

# Equipment Report



## Nordost QBase Reference AC Distribution Unit

### The Hippocratic Oath

Jacob Heilbrunn

**I**n a collection of his essays called *Living With Music*, the novelist Ralph Ellison described how he set about constructing his own stereo system. Ellison, an ardent jazz fan and record collector, was eager to drown out any distracting noise from his neighbors as he worked in his small apartment in Harlem on his masterpiece *Invisible Man*. He built several pre-amplifiers and purchased a fine speaker system, a turntable, and a tape recorder. “I was obsessed with the idea of reproducing sound with such fidelity that even when using music as a defense behind which I could write, it would reach the unconscious levels of the mind with the least distortion,” he wrote. “But it didn’t come easily. There were wires and pieces of equipment all over the apartment.”

Sound familiar? Musical reproduction has come a long way since the 1940s, when Ellison initiated his lifelong pursuit of the absolute sound, but the quest for banishing electronic distortion remains a perennial one. One of the most direct ways of addressing it is by tackling it at the source, which is what the Nordost QBase Reference seeks to accomplish. A reference-level AC distribution unit, it seeks to follow the audio equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath—first do no harm. This 10-outlet AC distribution device contains no filters. It employs star-grounding to drain noise and other effluvia that may ride along the power lines.

Some of the goodies that it contains include Nordost wiring featuring its micro mono-filament technology, a WBT binding

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post that can be attached to a separate grounding device, a 20-amp IEC input, adjustable resonance control supports, and a dual PCB design. It also features two buttons in front that control what Nordost calls QSINE and QWAVE units. One button controls the QSINE and QWAVE positioned internally on the left side of the component, and the other controls the QSINE and QWAVE units located on its right side. When no lights are on, neither QSINE nor QWAVE is active. A blue light on either side indicates that the QWAVE has been

activated. A red light on either side indicates that a QSINE has been activated. And a green light denotes that both a QWAVE and QSINE on either side have been activated. The QWAVE is described by Nordost as AC line harmonizer and QSINE as an AC enhancer. Both, as I discovered, play a critical role in improving the sound.

Until the arrival of the QBase Reference, I had been using Nordost’s QB8 as well as reviewing a passel of other products that aimed to improve the electricity emanating from the wall, ranging from grounding devices to regenerators. With the insertion of the new QBase Reference, I heard an audible and immediate improvement in clarity, scale, bass extension, and detail. It does not filter the sound; rather, the QBase Reference lets it emerge in-

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## Specs & Pricing

**Input socket:** IEC C-20

**Output sockets:** US, EU, or AUS

**Electrical output:**

Equivalent to input

**Dimensions:** 19" x 8" x 5.5"

**Weight:** 25.9 lbs.

**Price:** \$17999

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tact. No device has come as close to performing invisibly in my system as the QBase Reference.

One stern test that I posed to the QBase Reference was a recent recording by the superb Icelandic pianist Vikingur Olafsson. On *From Afar*, he performs his entire program on both a grand piano and an upright from his childhood. The result is a spooky exploration of the sonorities produced by the pianos. The QBase Reference may not have stripped an entire veil away, but it seems to offer a more direct connection to the performance. Nordost's device rendered it easier to follow the musical lines as well as Olafsson's manipulations of the piano pedal, particularly on his old upright which made creaking and grunting noises on some of the pieces that he played. I'm not the kind of audiophile who goes nuts about those kinds of noises—not to mention the breathing of an instrumentalist—but there was no doubting that the QBase Reference made them more discernible. The QBase Reference, in other words, increased the overall resolution of the sound.

Something similar occurred on a Columbia recording of Leonard Bernstein conducting Gershwin's jaunty symphonic poem *An American In Paris*, which premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1928. This early Bernstein outing possesses all the exuberance and effervescence that the recent drama film *Maestro*, starring Bradley Cooper complete with a big schnoz, highlighted. The QBase Reference helped efface a vestigial scrim of distortion, allowing the expansive percussion section—snare drum, two tom-toms, woodblock, high hat, bells, crash and suspended cymbals—to emerge with more snap and alacrity. The brass section also had a greater sense of weight and authority, while trumpet solos had a heightened sense of swagger and sinuousness. When added up, the small details allowed to blossom by the QBase Reference offer a greater overall sense of musical realism that almost makes you expect it to declare, "I got rhythm."

Trumpet and tympani are also at the center of Bernstein's friend and mentor Aaron Copland's majestic "Fanfare for the Common Man," a tribute to the American soldiers and sailors fighting in World War II. It sounded uncommonly good on Eiji Oue's performance of it with the Minnesota Orchestra on Reference Recordings, the fabled label of Professor Keith Johnson. The principal improvement came in the sheer weight of the instruments—the bass drum was more resonant, and the trumpets

possessed a glorious timbral sheen. Overall, there was a heightened sense of drama and urgency to the fanfare when the QBase Reference was added to the sonic proceedings. Even from my upstairs kitchen, I could feel the additional heft that it provided to the tympani and bass drum in the form of increased air movement.

That sense of authority also came through on very small ensembles. Take a nifty recording featuring the German trumpeter Matthias Höfs succinctly titled *Hommage!* on the Es-Dur label. On a sonata in C major by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, the piping quality of piccolo trumpet was beautifully conveyed, while the bassoon honking played perfectly in tandem with nary a trace of blur or smear. For fear of exciting the wrath of my colleague Jonathan Valin, who regards the term as hopelessly imprecise, I have until now forborne in this review from employing the phrase "black backgrounds," but the QBase Reference helped situate the trumpet so precisely in the soundstage that I can no longer restrain myself from employing it.

Throughout, I had the feeling that having the QBase Reference in my system was equivalent to turning up the volume knob—the sound seemed to suffuse my room, never more so than on a new album on Blue Engine records called *To Whom I Love* by the 22-year-old Summer Camargo, a Julliard graduate who has joined the *Saturday Night Live* band as lead trumpeter. I first saw her play two years ago, together with three other trumpeters from Jul-

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liard, all of whom performed with Wynton Marsalis' Jazz At Lincoln Center Orchestra. As she soloed, her trumpet blasts resounding to the rear of the hall, Marsalis looked on incredulously, shaking his head in disbelief. The most memorable track on her maiden album is "80 Years of Joy," featuring a fantastic solo by her as well as some nimble work on the Hammond B3 by Joey DeFrancesco who passed away in 2022—it sounded like my system had been hot-rodged when I played it with the QBase. Even on an old jazz recording from 1926, like Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers playing "Sidewalk Blues," I was surprised by how much further my stereo reached into the soundstage thanks to the QBase.

A plethora of devices exist to cleanse, scrub, and purify the electricity coming from your wall. More than a few of them prompt audiophiles to swear by or at them. When it comes to the superb QBase Reference, I fall firmly into the former camp. **tas**