

Shunyata Research Alpha USB cable

by Alan Sircom



If there's one fixed point in the audio firmament, it's that nothing stays the same for too long. Models refresh, new products come along, and benchmarks move with the times; so it is with cables. I am guilty of a little complacency and inertia here in that my range of go-to USB cables (AudioQuest, Cardas, Crystal, Kimber, Nordost) have remained more or less unchanged for a few years, so I thought the Shunyata Research Alpha USB wouldn't shake that tree too violently.

Wrong!

If I'd thought about this carefully, Shunyata's explorations into power line noise reduction that gave us some fine power cables and conditioners would obviously apply to the USB cable; two of the four immediately adjacent conductors within the USB cable are there to deliver a 5V, 0.5A feed from some notoriously noisy USB chipsets. Worse, due to the high-speed nature of digital audio and the performance-lottery of USB terminals (especially from host computers not set-up specifically with audio in mind), the intrusion of interference from nearby devices can play havoc with performance.

In the Alpha line Shunyata shields this cable from any external interference thanks to a complete silver-mesh shield. It also plays extremely close attention to the nature of the USB conductors and terminations. Each conductor is silver-plated continuous cast copper set in a FEP dielectric. The cable is impedance matched using what Shunyata calls its 'Precision Matched Z (PMZ)' concept. This means that tolerances of the conductor surface, dielectric extrusion, and the precision of the braided shield are held to minute variances. This is performed by running the extrusion machinery at one-quarter normal speed during manufacturing. The conductors are then connected by hand to custom-designed USB A and B terminations, said to reduce junction-related distortions in the cable. Shunyata also uses the company's unique 'Kinetic Phase Inversion Process (KPIP)', which is said to be a cable-conditioning methodology based on Shunyata chief Caelin Gabriel's investigations into why burn-in, directionality, and cryogenics occur. As a consequence, burn in is not required or recommended.

PRICE AND CONTACT DETAILS

Shunyata Research Alpha USB cable:
£1,000/1.5m

Manufactured by: Shunyata Research
URL: shunyata.com

Distributed by: The Shunyata Distribution
Company
URL: shunyata-uk.com
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Plugged between a MacBook Pro and an APL DSD-S DAC, the change was remarkable. This excellent DAC had a jump in performance. Sounds that were already extremely open and natural sounding became that bit more natural and open sounding. The timing of this good, but sometimes perhaps a little laid-back DAC snapped into greater focus, the already quiet DAC just got that bit more chilled out in background noise resolution. Using it with the Melco N10 also made a big difference, but one that is relatively minor next to the huge change it makes when with off-the-shelf computer.

Those who hold out against USB-based audio because think it unfit for purpose. The Shunyata Research Alpha USB cable represents the last time that argument can be made with any validity. Put simply, it makes USB sound better! +