

hi-finews GROUP TEST

Hi-Fi News is no stranger to cable reviews but we've resisted the temptation to entertain the idea of 'USB cable sound' until now. Ten key brands are featured and all auditioned blind...

USB CABLES £18-£139 (£6.5K)

TESTED THIS MONTH

ATLAS CABLES ELEMENT	£48	KIMBER KABLE B BUS CU	£60
AUDIOQUEST CARBON	£139	QED PERFORMANCE GRAPHITE	£18
CHORD USB SILVERPLUS	£55	TRANSPARENT CABLE USB	£95
CRYSTAL ABSOLUTE DREAM	£6.5K	VERTERE PULSE D-FI USB	£70
FURUTECH ADL FORMULA 2	£82	WIREWORLD STARLIGHT 7	£125



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



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Every seasoned audiophile knows that different interconnect and loudspeaker cables will impact on the sound of a hi-fi system. Linear (S/PDIF) digital interconnects, even optical types, have been demonstrated to have an effect too. But synchronised, packet-based digital interconnect standards like USB? Never say never.

In true *Hi-Fi News* fashion we sought to discover for ourselves in as objective and repeatable a fashion as we might sensibly devise. We have measurements too, illustrating clear differences in the 'shape' of the data waveform arriving at the USB DAC [for more on this, see my Opinion, p98].

MATURE MARKET

Ten key cable brands are represented here (Crystal Cable's Absolute Dream USB is included as a cost-no-object comparison), reflecting a certain maturity in this market, although the lengths supplied varied from 1m to 2m according to the availability of stock. 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 Sony Vaio laptop running foobar2000 served as our front-end, Thesycon v1.56 drivers yielding an asynchronous USB connection with Musical Fidelity's new M1 S-DAC. This served as an active USB-to-S/PDIF converter only, the coaxial output driving the digital input of a Devialet D-Premier ADH amplifier. (You can see the room/setup 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 [see p99], 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: 'Hotel California' from The Eagles' 1994 live set *Hell Freezes Over* [Geffen UICY-1059] and 'You Look Good To Me' taken from the Oscar Peterson Trio's classic *We Get Requests* released on Verve in 1964 [FIM reissue using JVC's K2 mastering, LIM K2HD 032].

We also played a 24-bit/192kHz file of the Helge Lien Trio, downloaded from the highresaudio website, the title track of the album *Natsukashi* [Ozella Music OZ 036 CD]. Most telling of all, it transpired, was the opening track from The Beatles' *Abbey Road* album, the rousing 'Come Together' – this from the 24-bit/44.1kHz 2009 stereo remasters collection available on USB stick. But how obvious would the differences in USB interconnects really be? Read on...

REVIEWS & LAB TESTS BY PAUL MILLER

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GROUP TEST

Element USB
 Made by: Atlas (Scotland) Ltd
 Supplied by: Atlas Cables
 Telephone: 01563 572666
 Web: www.atlascables.com
 Price: £47.50/2m

**AUDIO
 FILE**

Carbon USB
 Made by: Audioquest, California
 Supplied by: Audioquest UK
 Telephone: 01249 848 873
 Web: www.audioquest.com
 Price: £139/1.5m

Atlas Cables Element USB



Scotland is host to a few specialist hi-fi cable manufacturers but Atlas is the first to apply its know-how to a USB interconnect. Its Element cable employs twisted pairs of silver-plated OF-copper strands for the differential data and power/ground conductors with screening between the respective cores. An additional coaxial screen surrounds the cable within the jacket.

Atlas claims that its gold-plated connectors have been 'engineered to keep characteristic impedance stable' and the 12.6nsec risetime for the sync pulses puts it bang in the middle of

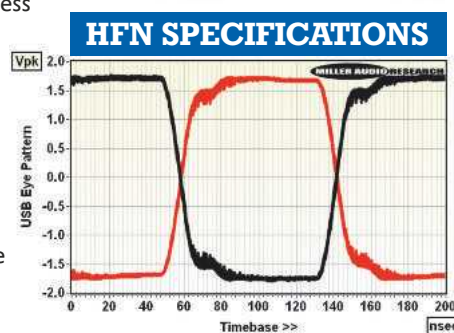
the group. Prices range from £35/0.5m up to £77.50/5m.

ADRENALIN RIDE
 'Whoa – this cable has some weight' remarked one listener as a steady drum-beat marked out the opening rhythm to the live 'Hotel California' track. Its soundstaging is not as three-dimensional as the Chord but it seems better balanced than either the Vertere or Wireworld, even if 'it's like someone has pressed the loudness button'.

How you'll respond to the Element's vivid expression will depend on your system and taste. If you like your music more adrenalin-fueled you'll be delighted. But if you prefer

a double-bass to sound naturally resonant, rather than 'contrasty' as we heard with the Oscar Peterson trio, then the Element may be less compelling. Percussion has great attack, the edges quick and colourful but it does have a touch of the 'Trinitron' brilliance about it.

The Beatles remasters certainly sounded full of energy but the soundstage was slightly flattened and the recording more obviously 'dated'. Element is a beautifully constructed cable but, in our system, it lacked total transparency.



Sound Quality: 75%



Audioquest Carbon USB



Midway through Audioquest's five-strong USB cable range is this 'Carbon' version which, fortunately, contains no graphite at all. It's probably named after the woven carbon fibre-esque jacket that clothes this fashionable cable.

The four A and B plug contacts are silver-plated and the conductors are all solid copper-core types, the pair that carry the differential data also silver-plated and insulated with a thicker HDPE dielectric than the +5V supply and ground conductors.

On the lab bench, our 1.5m sample offered a fast 11.9nsec risetime (only

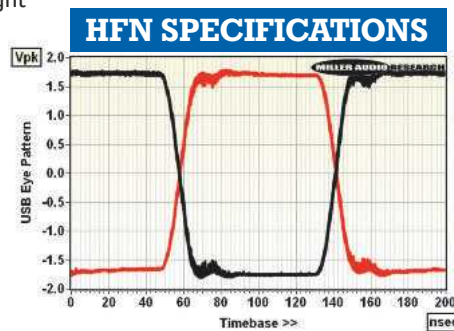
bettered by Crystal Cable's Absolute Dream) with low deterministic jitter [see eye pattern, opposite].

GRAPHIC GRAPHITE
 Auditioned after the fat-sounding Transparent cable, Audioquest's leaner and, well, evidently more 'transparent' presentation brought a fresher perspective to the music in play. This time it sounded as if The Eagles' guitarist was plucking those strings closer to the bridge than the neck, the sound full of life and vitality.

The triangle that announces Oscar Peterson's 'You Look Good To Me' now had a pure-sounding ring –

many of the more 'polite-sounding' cables had muted this metallic 'ting'. And, despite the age of the source, it also brought out the life, pace and youthful energy of The Beatles from their recent 24-bit remaster.

The 'speed' of the guitars, vocals and Ringo's effervescent percussion were traded for a slight loss in deep, resonant bass but unless you are using big floorstanders (or a sub) you'll likely be so carried along by the musical tide that you'll not notice.



Sound Quality: 80%



USB SilverPlus
 Made by: The Chord Company, Wiltshire
 Supplied by: The Chord Company
 Telephone: 01980 625700
 Web: www.chord.co.uk
 Price: £55/1.5m

AUDIO FILE

Absolute Dream USB
 Made by: Crystal Cable/IAH, Netherlands
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.crystalcable.com; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £6480/1m

GROUP TEST

Chord Company USB SilverPlus

There's quite a jump between Chord's entry-level SilverPlus at £45/0.75m and its high-end USB cables – the £400/1m Signature ARAY and £750/1m Sarum ARAY – but at least the baby of the range is in good company.

Chord uses gold-plated contacts and shells for its A and B connectors while the differential data pair employs silver-plated OF copper strands insulated with LDPE. The ensemble is fully screened, jacketed in a soft white PVC sleeve and complemented, aesthetically, by its blue and white moulded plug. Technically, SilverPlus offers a 13.5nsec risetime

(fractionally slower than other 1.5-2.0m types) but its waveshape shows little distortion [see eye pattern].

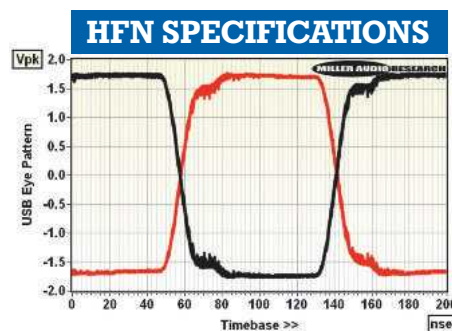
SUPER STEREO

In the event, the overwhelmingly positive reaction of our panel (on three separate occasions) put SilverPlus top-of-the-heap in the sanely-priced category. This is an extremely open-sounding cable – fresh, effusive and bubbling with detail without sounding forced, bright or in-your-face.

The atmosphere of The Eagles' live 'Hotel California' was extremely realistic. 'Did you hear that guy whistling way back there?', remarked

one listener admiringly. Chord's cable did the very same thing with Oscar Peterson's trio, creating a huge image without blowing the perspective of the piano, percussion and strings out of proportion.

In tonal balance, SilverPlus is a match for Kimber's Cu but brings with it a greater sense of spaciousness and transparency. Percussion has fantastic sparkle, a vivid life without a hint of brashness. And The Beatles' remasters? No longer a 'period' piece, this sounded like it was recorded yesterday.



Sound Quality: 85%



Crystal Cable Absolute Dream USB

Dreaming is about as far as most of us will ever get to owning a length of Crystal Cable's flagship USB cable. Each heavy metre comprises four coaxial 'solid-core' cables, the central conducting axis a single silver strand sheathed in two layers of Kapton and clamped within a PEEK (Polyether ether ketone) dielectric. This core is surrounded, in turn, by two peripheral braids composed of silver-plated 'monocrystal' copper strands and gold-plated monocrystal silver strands. Hence the price...

Inserted into the test rig, our 1m length of Absolute Dream showed the lowest

deterministic jitter and the fastest data edge risetime of 11.0nsec [see eye pattern].

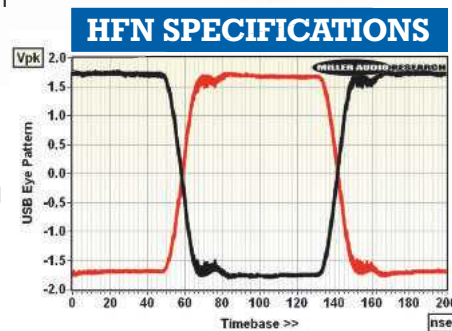
OUTRAGEOUS

As corny as it may appear, the most outrageously priced USB cable in our survey was, indeed, voted the 'best all-rounder' by our panel of blind listeners. We were greeted by realistic 'whoops, hollers and hand-claps' from the audience as the live 'Hotel California' burst into the room.

Don Henley's charismatic vocals were delightfully easy to discern 'almost like he's taken diction lessons' quipped one listener as we tapped our feet right through to the end of this very familiar track. In

essence, this cable offers the smooth, creamy lushness of the warmer-sounding cables and yet combines this with a spaciousness and the sparkle of the livelier sounding cables.

The crispness and delicacy of the cymbal work from Oscar Peterson's 'You Look Good To Me' was spectacular, the weight of the double-bass enhancing the huge width and depth of the soundstage. You could almost reach out and touch the atmosphere. Absolute Dream USB is well-named.



Sound Quality: 88%



GROUP TEST

ADL Formula 2
 Made by: Furutech Co. Ltd, Japan
 Supplied by: Sound Foundations
 Telephone: 01276 501 392
 Web: www.furutech.com
 Price: £82/1.8m

AUDIO FILE

B BUS Cu
 Made by: Kimber Kable, USA
 Supplied by: Russ Andrews Accessories Ltd
 Telephone: 01539 797300
 Web: www.kimber.com
 Price: £60/1.5m

Furutech ADL Formula 2



Constructed rather like a four-core version of one of its analogue interconnects, Furutech's Formula 2 USB cable also employs multistranded Alpha-OFC conductors, one 28-gauge pair for the differential data and a 24-gauge pair for ground and power. The data lines are distinguished by their silver-plating and superior HDPE dielectric and additional aluminium foil screen.

All four cores are shielded via a braid and inner foil wrap, although such arrangements are typically discouraged by EMI design guidelines (for full speed cables, at least) due to the series inductance of the

drain wire. Nevertheless we couldn't fault the build quality or termination of its 24k gold-plated USB connectors. Furutech's ADL Formula 2 is clearly built to last.

BASS TEXTURE

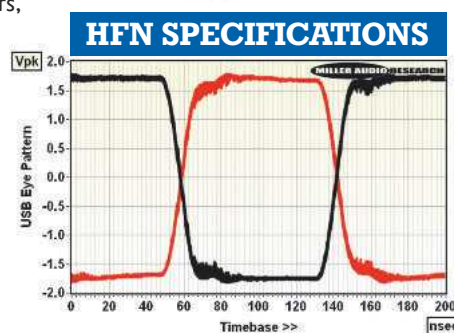
In terms of its very tidy musical presentation, its very well-balanced and comfortable sound, Furutech's ADL Formula 2 is a subjective match for Kimber's Copper. Neither cable provides an over-hyped bass, strident treble or exaggerated sense of drama.

By way of example, The Eagles' 'Hotel California' was eminently 'listenable' but neither was it especially

'live-sounding' – the audience air-brushed into the recesses of the soundstage.

Its bass, however, played directly into the hands of our resident B&W 802 monitors, allowing us to hear the subtlest differences in bass textures without sacrificing any weight or energy. As one listener remarked, 'It was easy to pitch the notes and describe the character of double-bass (Oscar Peterson), the ensemble working to deliver great musical intensity without sounding, well, intense.'

This is a good all-rounder at an agreeable price.



Sound Quality: 80%



Kimber Kable B BUS Cu



There are two cables in Kimber's USB range, both offered with a choice of either standard B or mini-B destination-end connectors. The cable appearance and geometry follows the USB rulebook to the letter, Kimber employing 'the largest gauge conductors possible under USB specification' (the USB 2.0 spec. cites 28AWG for the differential pair).

In this 'Copper' cable the conductors are also silver-plated and insulated in a superior HDPE dielectric. The plugs and contacts are gold-plated, and (detachable) ferrite EMI suppressors are clamped at either end. On

the bench, Kimber's 1.5m B BUS Cu offered a 12.4nsec risetime, the data waveform broadly undistorted.

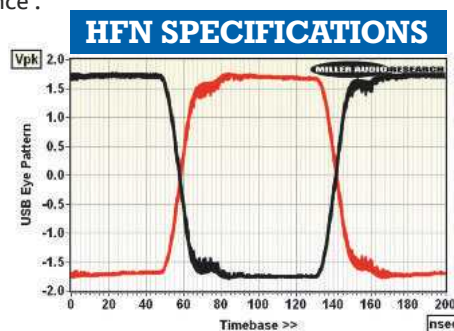
FOOT-TAPPING

From the outset, Kimber's Copper USB cable offered a very welcoming sound with no particular emphasis, and no damning flaw. Sure enough, there was slightly less bite to The Eagles' nylon guitar strings but there was also a quiet assuredness to the sound that was very compelling indeed.

The rich resonance of Peterson's double-bass was especially attractive. 'Everything has an appropriate sense of scale',

noted one listener, 'the brushes on the snare drum have a great sense of air and space which helps create a very convincing performance'. Indeed, it was one of the few cables that found our feet tapping along!

This inherent 'listenable' carried through to The Beatles remasters which sounded 'all of a piece', a period piece, certainly, but the balance between the roll of drums, the grunge of Harrison's guitar and Star's percussive assault was all laid bare without a hint of stress or strain.



Sound Quality: 80%



Performance Graphite
 Made by: QED, Herts
 Supplied by: Armour Home Electronics
 Telephone: 01279 501111
 Web: www.armourhe.co.uk
 Price: £18/1.5m

AUDIO FILE

Performance USB
 Made by: Transparent Audio, USA
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.transparentcable.com
 Price: £95/1m

GROUP TEST

QED Performance Graphite



As last month's *Audio Milestone* illustrated, QED has long been associated with high value, no-nonsense cables and, at just £18/1.5m, its Performance Graphite USB maintains the family tradition.

Performance Graphite uses mixed-gauge conductors (26AWG for differential data and 22AWG for power and ground), with 5N copper rather than silver-plated strands. All four conductors are dual screened with a conductive mylar wrap while a 5N copper braid offers 90% coverage. QED's plugs are gold-plated while the moulded plastic grips and PVC jacket ensure this cable will

withstand the most 'rigorous' of applications.

In our tests, the data edge risetime was fine at 12.8nsec and deterministic jitter about average for the group [see eye pattern graph].

ZING SONG

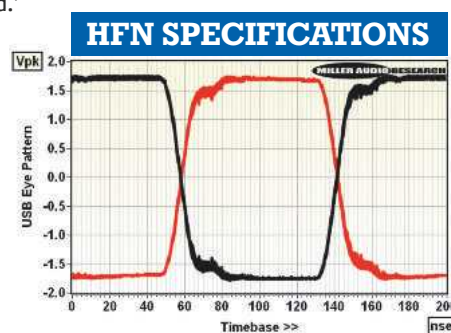
The opening bars of our live Eagles track exposed this cable as one of the 'big-sounding' breed, although the strings were described as 'plucked by the pads of the fingers rather than plectrum or nails'. There's a hint of blowsiness about this cable, the bass effusive but also slightly wayward.

Indeed, QED's USB cable was not quite as composed

sounding as the Kimber Copper. One listener observed that 'it's a bit like listening to a modern CD or download where the dynamic range is squeezed.'

The remastered Beatles certainly sounded a little less relaxed, eager to impress but perhaps tripping over itself in the process. Ringo's cymbals sounded slightly 'zingy' while the drums were not as free or deeply resonant as possible.

This cable might lack some musical freshness and freedom but it's a clear upgrade on freebie USBs at a near 'giveaway' price.



Sound Quality: 70%



Transparent Performance USB

Far from the most affordable USB interconnect in this month's test, Transparent's Performance series is actually its entry level offering, preceding the 'High Performance', 'Premium', 'Reference' and 'Reference XL' ranges. USB cables feature in all but the Reference ranges, and all employ 'large gauge conductors which have greater surface area than typical USB cables'.

Our sample was terminated in nickel-plated A and B connectors although the version featured on Transparent's website shows gold-plated plugs. The heavy, burgundy-coloured PVC jacket

is retained, however, as is the 20-gauge specification. In our lab tests, the 12.2nsec data risetime puts Performance USB in the middle of the pack, despite its short 1m length.

CREAM RISES

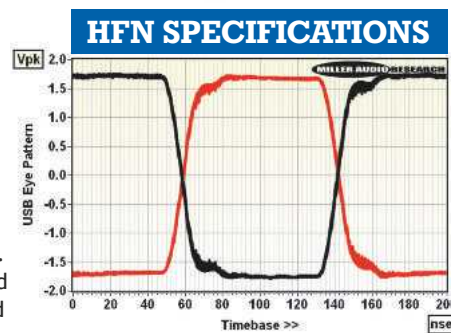
A real charmer, Transparent's Performance USB is a very rich and creamy-sounding cable, not unlike the Vertere in some respects. The Beatles 'came together' with a boisterous weight, slightly ponderous at times and arguably slow on the draw but always very comfortable and engaging.

There's no edginess here, no over-hyped treble or unnecessary drama. With the live 'Hotel California' in

play, its warm tone prompted one listener to suggest 'The guitarist sounds like he's plucking the strings closer to the neck than the bridge'.

Nevertheless, this cosy, easy-listening did 'hood' some of the freshness and air of the Helge Lien trio, for while the piano had a realistic sense of body and proportion, those gentle percussive strikes didn't spark the most realistic atmosphere.

Likened to 'a full-bodied red rather than a crisp and dry white', Transparent's Performance is a big, fat cable with a similarly larger-than-life bass. Partner with care.



Sound Quality: 75%



ortofon

Masters of High-End Sound

MC

Anna

Xpression



The new MC Anna from Ortofon sits at the highest echelon of Moving Coil cartridges. This state-of-the-art product is representative of numerous design elements and ideals pioneered by one of the world-leaders in analogue technologies. As a result, the MC Anna is truly capable of the highest degree of performance possible, and will provide a sound which is literally unsurpassed. The MC Anna is named after and inspired by the world-renowned operatic soprano, Anna Netrebko.



The stylish Xpression cartridge from Ortofon bridges the gap between SPU-type designs and High-End models like the MC Windfeld and MC Anna, which are designed for headshell mounting. The result is a high-performance moving coil cartridge with the convenience of a standard headshell connector. By using some of the best technologies available to them, Ortofon have made the Xpression into not just a convenient and attractive design, but also one of the finest sounding cartridges available on the market.

Cadenza Series



The Cadenza series represents another example of Ortofon's constant push toward technological perfection. By taking various design characteristics acquired through market leaders, such as the MC Jubilee and Kontrapunkt series, Ortofon have developed Cadenza to elevate any decent Hi-Fi system to a whole new level. The range consists of 5 different models, including a Mono version, but they all adhere to Ortofon's core principles of accurate information retrieval and phenomenal sound performance.

Pulse D-Fi USB
 Made by: Vertere Ltd, London
 Supplied by: Vertere Acoustics
 Telephone: 0203 176 4888
 Web: www.vertereacoustics.com
 Price: £70/2m

**AUDIO
 FILE**

Starlight 7 USB
 Made by: Wireworld Inc, USA
 Supplied by: Nue World Ltd, Middx
 Telephone: 0208 991 9200
 Web: www.wireworldcable.co.uk
 Price: £125/2m

GROUP TEST

Vertere Pulse D-Fi USB

Clever marketing and an impressive heritage has allowed Vertere to not only launch but cement a new cable brand in the minds of audiophiles and industry pundits alike. Pulse D-Fi is one of its more affordable cables although our sample, with its two coaxial conductors labelled 'Pulse E precision analogue interconnect', clearly differs from pictures we've seen elsewhere.

Separating the differential data lines from the power supply is not a bad idea, provided the 90ohm characteristic impedance specified for USB is observed. In the event, Pulse D-Fi had

the most observably altered waveshape of any cable here, the 27.6nsec risetime some 15nsec slower than the group average [see eye pattern].

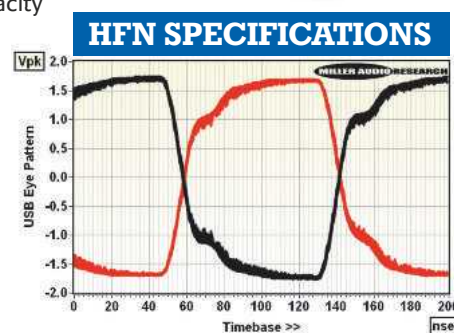
WARM & CUDDLY
 Initially auditioned directly after Chord's Silver Plus, Pulse D-Fi sounded immediately 'quieter' although the level itself could not have changed.

There was a softer percussive strike to Helge Lien's ivories, described at the time as 'akin to an archetypal tube amp'. This warm overall character seemed well suited to the vintage Oscar Peterson recording, the bowed double-bass sounding creamier, richer and lusher than usual.

Then again, the plucked strings were described as 'slightly softer', the overall demeanour gentler, the percussion lacking a little sparkle, vivacity and freshness.

It took away the edgy splash of cymbals from the 24-bit Beatles remasters but also encouraged an over-resonant bass which was just too fulsome and rich for our big floorstanders.

Pulse D-Fi might prove a tempering influence for a slightly bright or even a gritty sounding digital system. For others it may just sound a little slow or even lazy.



Sound Quality: 70%



Wireworld Starlight 7 USB

The usefully flat and flexible profile of Wireworld's new Starlight 7 USB cable might suggest it houses four parallel conductors. This would be a very bad idea so it's reassuring to learn that it's the differential data and power supply conductors that are self-contained and separated within the red jacket. The former comprise four, multistranded silver-plated copper conductors in Wireworld's 'Symmetricon' geometry while the supply line is handled by an adjacent shielded coax.

Wireworld claims that 'Starlight functions well over longer lengths than

other USB cables' and the quick 12.0nsec risetime and reduced deterministic jitter shown over a 2m length [see eye pattern] supported this.

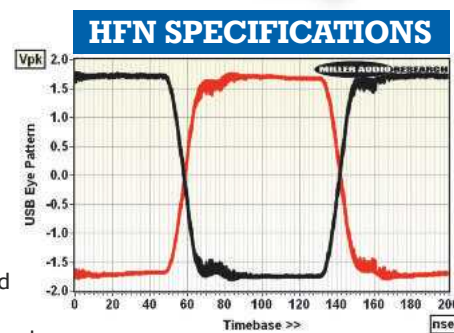
VIM AND VIGOUR
 Coming after the Vertere (above), the tighter and crisper sound of the Starlight 7 was immediately and palpably obvious from the opening bars of The Eagles' live 'Hotel California'. There was far less 'wallop' to the bass, however, exposing the vocals and top-end percussion which were described as 'slightly nasal, even harder-edged' by our blind panellists.

Typically, the ambience of the venue was far better

revealed and while the piano from Oscar Peterson's trio was slightly 'clankier' in tone, the piece as a whole certainly had plenty of vim and vigour.

Compared with the lush cables in this test, the sound of wooden sticks hitting cymbals was now undoubtedly more realistic even if that strung bass lacked its customary gravitas.

This fast and crisp sounding cable paints vivid musical pictures despite lacking some deep bass grunt. It's ideal for the 'flabbier sounding' system and where long runs are unavoidable.



Sound Quality: 75%



Burmester 101 Integrated Amplifier & 102 CD Player News from the Classic Line

The 101 Integrated Amplifier is the latest integrated amplifier in the Burmester product range and a supreme example for the perfect combination of efficient class D power sections and an analogue power supply. With its power reserves thus made available the 101 easily achieves in a compact design the warm and well-balanced sound which is known to be a trademark of the Burmester tone. The switchable „Smooth“ function produces a rounded and detailed sound image even with low volume levels. Within the Burmester sound world the 101 integrated amplifier commends itself as a perfect game partner for the 102 CD player.



Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH
Wilhelm-Kabus Strasse 47 · 10829 Berlin · Phone +49-30-7879680 · www.burmester.de
Germany

GROUP TEST VERDICT

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If we began this group test with an open mind then we left convinced, and not a little surprised, at the audibility of differences between proprietary USB cables. Vertere's Pulse D-Fi was arguably the most left-field of the bunch with its twin 'analogue' coaxial cables measurably altering the shape of the USB data waveform. Its rich and warm sound was not unappealing but it was hard to escape the softening of its extreme treble and a loss of atmosphere, especially with live recordings.

GETTING STARTED

QED's Performance Graphite was identified as offering a slightly 'pinched' sound but there was plenty of energy to piano and percussion. 'It almost sounds louder', remarked one listener as the Helge Lien ensemble was projected confidently into the room. It's far from the best in test, but at just £18 it's a great starter USB cable.

Atlas's new Element USB was arguably better balanced but we still couldn't hear through the twisting musical elements as easily as with its peers. If your system lacks some drama and pizzaz, you might love the Element but it may not prove as transparent or subtle in a more revealing system. Neither was Transparent's Performance USB

the most subjectively 'transparent' conduit on test, its rich and warm sound proving a little too luxuriant at times. But we shouldn't overplay this as its smooth and tuneful sound was certainly preferred to the over-hyped quality of the more forward sounding cables.

Wireworld's Starlight 7 sounded very tidy but the 'woomph' of air that would normally accompany the deepest bass was subjectively filtered away leaving a smaller, spotlight soundstage. Perhaps Starlight 7 is not ideally suited to 'big' systems, but it still looks like a good candidate for long 3m+ runs.

MAKING THE CUT

Unflustered by dynamic recordings, Furutech's ADL Formula 2 'makes the music sound dramatic but in a very controlled fashion, underpinned by fabulously strong bass'. Contrast and compare with Kimber's B BUS Cu whose gentle demeanour really allowed us to hear into performances. This cable impresses for its poise rather than dramatic effect and gets a warm recommendation.

As does, I might add, Audioquest's Carbon which proved to be a very upbeat sounding cable, if not as spacious as the very best. It made the Peterson trio sound fun and jolly, successfully describing the verve of their playing without lapsing into edginess.

WE CAN ALL DREAM

'Sounds like we've upgraded the DAC', suggested one listener

as we switched to Crystal Cable's Absolute Dream USB. Arguably the 'ringer' in this month's test and pitched at an impossible price, this cable manages to be both comfortable on the ear and yet still explicitly detailed and revealing.

The remastered Beatles selection illustrated this perfectly. New life was breathed into George Martin's classic Abbey Rd production as the compression we had heard with other cables was relaxed, just as it was with the considerably more affordable Chord SilverPlus. What Absolute Dream brought to the party was greater extension and, well, a sense of 'sheer class'. Outstanding.

And yet, back in the real world, Chord's SilverPlus will likely appear on more audiophile's shortlists. 'You can mentally scale the size of the

'Chord's Silver Plus is so vivid it sounds like enhanced stereo'

acoustic around Lennon's voice,' said one 'while differentiating the grungy guitar and electric piano with no blurring between them.' So vivid is the presentation of this

cable that it sounds like 'enhanced stereo', albeit without any artificiality or contrivance. It's the sort of sound that'll have you digging through 'difficult' recordings just to discover what might now lie within. ☺



ABOVE: Crystal Cable's Absolute Dream – top performance at a top price



ABOVE: Chord's affordable SilverPlus USB is a musical revelation. A bargain!

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