and, quite frankly, neither has our choice of favourite USB cable. ☺

'Chord's Tuned Aray offers a richly hued performance'



**ABOVE:** Nordost's Blue Heaven 2.0 – its music 'has a natural flow, free of grain'



**ABOVE:** Chord's top-of-the-line Signature Tuned Aray – voted the best USB in 2014!

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