

# Nordost

## A "System" of Products

as reviewed by Danny Kaey



The online dictionary defines system as: the unity of several elements working together to achieve a goal. Wait, what's that have to do with Nordost? Quite a bit—permit me to explain: over the years, Hi-Fi has seen its share of "systems," Linn, Naim, anyone? Typically, we have associated these system approaches within the context of the entire audio ecosystem, i.e. start to finish, zero to hero approach, most closely associated with those oh so classic British brands. Perhaps more so than anyone—at least I can't think of any others near term—both of those Hi-Fi houses fundamentally ascribed to the notion

that the whole sum is made up of all the parts, and therefore the sum becomes *greater* than each individual component. Sure, many others have tried—and miserably failed—to distinguish themselves along those lines, alas, it appears that this *integrated* approach has become quite popular yet again.

Go figure, what's old is new, what's new is yesteryear's news! Welcome to the world otherwise known as... *Hi-Fi*. Now, Nordost clearly is no stranger to any Hi-Fi enthusiast, er excuse me, "*audiophile*". Since their beginnings in 1991, Nordost has become the quintessential reference in the world of high performance cables, including power, interconnects, and speaker cables. Looms and looms of Nordost labeled cables have graced many a Hi-Fi (and reviewer's systems), no doubt they have *earned* their stars and stripes. Mention the mere word "high-end" within the context of cables (read: more than \$100 cables) to an innocent bystander and watch the world come crumbling down with mayhem. More so than just about any other part of Hi-Fi, cables have opened up Pandora's box what with all sorts of gimmicks, gadgets, and other such drivel routinely being attached to *that* part of audio.

How refreshing, then, to know that Nordost never strayed, never *struggled* to send their clear and reassuring message since their inception: this isn't about the latest and greatest-what-gizmo-can-we-slap-on-this-product, this is about science, technology and the overall advancement of what many believe to be the most important *link* within Hi-Fi. Over the years, particularly my early years as audio ambassador, I—admittedly—struggled to recommend the science and art of cables: after all, how could a cable make such a dramatic difference, better yet, *improve* upon the sound of your system?

Well, they *do*. Heard it many times over—to varying degrees. Naturally, those that improve stay, those that don't... well, you get the picture: *TAXI!* So how then does the word *system* apply to the world of cables? Therein lies the genius behind Nordost's latest offering: if, utilizing one's technologies, a significant improvement can be achieved by simply replacing existing cable looms (interconnects, speaker, and power cables), then it *should* follow that further improvements along the power delivery process from your home's wall socket would *also* benefit from said application.

Thus we arrive at what I label Nordost's system: QBASE power strip, Qx power purifier, and Qv2 line harmonizer. The QBASE power strip (QB-8 in this case) is at first glance, just that, a power strip. All 8 sockets are mounted on an aluminum extruded chassis that is *substantial* in not only appearance, but feel. While I didn't have a scale handy to weigh it, it certainly feels heavy enough to not be considered a fly weight. Said to be a "mechanically tuned" construction, it quickly

becomes apparent that thought was put into this power strip, what with all the clever engineering *residing* inside the unit. Omitting any active filtering or active circuitry (imagine the superfluous claims they *could* be making given the substance of the device and the big "Do not open, no serviceable parts inside" stickers) the QB-8, no less performs a functional element as part of Nordost's power distribution system. To quote from their ad copy: "By eliminating any form of in-line filtering or active circuitry we maintain the lowest possible AC supply impedance, while a tiny lift in the Earth impedance of all but one of the output sockets routes the signal grounds directly to the center of the star and the clean Earth terminal. Clearly identified on the casework, this Primary Earth socket is at the center of your system's performance, literally and metaphorically. It defines both the order in which you connect your components and also, their listening priority in your musical enjoyment, allowing you to further optimize the performance of your primary sources." Sounds to me like the QB-8 is much more than just another power strip.





minute aspects of the overall sound, only to darken, dampen, and suck the *Gestalt*—that's life, for those of you in Rio Linda—of the music overall. Operation successful, patient *dead*. Ha! Thus, you may well imagine my overall surprise, when, after partaking in Nordost's now famously Oscar worthy demo performances at a recent Hi-Fi show, QRTs Qx power purifier did exactly what they claimed: remove the stuff you don't want and give you the stuff you do want, *without* side effects. Clever these people are...

Now then, on to the story on the Qx power purifier. Funny things happen as your music's signal travels from your source to your speakers. As it turns out, the last couple of feet of your home's power distribution are quite important. Imagine all the noise, HF, EMF, and RFI that gets sucked into your component's power supply being delivered straight up to your ears without any sort of filtering, conditioning, or other sort of *purification*—the effects of which ultimately disturb the overall sound quite a bit. Partnering up with a company called Quantum Resonant Technology, Nordost has essentially harnessed the net plus positive effects *that* company has to offer by way of being QRTs global master distributor.

In theory, QRTs idea is simple enough: by eliminating—minimizing—said HF fields and noise pollutants, the power entering your component's power supply will be that much cleaner, enabling the power supply to do its job in a far more efficient and cohesive way. The proof, as they say, is always in the *pudding*. Many companies claim to have solved these riddles, alas, few of them actually do. My experience with many—if not most—of these types of devices has been *negative*. Too often have I heard these devices improve certain,



The last, but by no means least, part of Nordost's puzzle is their Qv2 Line Harmonizer. Nominally appearing to be a carbon fiber bodied power socket "plug," Qv2 actually acts as a sort of sonic beam: "a carefully calculated range of pulsed frequencies generated from the original 50 or 60Hz waveform" are injected—*beamed*—into the signal. This is said to result in an overall dropped noise floor level, increased resolution and optimized power flow.

But wait... power line and general power conditioning is only half the story when it comes to what you hear. Indeed, cables make up quite a bit of the other half, and in this case, Nordost supplied me with their latest looms of new *stuff* fresh off their latest Norse series *relaunch*, aptly dubbed "Norse 2." I received speaker cables and interconnects (both balanced and RCA) from their Tyr 2 line as well as Frey 2 power cables. Having followed and being familiar with Nordost's original Valhalla and Heimdall cables (the Heimdall line spending quite a bit of time as my reference in years past), I was eagerly anticipating the arrival of Tyr 2 / Frey 2. Tyr 2, of course, carries forth the latest generation of the company's proprietary Micro Mono-Filament technology sending performance into ever higher echelons of auditory revelations. Let's face it; the stuff is just really good. Make that *great*.



Nordost's cable lineup has obviously received many accolades over the years and rightfully so. The cable world in particular can at times be looked upon with quite a bit of skepticism—I know I have had my fair share. *Snake oil*,

Rapunzel and Wolves alike, cables are easy to play with and make bold claims to. Sleezeballs and imaginary Über-Wunder-Wurlitzers aside, Nordost was always heard—and played—above the noise. Joe Reynolds, Nordost's affable front man patron, would never stand for such claims, however bold or otherwise. No, Joe was always very upfront and *honest* about the company's motto: to offer value and performance all in one. Certainly their now legendary show demos offer a story like no other (that I can think of). Walk into a Nordost demo and prepare to *hear* what the stuff actually does and how it works—*for reals*. Listen to how each new—higher up—cable eagerly dances up the sonic value ladder with more pop and pomp.

Connecting my trusted EINSTEIN pre/power combo, phono, and Playback Designs DAC via Tyr 2 interconnects and further downstream, Tyr 2 speaker cables (and Frey 2 power cables) to the Marten Djangos, I was ready to experience my own homebrew version of Nordost's cable demos. Well, not quite. *Ha!* Gotcha. Not so fast there, buster. While I couldn't resist the urge to have a quick listen to the setup, I did not start taking formal listening impression notes until about a week or two into the process. You guessed it: *burn in*. Quite frankly, it's become somewhat normative at casa K to give any new addition to the system some time to settle in—maybe it's all silly gobble-di-gook, maybe its *Maybelline*. Who knows. For what its worth, waiting those few weeks following a new upgrade does have an effect.

Imagine my surprise then when I selected the first track to listen to via this newly installed Nordost system. Calm, peace, serenity, blackness, *quietness*, startling realism, increase resolution. In about that order, those where in fact the opening notes I penned, well, er *typed* on my iPad. Of these, startling, perhaps best described the impact and weight of this newly found bliss and joy. Now I live out

by the beach in a house with an electrical system that was built back in the 60's, with the only change having come by way of an addition the former owners built (which includes my listening room on the 2nd floor) in the early 80's. Sure, the electrical system works fine: my coffee machine brews great coffee, the fridge keeps things *cool*, and, for what it's worth, the audio system hums along quite nicely as well. Point is, the electrical system in *this* house far supersedes the electrical junk I had to deal with back in the old place. Thus, when I first explored the idea of adding some sort of power filtration system to the mix, I was, well, you guessed it: skeptical.

Nordost to the rescue. Let's call that more like *revelation*. With the noise floor apparently having been dropped by a significant amount, music I was so familiar with in first place simply sounded far better than before. Ravel's Concerto in G (the Classic Records 45 version of many moons ago) never sounded more *alive* and dramatic at the same time. Dynamics and transients, particularly the attack and decay of notes, appeared far more dramatic than without the Nordost system in place. A simple, yet effective means of objectifying that experience was to unplug the pre/power combo and plug it directly to the wall sockets—music was still there (as I had heard it a million times), alas, that oh so special high-def, Technicolor *extension* was missing.

Cueing up tracks with both large and small dynamic swings of various sorts produced the same sort of startlingly stunning effect: each of the cuts simply portrayed that much more realism. One aspect of increased *realism*, for example, was the absence of transient smearing and overall increased focus each note was brought to life with. Without the Nordost system, each track sounded right, that is, I heard it, I *knew it*, I loved it, alas, when cued up *avec* Nordost each track played with more ease, pace and rhythm.

Upon ringing up Nordost's newest US team member, Paul Ritchotte, to express my assessment and findings, he simply replied "yeah, this new stuff is special, isn't it?" Well yes Paul, indeed it is. I suppose if anyone would know first hand, Paul would be a good start as he is in constant communication with Nordost's customers. From the results it produced, it seems that Nordost simply decided to move the entire line upstream—by several notches—where I would venture to guess the new Norse 2 series, especially the upper tier looms, approach if not even *catch up* to, yesteryear's Valhalla reference. Mind you, I didn't have the old Valhalla cables around to compare, but after speaking with a few industry peeps and customers alike, that *seems* to be the consensus. Ain't technology amazing? Cleverly and unlike so many others, Nordost knows how not to screw with their brand and customers.

Sell whatcha got and offer true *component* level upgrades every few years—hence retaining the value of the original stuff well beyond the norm. Alas, back to my stash of review notes. One particularly difficult piece of music to reproduce is Mino Cinelu's most terrific, self-titled debut album. Here we have complex rhythms, complex *instruments*, and an overall impeccable recording to contend with. On anything but the finest resolving systems, many tracks will simply overwhelm the playback system. Due to the densely populated instrumental arrangements with complex, rich harmonic structures and textures (African percussion, etc.) I have in fact heard these cuts to sound, well, *blah*. Tyr 2 / Fry 2 / Nordost power filtration in the system noticeably improved the renderings of each track. "Moun Madinina" with its multitude of percussive instruments in play, particularly brought out a fresh coat of paint. Individual instruments were far more clearly heard and brought to focus giving you a deeper insight into the music. I hate to sound clichéd, but heck, the stuff just *rocked*.



*Scandalous.* Effective. No matter which components (darTZeel integrated, Brinkmann Rönt tube power supply for Brinkmann LaGrange 'table) where plugged in and out of the QB-8 / Qx4 combo (adding to varying degrees layers of Qv2s, which provided the extra *ooohmpf*) the results where universally the same: increased focus. Quietness and overall enhanced dynamics (both macro and micro) are perhaps the attributes that came to mind most frequently whilst auditioning and running the Nordost *system*. Each new addition of Nordost *components* (hey, I think it's about time to start calling this for what it is: a component level upgrade), that is, QB-8, Qx4, Qv2 (to a lesser, yet inexplicably fundamental degree) and of course the Norse 2 series loom, brought forth incremental upgrades to the sound that I don't / wouldn't hesitate recommending anyone wishing to start off with one / any of these components to build out their system. Heck, if you can go for the whole shebang, then by all means do: it's that significant of an upgrade and makes you wonder what Nordost has in store with Valhalla 2 / Odin (now then, Odin... well, I suppose I can't even imagine the improvements that would bring forth, alas, hopefully we shall get to report on that someday). A recent visit to a music industry insider running merely 1 pair of

V2 interconnects (DAC to preamp) in an otherwise quite capable cable setup (let's just say, "reference grade") proved quite dramatic and startling indeed.

I suppose one could take apart the entire Nordost system, insert piece by piece back to its proper lineage and conclude that with each step, improvements are noticeable. Mind you, I said, *improvements*. Too often have I heard the game play out with sideways steps instead. Give some, get some. That sort of thing. Nordost proves otherwise. Oh, just in case you wondered if the Nordost QB-8/Qx4/Qv2 system worked and played nice with other brands of cables? Sure did. Tried it with my usual round of suspects, Kubala-Sosna (yummy), EINSTEIN (delicious), Zu (*positive* riot). Surprising. Given that most would attribute maximum gains with maximum buck, i.e. complete Nordost or *bust*. Well done—there's that brand thing, quality, quantity, integrity and measurability again.

So then, here's to many more rounds of musical bliss at casa K then—no doubt, Nordost upped the ante considerably—while mileage ultimately may vary, I'd wager to guess that most anyone would hear improvements similar to what I heard. Most highly recommended, A+++!

**Danny Kaey**

**QB-8**

Retail: \$1399

**Frey**

Retail: \$1349

**Qx4**

Retail: \$2699

**Tyr**

Retail: \$1999

**Qv2**

Retail: \$350

**Nordost**

<http://www.nordost.com>

