

Atlas Element USB cable

I ordered a 3m Atlas Element A-B USB cable to connect my laptop and DAC in this test because I have found that shorter cables do not necessarily sound the best where USB is concerned. In truth, in many tests before, listeners and I have significantly preferred 5m cables to 1m varieties: so despite the fact that signal transmission down a wire is an analogue process – digital signal being just wide bandwidth, square waves – so-called digital signals can appear far less fussy than their analogue counterparts, possibly because of the high frequency content they contain.

For the purposes of this test I used a CEntrance DACmini powered by a Red Wine Audio Black Lightning LFP Edition battery power supply connected to my reference Naim multi-amplifier/Neat XL10 system. Digitised music was copied from my NAS and played on the laptop using the Gold edition of Media Monkey software through the CEntrance Universal Driver.

You pays your money...

This might seem an unduly expensive and revealing system in which to test a cable costing only £57.50 but that price makes it broadly competitive with my current favourite audiophile USB cable, the Furutech ADL Formula 2, which starts at around £60 (3.6m costs £115). To provide perspective, a typical computer-reseller grade 3m USB 2.0 cable suitable for “connecting a printer” can be had for under £2.00. Such cables usually sound somewhere between dire and disgusting, and so I would discourage their use in any musical application – despite the obvious cost-saving benefits. What is more, in my opinion, USB audio needs all the help it can get!

The Element cable draws on the experiences and lessons learnt by Atlas during the development of its successful HDMI cable, in particular the precise matching of the conductor lengths in each pair of conductors to maintain the signal propagation time of each pair along with extreme care with the overall shielding to reduce noise. The conductors themselves are high purity copper produced by the Ohno Continuous Casting process, which significantly reduces

the number of crystal boundaries within the copper – boundaries at which impurities collect. Each wire might contain three or four crystals rather than the thousands of boundaries typically found in regular OFC wire. Current research strongly indicates the performance superiority of these ultra-pure conductors, says Atlas.

The Element cable furthermore uses crimp-connection terminations to provide reliable and impedance-matched connections with the conductors and optimal signal transmission through the plated plugs. It also seemed a slightly less bulky cable than the Furutech. I confess that I am now waiting for some manufacturer to make a USB cable with connectors hewn from aluminium billets and the size of Schuko mains connectors, and then claiming some ludicrous performance advantage for them!

Needless to say, the Atlas connectors are not extravagant and on the initial listening, alongside a dozen or more rival cables from a number of manufacturers, the Atlas Element quietly impressed with its ‘together’ quality and balance of musical and hi-fi attributes.

Sound quality

Some of the competing cables stood out because of one particular strength – their dynamic compass, their bass agility, their instrumental texture, vibrant tonal colour or suchlike. The Element brought all these strengths and more to the party with its masterful and completely sympathetic handling of singer, Emeli Sandé. The cable’s presentation of her hit single *Next To Me* was wonderfully dramatic, dynamic and rich in both detail and texture.

The bass guitar was solid, deep and vibrantly tuneful, while the percussion, at the other end of the frequency spectrum, was extended and appropriately delicate. Her glorious voice, the most important element, appeared little short of incandescent and had an uncanny knack of communicating effortlessly with the listener.

One obvious strength the Atlas possessed was that of imbuing voices and instruments with deliciously abundant texture: this made Sandé and her piano sound quite magical and present on *Read All About It* and, what is more, conveyed the convincing and beautiful dexterity of her lyrics and overall magnificence of her song-writing abilities.

The Atlas Element provided a powerful and remarkable link to the singer because its ability to communicate emotion seemed exceptional with this and other albums. It often seemed able to penetrate deep into a vocal line going past the words that were being sung and unearthing the feeling and meaning behind the composition.

In short, the Atlas Element USB is a spectacular performer at a beer-budget price. As such, it comes heartily recommended. **MS**

DETAILS

PRICE: £57.50

CONTACT:
0800 7311140

WEBSITE:
ATLASCABLES.COM

OUR VERDICT

