

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Nordost QKORE ground units

By Alan Sircom



Sometimes we as journalists are privy to items way prior to their launch. Such is the case with Nordost's QKORE trio of ground units. I was told about these at CES this year, but was so sworn to secrecy that they appeared as 'Nordost stuff' and later 'Nordost Q Project' on our internal planning documents. Even Nordost's distributors will only learn of this product line by reading this review as the devices are released into the wild at Munich High End in the middle of May.

The popularity, efficacy, and use of ground units appears to be a comparatively recent phenomenon. In fact, back in the 1980s, dedicated audiophiles used to create an additional ground to the domestic AC 'earth terminal', by running a thick conductor from the system to an earth spike or ground rod buried deep in soil. This requires access to said soil (you need to water this ground rod periodically), and is often impractical to implement. A more recent development has been standalone units that replicate the benefits of an independent ground rod and line.

Thirty years ago, the demand for a separate grounding system was as an attempt to counter the results of noisy power supplies on the same local power circuit (such as the refrigerator) undermining the performance of the audio system. Today, that problem is magnified as ever more products chuck even more high frequency nasties onto the AC line ground in the (otherwise laudable) goal of energy efficiency. Power cords and active purifiers can work to limit these effects on the live

and neutral lines, but grounding is a tougher nut to crack. Grounding units and their like leave the electrical ground well alone, creating instead an unpolluted parallel ground.

QKORE is built around three products, all in an almost identical case to the one that houses the company's Qx power purifiers. The three comprise a QKORE1 with a single binding post designed to connect to the power before the electronics (ideally connecting to something like a QBASE), QKORE3 that includes three binding posts to connect to the electronics (plugging into a spare RCA socket), and QKORE6 that combines the QKORE1 and QKORE3, adding a supplementary set of mono ground connectors, for an all-in-one package or for users of mono power amps. Each one comes with an appropriate green QKORE connector (two in the case of the QKORE6) but additional QKORE cables would be a good idea to include every device in the chain. The QKORE1 with its 4mm banana plug to 4mm banana plug does imply use with a distribution block with an earthing terminal, and Nordost's QBase range is one of the obvious choices.

The change QKORE brought about was instant, obvious, and profound. No need to spend weeks listening (although removing the QKORE products after a few weeks of listening highlighted what they are doing still further). It was easy to hear and applied to any music you might play, irrespective of genre. The main effect was in the bass, which sounded significantly tighter, deeper, and more authoritative. More significantly, QKORE was like a quick lesson in 'time coherence', giving any ▶

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▶ sound (even speech) a more accurate sense of rhythmic beat and metre (we often just lump this together into saying it ‘times’ well). There are other benefits, too; the almost clichéd ‘darker backgrounds’ and wider soundstage with better separation of images applied here, too. The treble seemed to integrate slightly better with the midrange and bass as well, but it’s that bass and temporal correctness that wins you over. It’s like your system no longer has to apologise for itself, even if it had little to apologise for before you QKORED it!

For those who have already have a collection of Nordost cable, Sort, and Quantum products in their system, the QKORE line is your next step. Indeed, if you are considering taking a jump in cable grade, I’d argue that QKORE is a useful step to make before that cable upgrade. Note, not ‘instead’, but ‘before’, or at least ‘in addition to’. If you are less deep down the Nordost rabbit hole, this is the step between Sort products and investigating the Quantum line.

The QKORE is not simply there for Nordost users, though. This plays to a broader church. There are many people whose systems could benefit from an independent ground. Alongside trying the QKORE products in a plug-socket-to-speaker-terminal-and-beyond all-Nordost system, I ripped everything Nordost-shaped out and used QKORE as the sole upgrade in an otherwise fully ‘untweaked’ Hegel and Graham Audio system, the same system with Cardas cable in place, and a ‘mullet’ system of a pair of Wilson Duette II loudspeakers with a Naim NAC A5 speaker cable and a Naim SuperUniti as the sole electronics component this side of the Ethernet switch. And in all three cases, the upgrade in performance was consistent with that of the Nordost-to-the-bone system described above.

The idea of an independent ground was very popular with Naim’s hardcore back in the 1980s, as it moved the performance on rhythmically from the limits of what you could do with star-earthing. The QKORE provides the same benefits

without having to bury bits of metal deep in your garden. For medium to large sized Naim systems, even if no other Nordost products make it into your system, QKORE makes a lot of sense.

Finally, I experimented with different combinations of QKORE. The three play to different systems, but perform the task so similarly as to make them near identical. If you have a system with no easy way to add grounding to the power input, go with QKORE3. If you do, either go with a separate QKORE1 and QKORE3, or go with the QKORE6 for one-box convenience. It’s only if you have separate mono amps that the QKORE6 makes a case for its own unique inclusion.

Nordost isn’t the first – and probably won’t be the last – company to address the concept of an independent grounding system. But it has jumped out of the starting gates with an extremely cogent set of products that fit the widest variety of systems. And the benefits are immediate, easy to hear, and extremely consistent from system to system, even in systems that may never use another Nordost product. Very highly recommended. +

PRICE AND CONTACT DETAILS

QKORE1 (with 2m 4mm-4mm QKORE cable): \$2,499.99

QKORE3 (with 2m RCA-4mm QKORE cable): \$3,499.99

QKORE6 (with 2m 4mm-4mm and 2m RCA-4mm QKORE cables): \$4999.99

QKORE WIRE: \$360.00 (\$150.00 per additional 1 meter length)

Manufactured by: Nordost

URL: www.nordost.com

Distributed in the UK by: Atacama Audio

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