

Hook Shawline and sinker...

Thanks to a new offering from Chord Company, Martin Pipe discovers that USB cables do matter.

USB-equipped audiophile DACs, decent media-player software and the enormous storage capacities of hard drives have turned the modern desktop or laptop computer into a great music source for any hi-fi system.

With the rise of serious computer audio, a digital interconnect from specialist audio cable manufacturers – the USB cable – was inevitable. One of the first to enter this market was from Chord Company, their USB cables intended to help listeners squeeze every last drop of potential from the computer/DAC link. Its latest product here is the £200 (for 1m) Shawline USB.

With its bright-red woven-nylon jacket and custom silver-plated plugs – USB-A for the PC, and USB-B at the DAC end – it's obvious that we're no longer in high-street PC retail territory. The cable linking these plugs together is of particular interest, because it's of completely-

different internal construction to the cheap commodity stuff that interfaces your PC to a printer. Like the plugs, the four internal connections – ground, power and two for differential (balanced) serial data – are silver-plated, and a special type of polyethylene used for insulation.

Then there's an overall shield, which prevents high-speed USB data from contaminating nearby analogue audio signals – and to prevent unwanted interference from the outside world corrupting the digital datastreams. Chord Company has applied its 'Tuned ARAY' conductor geometry, found in its expensive

Signature range, to the similarly-handbuilt Shawline USB cable. Extensive listening tests then helped refine its basic design.

With a Chord Electronics Hugo TT DAC and Focal Utopia headphones, fed by a bog-standard Dell i5 Windows 10 PC running the suitably-configured (Class 2 audio drivers for hi-res and DSD-over-PCM) Foobar2000 freeware player, the improvement relative to a £5 computer-type USB cable was obvious – even if common sense (it's only digits, right?) tells us there shouldn't be any difference! With a variety of musical genres, more refinement was on offer; listening carefully to a good recording, I

found it even possible to distinguish between a variety of different string tones that would otherwise be merged. Brass instruments seemed more vivid, while a tad more energy and flow was bestowed on rhythms. A fine USB cable – well worth a listen.



THE CHORD COMPANY SHAWLINE USB £200

(CUSTOM LENGTHS ALSO AVAILABLE TO ORDER)



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VALUE - keenly priced.

VERDICT

For the serious computer audiophile. Give it a try...or miss out!

FOR

- impeccable construction
- soundwise, improvements all round

AGAINST

- due to the plug/sleeve design 120mm of clearance needed

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