

# SoundStage! Ultra | SoundStageUltra.com (UltraAudio.com)

Garrett Hongo  
21-27 minutes

---



Over Thanksgiving and the ensuing week, I flew down from Oregon, where I live, to spend time at a retreat for artists (I write poetry) in northern California near the Bay Area. Because I also had friends to visit, I rented a car when I landed at the Norman Y. Mineta San José International Airport, splurging on a full-size vehicle: a silver Chevrolet Malibu sedan. It was big and stable, gave good mileage, and had lots of features. It got me around -- to Berkeley and Lafayette, to San Francisco and Santa Cruz. But it didn't have *savoir faire*. It lacked that *je ne sais quoi* that aging guys like me crave on getaways from our humdrum lives.

*That* came one weekend day, when a friend met me in Monterey to give me a tour of Tor House and Hawk Tower in Carmel -- the stone cottage and rock eyrie, perched on a cliff overlooking the sea, that was the home of poet Robinson Jeffers until his death in 1962. She insisted we ditch my Chevy sedan and that I drive *her* car -- a Porsche Boxster S, silver and black (Oakland Raider colors) -- with the top down, the heater on, and sweet soul music blaring from the Burmester surround-sound system. "Man oh man / In the middle of France / The odds were against us / But we took a chance," as the Persuasions famously sang. This was another order of driving altogether. I popped gears and floored the pedal on that thing throughout the famous 17-Mile Drive through the sparse pine forests of Pebble Beach, then along the S-curves of Highway 1 down to Big Sur, engine-braking, right foot sashaying between clutch and accelerator, hugging the road in third and fourth gears, letting it out into fifth and even sixth in the rare straightaways. It was a laughing-gas blast. Let no one tell you a car is just a car. There are cars, and then there are *Porsches*, man.

As with drivers of automobiles, aside from us enthusiasts, there are still the sedate skeptics among audiophiles when it comes to cabling. They'll spend scores of thousands of bucks on speakers, electronics, and sources, go for bling and badass bass in all other components, but when it comes to power cables -- the foundation of a stereo system -- there are still those who not only balk at shelling out equivalent money for cords, but who don't believe that *any* specialty audio wires can make a significant difference in sound quality. I've even heard a respected audio engineer say, dismissively, "Electrons don't care how much cables cost." But to me it's like a

finely tuned sports car vs. a family vehicle, and it's kind of the same as with music. Music is either a major part of your life, and you crave hearing everything you can from a recording, or it's just secondary, a background soundtrack to whatever else you're doing in your life -- cooking, vacuuming, entertaining dinner guests, driving to work or the kids to school, ballet, or tennis practice. But to me, the better the cables, the more *of* and *in* the music you can hear.

## Background and development

Early this fall I spoke with John McDonald, president of Audience, about why and how he and his chief engineer, Roger Sheker (recently deceased), developed their new line of Au24 SX powerChord power cords.



“We’d just come out with a whole new line of SX speaker wires and interconnects in early 2016, so I wanted a new powerChord to match them,” he said. “I felt we’d reached our *personal best* in other cables, so I wanted something new to best the existing SE line of Audience pCs.”

McDonald feels that the two Au24 SX powerChords, introduced in fall 2016, enter a new league of performance compared to the prior lineup of three SE powerChords (SE 10-gauge, MP 12-gauge, and LP 14-gauge). The largest gains in the new SX line, he claims, are in coherence and focus: “Everything comes through in proper phase and without group-delay artifacts, so depth

and resolution are greatly improved, to the point that I was shocked how much better the SX was the first time I heard the prototype.”

McDonald had been scratching his head about how to make improvements when he hit on a fundamental thought: Like most other cables, SE powerChords are built up of multiple strands, then twisted. The result is strands in the middle and strands on the outside. This means that the strands on the outside must be longer. McDonald concluded that conductors of differing lengths would result in timing smear, and that by eliminating the necessity for different lengths, he could synchronize the timing better across all strands. Sheker agreed. “It’s common sense and sounds hokey, but it’s true,” McDonald said.

In trying to minimize differences in timing, Sheker and McDonald came up with a design based on a central core of nonconducting material. This got rid of the central wires, and meant that the strands twisted around the new core could all be the same length. *Et voilà!* The sound was much better.

Sheker and McDonald’s design uses six bundles of 38 strands each, wrapped around a core of high-quality, cross-linked polyethylene (XLPE), the same material as is used in the dielectric and insulation of the SX powerChord. They found that the aggregate gauge of the strands also had a big impact. They settled on a 13-gauge conductor -- a relatively thin size compared to what other makers of high-end audio power cords use.

“Roger did all the math and figured out the exact number of strands and number of bundles that we’d need,” McDonald said. “He sketched the design out by hand, and then we sent it to a mechanical engineer to produce a drawing we used to make the first prototype. I had the original idea, and we both did the evaluations -- my ears are in everything we build -- but the designing was all Sheker’s.”

## **Description and installation**

A couple months ago as I write this, I received, via FedEx, a large cardboard shipping carton containing one Au24 SX powerChord and three Au24 SX MP powerChords. Each cable was in its own handsome box, bagged in plastic and with its terminations bubble-wrapped for protection. Also in each box was a tube of CAIG Laboratories DeoxIT Contact Cleaner & Rejuvenator. All Audience cables and powerChords are treated with DeoxIT at the factory. The 6’-long, high-voltage Au24 SX powerChord costs \$4600 USD; a 6’-long, medium-voltage SX MP costs \$4200. As with all Audience cables since the company’s inception, the warranty is for the life of the product.

The conductors of the SX powerChords are made of 99.9999%-pure OCC copper and receive a double cryogenic treatment at the factory. A standard 10-gauge SX powerChord has two 13-gauge wires per leg and, in a departure for Audience -- which has traditionally eschewed shielding in their power cords out of concern for loss of dynamics -- each ground wire is now shielded, then insulated in Teflon. Audience uses Furutech’s very handsome and substantial FI-50 NCF connectors, whose primary contacts are rhodium-plated copper. The shells are made of multilayer, nonmagnetic stainless steel and carbon fiber, and include an acetal copolymer with

special damping and insulating properties. The body of each connector includes proprietary active damping materials in a combination of ceramic and carbon powders that Furutech calls Nano Crystal Formula (NCF). McDonald claims that all of these improvements, along with shielding the ground wires, yield the best sound he's heard from any Audience powerChords. Au24 SX powerChords are available in 10-gauge, for components consuming more than 200W, and 13-gauge (MP), for components consuming 200W or less. It takes one tech one full day of labor to assemble one 10-gauge, 6'-long SX cable.

When I asked McDonald why there is no Lower Power (LP) version of the SX, he said that it's because the smallest conductor in the SX is 13-gauge, while the smallest in the SE is 21-gauge. "We can't make an LP version out of the new SX cabling, so we roll with SX as high current and offer the MP for medium power use."



The SXes are relatively heavy and substantial as power cords go. They're much thicker -- nearly a full inch in diameter -- than the SE models, and extremely handsome in their black-mesh jackets. The Furutech connectors are also impressive, adding a distinctive touch of bling. Flexible and supple, the cables bend easy and were cinches to install, tightly gripping the outlets of my Audience aR6-TSSOX line conditioner and snaking easily to each component.

I used the standard SX powerChord to my VAC 200iQ stereo amp and the MP powerChords to my Zanden 3100 preamp, Esoteric K-05X SACD/CD player, and the power supply of my

Zanden 1200 phono stage. Unlike the much-smaller-gauge Audience SE LP powerChord I'd been using, the MP was so heavy that I had to use a 1/2"-thick edenSound FatBoy brass damping disc atop the phono stage's little external power supply to keep it from flipping over and tumbling out of the rack. Aside from that, the SX cables dressed well and easily.

## Sound

My first impression of the sound of my system with the Au24 SX powerChords installed was promising, but I waited about 50 hours for the Audience cables to settle in and get their electrons flowing before taking any notes.

I was impressed. "Just Strong Enough," from Michael McDonald's *Wide Open* (CD, Chonin 538305282), is a blues track with numerous instruments and strings. It begins with resonant piano chords with a bounty of rich, harmonic colors against gorgeous brass. McDonald's distinctively airy voice soars soulfully over it all, as an electric guitar provides liquidly snaky runs and the strings flow silkily along in the background. There's a slow crescendo that climaxes in what I heard as a big, clean sound in which each instrument occupied its own place on the soundstage. There were superb timbral distinctions that were not laser-etched but solidly independent and complete, each with its integrity of timbre intact. All this was achieved not so much through hyperdetail but through differences in their natural timbres. There was the kind of clarity I notice with electrostatic headphones -- the sound was clear but alive, easily shifting in tones, densities, and amplitudes. The brass, the tenor sax solo, the drums and piano -- the sound of each was distinct, with propulsive momentum. I could hear that the backing singers were distinctly deeper in the stage than the bass and baritone sax. Horn choruses had real rumble and weight, and in them I could hear a tuba. And as the guitar screamed and hit its power crunches, the strings locked with the horns, and the drums, bass, and piano stuck to the insistent rhythmic pocket they'd laid down. The bass was tight and propulsive. Throughout, McDonald's chesty voice sounded powerful, with a tinge of growl, while the music churned in a great moil of rocking sound.

By contrast, Kevin Mahogany's version of Rodgers and Hart's "My Funny Valentine," from his *You Got What It Takes* (CD, Enja ENJ-90309-2), was exemplary in nuanced, low-level sensitivities of sound, his voice moving effortlessly from a baritone bottom to a falsetto top with pleasing bite and vibrato. His many shadings went from a breathy jazz recitative to an aria-like, fortissimo top that seemed to gleam in air. In between, he scatted lightly, tastefully, bluesily against a Monk-like piano accompaniment. My system produced a solid and stable central image of Mahogany's voice as he worked through his array of stylings, ending with a beautifully sustained, plaintively elongated "Staaaaay, little valentine . . ." that was without raggedness or opacity, demonstrating how easily the SX powerChords could provide an unshakable constancy of power.

Women's voices fared just as well, whether those of rock and blues singers or lyric sopranos. "I Put a Spell on You," from Morgan James's *Live from Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola* (CD, Epic 88765 41142 2), features the soul singer's smoky, acrobatic voice sailing over the ensemble of tenor sax, electric guitar, piano, bass, drums, and congas. Composed by the appropriately nicknamed Screamin' Jay Hawkins, this tune, as sung by Morgan, had virtuosic leaps, hollers, and shouts,

the system handling all of them with aplomb, never straining or sounding washy. Likewise, Emma Kirkby's soprano was clear and clean against the vibrant strings of the Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra directed by Jeanne Lamon in Vivaldi's solo motet *In turbato mare irato*, RV 627 (LP, Hyperion A6247). Kirkby's top piped beautifully with exquisite coloratura ornaments, particularly when she rose in pitch and volume, sounding sweetly piercing against the ensemble's strings.

Especially wondrous was the sound of David Oistrakh's violin in Beethoven's Violin Concerto, with the French National Radio Orchestra led by André Cluytens (LP, Angel S 35780). In the long orchestral intro of the first movement, *Allegro ma non troppo*, there are rich double basses and woodwinds before Oistrakh's thrilling entrance. His was truly a singing violin, bold and dynamic in its phrasings against the powerful accompaniment of full orchestra, then trilling deftly in solo in the cadenza (by Fritz Kreisler). With other electronics and cables this vintage LP can sound brittle, but there was no hint of that here. The orchestral sound was sonorous, pulsing, and sensitive. Oistrakh's violin sounded pure and rich, throwing off bountiful harmonics as he played emphatically and clearly, without shrillness. The strings always sounded right, assured and organic, never electronic. And, in the soundfield itself, there was a great spaciousness that was filled by the varied elements and sections of the orchestra, morphing into images as their sounds emerged from, then disappeared into the great bloom of air filling the long wall of my listening room.



Of all these lovely things, perhaps the most lovely was how the system sounded with jazz. Whether on LP (Gerry Mulligan with Chet Baker), new CDs (e.g., Roy Hargrove), or 1960s bossa nova (Stan Getz), the sound was flat gorgeous without fail, even from recordings I'd long thought were nothing special. In "In the Slow Lane," from the Kenny Barron Trio's *Book of Intuition* (CD, Impulse! B0024648-02), there was a fullness of sound as though the room were alive with it. The entire room was energized, but I wasn't playing the system loudly at all -- the music was just sensuously gripping, emanating from a rich and tuneful foundation of bass. I was surrounded by generous cues and delicious reflections, as if a live gig were taking place in front of me. There were solid images of piano, bass, and drums, and a deep, wide soundstage extending about 4' past the outer panels of the speakers, 3' toward me into the room, and a like depth behind. There were touch and snap to the chattering tap and susurrous sweep of brushes on the skin of the snare. Barron's piano and Kiyoshi Kitagawa's bass locked on to the downbeat, and the leader's arpeggios were rich and articulate, with nuanced impacts. Every note lived and breathed, entirely without opacity -- each was open. Speed and timing were delivered with natural assurance, and a firmness of sound that was emphatic and powerful without feeling aggressive or strained. It was big and bountiful, but with an ease to everything. Impacts came from an instrument, then a rich unfolding of notes in time, with crispness and precision when called for -- a snapped bass string, a stick against a snare drum's rim, a rich low note on piano locked to a plucked string from the double bass, syncopated drumming against a repeated figure on the piano. It was an entirely tactile and pleasurable listening experience.

## Comparison

After living for a couple of months with the full complement of four Au24 SX powerChords running to all my electronics, I replaced the SX pC going to the VAC 200iQ stereo amp with an SE pC (\$2400/6' cord), and reinstalled SE MPs (\$1250/6' cord) for the SX MPs on the Esoteric CD player and the Zanden pre and phono stage. I expected a completely tedious exercise of comparing Audience's SE and SX powerChords, swapping them back and forth to try to hear tiny differences, perhaps hitting on a quality or two to emphasize a difference I might gin up into some authoritative-sounding prose, all while hedging my claims by reminding the reader that his or her mileage may differ.

But the difference wasn't close.

With the SE pCs in the system, Michael McDonald's voice was still powerful and chesty, but betrayed a hint of washiness when I listened to "Just Strong Enough," from *Wide Open*. The bass was punchy, and the piano locked to it solidly and rhythmically, but McDonald's high notes sounded wiry at times, and at others too husky, losing the thrilling clarity I'd heard with the SX pCs. The soundstage shrank from a generous 4' past my speakers' outer edges to just 1' beyond them. And McDonald's signature wails were now buried toward the back of the soundstage -- there was no exultant rising above it as before, and the gift of extraordinary sensuousness was gone, the track sounding somewhat electronic by comparison.

It was similar with the voices of Morgan James and Emma Kirkby. James's wails and shouts showed a hint of bark and sibilance at high volume, the system seeming to lose its ease and assurance as James's voice thinned a bit, with a flattened dynamic range. The rhythm section was still as tight and fat as with the SX pCs, but my system couldn't ramp up as easily when James cranked up her pitch and volume. It was the same with Kirkby's soprano. In the Vivaldi, the violins were just as lively and agile, but there was now a slight raggedness in Kirkby's voice at dynamic peaks that hadn't been there with the SX powerChords.

Oistrakh's recording of the Beethoven concerto also sounded a bit peaky and sometimes washy. In the first movement there was a glossy bite, and sometimes a tube-like sound to dynamic passages when the violins played *fortissimo*, indicating a timing problem in the signal and causing a slight smear to the sound. The soundstage was narrower, Oistrakh's violin emanating not out of the illusion of a soundfield, but closer to the drivers of the speakers. At times that violin chirped rather than sang, and the sense of scale diminished, the music's grandeur slightly marred by the forwardness of the treble.

Finally, when I played the Kenny Barron Trio's "In the Slow Lane" again, this time with the SE pCs in the system, I didn't hear the sense of saturation or bountifulness I'd heard before. The music was a tad more polite, a touch less sensuous, and Barron's piano wasn't as sparkling or as precisely timed in the sweet, brief shimmers of its crystalline top notes. Overall, there was less *sprezzatura*, and not the same evenness and depth to the soundstage. With the SX cables there was a consistent density, depth, and bouquet of sound from left to right of the soundstage. But with the SE pCs there were slight but noticeable shifts in all of these -- a narrowing, a thinning out, an occasional loss of image solidity. A quality of slight hardness crept in from time to time, and the whole was not as consistently sensuous as with the newer Audiences.

It was as if the system had lost its overdrive -- its sixth gear, if it were a Porsche -- and now had to run hotter, with higher, more audible work without it. The system lost its *smoove*.

## Conclusion

For decades, Audience has been an excellent and reputable manufacturer, but it has toiled in a category in which it has had lots of company, making fairly affordable (by audiophile standards), good-performing, but not quite industry-leading cables. But with the introduction of the SX line, and particularly with the new Au24 SX powerChords, I believe that Audience has moved into a leadership position in terms of sound quality.

The Au24 SX cables lent several special qualities to my listening. There were great gains in soundstaging, with improved depth and breadth, but with a new spaciousness and feeling of greater dimension in all kinds of music. I also heard more timbral accuracy and definition in the reproductions of instruments. Textural contrasts become more apparent, and there was a wider, more articulated palette of tones. Pace and timing improved, with gains in rhythmic snap and punch. Finally, dynamic range and contrasts took great leaps, lending expansiveness and majestic scale to orchestral music especially, with more precision in textural and dynamic



changes. Dynamic shifts and timbral contrasts at low volume levels also improved. There was no audiophile category that did not get better with the SX powerChords. Like Venus rising from foamy waters and gliding on a half-shell blown by sweet Aeolian winds in Sandro Botticelli's painting, they really bring, right uptight to you, the sensuous body of the muse.

I flat-out love Audience's Au24 SX powerChords. They're among the highest-performing cables in the audiophile market, and I think they're relative bargains. They're not inexpensive, but nevertheless they cost as much as thousands less than their competition in the same range of sound quality. If you're looking for peak performance in a power cable, I strongly urge you to audition the Au24 SX powerChord. If you don't get the jolt I do driving a Porsche from the 17-Mile Drive along Pebble Beach down to Highway 1 and through the dips and turns along Big Sur, I'd question your audiophile bona fides and recommend you stick with the cable equivalent of a family sedan. The Au24 SX powerChord is an absolute roarer -- it can feed your inner audiophile lion. Try it if you dare.

. . . *Garrett Hongo*

[garreth@soundstagenetwork.com](mailto:garreth@soundstagenetwork.com)

## PRICING

Au24 SX-HP (high-current) powerChord - \$4600 USD (\$5,999. CDN ) 6' cord

Au24 SX-MP (medium current) powerChord - \$4200 USD (\$5,499. CDN) 6' cord

Warranty: Lifetime.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### UNITED STATES

#### AUDIENCE

E-mail: [info@audience-av.com](mailto:info@audience-av.com)

Website: [www.audience-av.com](http://www.audience-av.com)

Phone: (760) 471-0202

### CANADA

#### Red Leaf Audio

E-mail: [sales@redleafaudio.com](mailto:sales@redleafaudio.com)

Website: [www.redleafaudio.com](http://www.redleafaudio.com)

(905) 746-9333

### Associated Equipment

- Analog source – TW-Acoustic Raven Two turntable and 10.5 tonearm, Zyx 4D Ultra MC cartridge (0.24mV); Ortofon RS-309D tonearm with Miyajima Zero MC cartridge (0.4mV)
- Digital source -- Esoteric K-05X SACD/CD player
- Preampifiers -- Zanden 1200 phono stage and 3100 preamplifier
- Power amplifier -- VAC Phi 200iQ

- Speakers -- Von Schweikert Audio VR-44 Aktive with RST-5 ribbon supertweeters and Masterbuilt jumpers
- Power cords -- Audience: Au24 SE powerChord and Au24 SE powerChord MP
- Interconnects -- Audience Au24 SX (unbalanced and balanced)
- Speaker cables and jumpers -- Audience Au24 SX
- Power conditioner -- Audience aR6-TSSOX
- Record cleaner -- Loricraft PRC4
- Accessories -- Box Furniture S5S five-shelf rack and amp stand, Pottery Barn four-shelf hardwood console, edenSound FatBoy dampers, HRS damping plates, fo.Q Modrate HEM-25B and HEM-25S Pure Note Insulators, Acoustic Science Corporation SoundPanels, Zanden Audio Systems AT-1 Acoustic Tubes and AP-1 Acoustic Panels, Winds ALM-01 Arm Load Meter, Audio Intelligent Vinyl Solutions Premium One-Step Formula No.6, Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab *Geo-Disc* cartridge-alignment disc and Vinyl record-cleaning brush, AudioQuest antistatic record brush