

LIGHT music

If you want to squeeze the best possible sound from your laptop or make the most of your set-top box, a decent optical digital cable is a must-buy – and, as you can read here, good examples start at £20



Optical Cable a digital audio connector that sends the digital data (see below) from a source (CD player or DVD player, say) to an amplifier as light through a fibre optic cable.

Digital Digital data is stored in bits – as numbers that can be transferred with very little degradation in quality. Most modern hi-fi and AV components process digital data in the quest for the best audio performance.



ATLAS FIBRE OPTIC
£32 (1M) ★★★★★

Already a firm favourite around these parts, the Atlas easily retains its five stars when pitched into the ring for a second time. It's a well-made cable, its design eschewing the more showy finish of some rivals in favour of a modest silver-braided outer jacket and chunky plugs. Sound is admirably balanced, the composed treble neatly complemented by solidly planted, appropriately forceful bass and an open, expressive midrange.

BELKIN SILVER SERIES AV5000QP
£20 (1.2M) ★★★★★

Belkin seems determined to shoulder its way into the home entertainment market, and at first glance this Silver Series looks to have a good chance. Unusually turned out in an abrasion-resistant flexible jacket and matt, rubberised head-shell, it delivers an enthusiastic, muscular sound, though it can be both a little too splashy at the top-end and a shade too inaccurate in the bass. A respectable buy, but not a great one.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO OPTICAL
£20 (0.75M) ★★★★★

We used the acclaimed Cambridge Audio DacMagic as part of our review system for this test, so we had high hopes for the company's optical digital cable. Sadly, it couldn't match the high standards of its stablemate. Compared with the Belkin at the same price, this lacks bass weight, speed and energy. It produces a smaller, more congested and less enjoyable sound. Given that it's a shorter cable, yet costs the same money, its fate is sealed.

VIVANCO PROWIRE PW2TT15
£25 (1.5M) ★★★★★

If its SHQ stable-mate (below) opts for a low-profile look, the Prowire takes the opposite approach, with flashily golden terminations. The more business-like braided black jacket redresses the balance somewhat. Sonically, this cable exhibits more poise than the Belkin, but that greater control is undermined by some edge to higher frequencies and a vocal presentation that's nowhere near as assured as that of the Atlas.



QED PERFORMANCE OPTICAL
£40 (1M) ★★★★★

Another cable we've admired before, the QED continues to impress. It's robustly constructed, and looks and feels every inch the part. In action, it's an intriguing listen: there's admirable transparency with complex rhythms or atmospheric tracks, and an expressive, detailed feel with voices. However, the slight reticence to big dynamics, coupled to subdued bass next to several rivals here, means this is a good rather than great cable.

VIVANCO SHQ TT1.2
£35 (1.2M) ★★★★★

The semi-transparent design of the SHQ series of higher-performance Vivanco cables gives it a cool modern look. And reassuringly, given its higher price, it delivers concrete sonic improvements over the Prowire (above), with more refinement to the treble and subtly enhanced vocal realism. However, the cheaper Atlas is still more complete, while the TCI Coral (right) trounces it for dynamics, so a good deal is essential.

TRUE COLOURS INDUSTRIES CORAL
£35 (1M) ★★★★★

Already a class-leading design – it won its *Group Test* back in October 2008 – this unassuming TCI design is astonishingly good value for money. Simply, it delivers more detail, more punch and more poise than any rival in this price class. Basslines are easier to track and easier to embrace, while voices have character and proper presence in the room. In short, it's a true all-rounder – and a worthy winner here.

WIREWORLD THE NOVA 5
£40 (1M) ★★★★★

As the most expensive cable here, the Nova 5 has its work cut out, although the business-like styling and durable build quality certainly help. Sonically, this cable has a powerful presentation with deep, well-founded and energetic bass, but it doesn't conjure the same focus or realism as the cheaper TCI, and there's also a trace of hardness to the top-end on occasion. That, plus its price, is enough to count against it.



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