

Nordost QBASE Reference (QB 10) AC distribution system

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Nordost calls its QBASE Reference a “multifaceted, reference-level AC distribution unit.” That’s cramming a lot of heavy lifting into a very few words. The QBASE Reference takes the passive distribution, a star-earthed design that has proved so successful with its standard QBASE distribution blocks (just now released in Mk 3 form and tested here soon) and takes it to the extreme.

Like existing QBASE blocks, using star-earthing and ground separation for each connected device helps isolate the signal and ground conductors, thereby reducing the risk of introducing noise-related crosstalk. It also ensures stray voltages and eddy currents are routed through a central ground. As you might expect from Nordost, it is internally wired with micro monofilament cables.

Where QBASE Reference differs from its fellow QBASE distribution blocks is in the degree of isolation, which is raised exponentially. The Nordost QBASE Reference adopts a dual PCB layout, with truly symmetrical live/neutral topology and separate grounding. This allows the user to place all the low-level signals on an entirely separate and isolated distribution platform to the amplifiers and any additional QRT treatment. But before we get into that, it’s time to catch up (QATCH up?) with Nordost’s system.

QRT Revisited

Nordost’s QRT system has been heavily revised of late and it’s worth looking at how things have changed. It bears almost no similarity to the QRT system of a few years ago. As the name suggests, QBASE and QBASE Reference form the basis of the tuning system. It’s the first (well, second... the first is the power cord from the wall to the QBASE) port of call and the power hub for all devices (both system and Nordost QRT).

From here, Nordost recommends a QKORE grounding system, running from the earth tag of the QBASE/QBASE Reference to a QKORE 6 (or similar) and then grounding connections to virtually every piece of non-QRT related electronics in the system. However, on the QRT side,

running a power feed to a QSOURCE linear power supply is recommended, including QPOINT resonance synchronisers under the audio electronics and the QNET network switch.

QSINE, QKOIL (known initially as Qk1) AC enhancers and QWAVE and QVIBE (or Qv2) AC line harmonisers are also in the QRT portfolio.

Back to QBASE

Nordost’s QBASE Reference includes the company’s latest QPOINT resonance synchroniser technology at its core and a QSINE AC enhancer and QWAVE AC line harmoniser for each of the two ‘sides’ of the distribution system. While QPOINT resonant sync. tech is always active so long as the QBASE Reference receives power, the QSINE and QWAVE can be activated or deactivated on either circuit, thanks to the colour-coded front buttons. The two buttons on the front display four states for each side of the QBASE Reference. Predictably, all LEDs off means both are inactive, while blue means QWAVE is active, red means QSINE is running, and green means everything is ‘go!’

That you can control the status of both sides is advantageous in the rare cases where the sources and amplifiers/additional QRT devices differ. It’s possible, for example, that QSINE isn’t needed for a line input like a phono stage or CD/SACD player, but both are used for preamp and power amplifiers. As an end user, you only need to cycle through the power buttons and potentially learn to live with two different colour status lights on your power distribution device. Listeners should experiment to see which QWAVE/QSINE combinations are ideally tailored to their system. However, in most cases, I suspect the full QWAVE and QSINE set-up will work best. It did for me.

The QBASE Reference sits on four Sort Füt variants, that can be adjusted to site and level the distribution unit. Nordost recommends it sits on its own dedicated shelf; weighing in at a shade under 12kg and roughly the size of a stereo power amp, that’s probably a good idea. Also, the company says it should allow maximum separation between the system’s AC power cords and signal leads.

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Simple sample

A sample system is shown in the manual for the Nordost QBASE Reference. This gives a good baseline system, comprising preamp, power amplifier, server, streamer and phono stage. Interestingly, this system takes the server away from the distribution unit and feeds it from the QSOURCE. I suspect this is because Nordost is thinking of a Roon Nucleus as server and using the QSOURCE's linear power supply as an upgrade. In other servers such as Innuos or Melco, the server will just run from one of the power outlets of the QBASE Reference, with either an additional QKORE cable to one of the Ground connections or – for optimum performance – an additional QKORE unit with both connected via QBASE Ground.

However, I would consider active subwoofers and turntables as 'outliers' and each require careful listening inside and outside the Nordost QRT 'ecosystem' to find whether they benefit from inclusion. This isn't sitting on the fence; a Kuzma Stabi R sounded more 'comfy' plugged directly into the wall and a VPI Prime preferred life a little more inside the QBASE's enclosure.

The Nordost QBASE Reference comes with ten sockets, two of which are 'primary' sockets designed for a preamplifier or integrated amplifier. However, for most people, the one on the right defaults to a ninth standard input. Unless you have a true dual mono preamp or integrated amplifier with two separate power feeds, the channel-two primary socket (top row, right middle) is not a primary one and is

recommended to stay that way. If you do have a dual-mono preamp, there is a switch beneath a cap on the underside of the QBASE. However, one primary socket and nine secondaries should be enough for most systems, even with a QSOURCE attached. The rear panel includes an IEC C-20 input, laid vertically, with a fuse and the QKORE grounding post flanking it.

In describing what Nordost's QBASE Reference is (a very high-performance two-section AC distribution unit bristling with the company's QRT devices), it's important to describe what it isn't. This isn't a power conditioner in the conventional 'big filter' sense as it has no filtration. Nor is it an AC regenerator. It purifies AC by its topology and the QRT enhancement and harmonisation effect. Nordost feels the QBASE Reference and additional QRT devices obviate the need for conditioners and regenerators. I'd agree... with a caveat. If your power is so poor that heavy filtration or AC regeneration is mandatory, then place what you need before the QBASE Reference. In other settings, the QRT concept will do a fine job of getting the most from your AC.

While we are talking caveats, two more spring to mind. First, although Nordost doesn't mention it, the QBASE Reference improves slightly over a couple of days as the QRT devices gradually spread their sphere of influence out across the system. Second, and probably most importantly, the QRT effect is cumulative and doesn't sit well with similar grounding treatments. If you like what something like Entreq, Shunyata, TriPoint or similar does, go with





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» that. None are intrinsically ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’; they do similar things in different directions. Don’t mix and match; nothing will suffer damage but you are creating an infrastructure ecosystem that effectively works against itself. It’s like alternate tunings on a guitar; pick one. It doesn’t sound good to use standard ‘EADGBE’ tuning on the bottom three strings and ‘DADGAD’ on the top three. The different harmonising effects of two or more different ecosystems might not sound as extreme as trying two different tunings on the same guitar simultaneously.

Two reasons

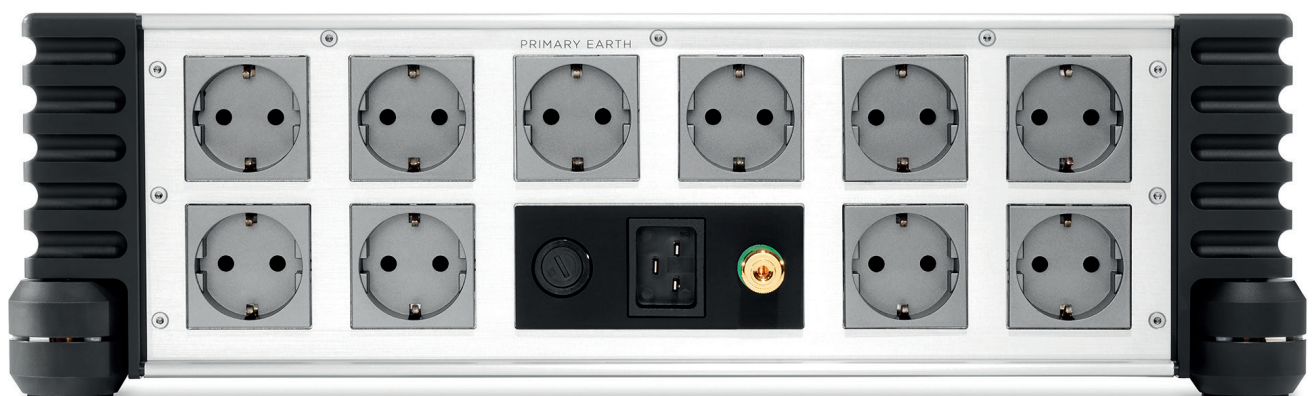
Discussing guitar tunings is deliberate for two more reasons. First, a track highlighting what the Nordost QBASE Reference does so well features a guitarist who used alternate tunings to great success; ‘Canadee-I-O’ by Nic Jones [*Penguin Eggs*, Topic]. Here, the QBASE Reference ticks all the modern audiophile upgrade boxes; it lowers the noise floor, opens out the stereo image in width and depth, and tightens and deepens the bass all the while imposing no fundamental character on the system itself. So far, so everything!

Nic Jones’s recording is so telling of what the QBASE Reference does so well because it lets the harmonic structure of both his playing and singing snap into focus. The delicate overtones and finger squeaks of his playing are made even more focused than usual... and that’s saying a lot. They aren’t exaggerated or given unnecessary emphasis; the QBASE Reference helps get the system out of the way of the music. His expressive guitar playing – the kind of playing that leaves other guitarists considering their life choices – is

given even more of a chance to shine. It’s not only that he seems more ‘there’ but that sense of immediacy and musical cogency is brought out extremely well.

The other guitar-related concept is more philosophical. The sound of a good guitar is the combination of great player and guitar, sympathetically recorded. That guitarist has spent years honing their craft and hundreds of hours practising that piece. The guitar is likely to have its intonation set perfectly and is tuned to perfection with strings at a balance point between being not so new that they sound jangly and bright and not so old that they sound muted and stretch out of tune too easily. The sympathetic recording is more than just a Shure SM57 six inches from the sound hole! Get any of these things out of kilter and what could have been a musical masterpiece just falls back into the musically ‘outstanding’ or worse. The QBASE Reference applies similar demands to the audio system, ensuring everything works harmoniously to bring out the best in any recording. This goes beyond the surface ‘lowering the noise floor’; it’s like reducing the risk of those ‘meh!’ sounding system days.

This is a somewhat abstract concept to get across. We are used to listening to changes in timbre, tone, pace, detail, soundstaging or dynamics, for example. And yes, the Nordost QBASE Reference does all those things well. But what it does that so few other things can do is tie the whole system together. It doesn’t matter if the music playing comprises vast, Mahlerian orchestral swells in a concert hall you could land a Boeing in, small-group jazz in a room so small, the soundstage smells of cigarette smoke, or pumps



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out wild distortion across a field full of muddy revellers... the Nordost QBASE Reference ensures the system treats the music with equanimity and respect.

It's a curious combination of making you relax into the music and wanting to listen more intently to those albums you know so well. That usually happens fleetingly in a system when all the Audio Gods are smiling on your equipment. Nordost's Audio Gods clearly smile more frequently, because that sense of a perfectly aligned system happens a lot with the QBASE Reference in place.

Wrinkle smoothing

By QBASE standards, the QBASE Reference is a hefty financial investment. But this also helps smooth out the wrinkles in Nordost's QRT platform relative to its cable lines. The QBASE Reference's price point puts it in Valhalla 2 and beyond territory, with a system and system infrastructure at a concomitant level of performance. With Valhalla 2 or Odin 2, if you put these cables on a more affordable system, the system will rise to the occasion, but it can only rise so far... and the same applies to the QBASE Reference.

Because of its layout, the Nordost QBASE Reference is only available in US, EU and Australian plug connections. The UK 13A power socket is just that bit too chunkinormous to fit, and the 10-socket QB-10 would become, at best, a QB-4. However, if Nordost made the QBASE Reference large enough to accommodate ten 13A plugs, it would need to be far taller and would likely need its own platform rather than a shelf on your rack. UK users can obtain an EU version equipped with Schuko sockets.

Nordost has always been about correctly establishing a system's foundations, and the QBASE Reference is a cornerstone in that regard. This is your next upgrade for those already in audio's First-Class lounge. If you are in the category just below that reference point, this could be your first upgrade. Nordost's QBASE Reference is that important to the sound of your system. +

Technical specifications

Type: AC Distribution system

Features: 10 (9+optional) inputs, including 1+1 Primary inputs for preamps and integrated amplifiers.

Star Earth Topology

Dual PCB Design, Symmetrical Live/Neutral Topology + Separate Grounding (with Voltage Directionality Technology)

Multiple, internal QSINE and QWAVE devices

Specifically optimised and modified QPOINT Technology

Pre-QKORE Ground Design

Resonance Control Sort Supports

Dimensions (WxHxD): 48x20x14cm

Weight: 11.75kg

Price: £18,000/\$18,000

Manufacturer Nordost

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