

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

QRT Qbase QB8 and Nordost Sort Kones

by Chris Thomas



For years it was cables, but these days there is little that rattles the cage of the committed audio puritan like mains conditioners and equipment support cones. Reviews of either is almost bound to elicit a rise in blood pressure and a trip to the keyboard to fire off an indignant mail to some audio forum or other. As for tiny, resonating metal bowls that sit on the wall? Don't even go there. Personally I think it is better to keep an open mind until you have at least had a listen. If you consider your electronics and speakers as just part of the overall installation, then providing them with the environment to perform is the way to keep a system working at the top of its curve. I am talking about system-building here which is a simple strategy aimed at releasing the full musical potential of your hi-fi by giving it the mains quality, equipment support and cabling advantages to do just that.

QRT (Quantum Resonant Technology) have close links with Nordost who also distribute their products. They design and manufacture interesting and unusual mains conditioners, although exactly how their 'field generator' technology works has always been beyond my scientific understanding. My ears however tell me that musically it does work; though with such products there will always be claims that the King has no clothes. That's a fine and healthy situation because when I first became involved in audio there were some prominent and respected pundits who insisted that all turntables sounded the same and the only differences between them were to be found on the spec sheet. It is perhaps fortunate that not everybody subscribed to those views. Time changes all things.

Nordost have recently introduced a range of individual equipment supports that they call Sort Kones. Sort means 'black' in Danish, though this refers to the nature of the musical backgrounds they achieve rather than their colour. They are considerably more sophisticated in construction than the old Pulsar Points, with different design aims. Sort Kones come in various material combinations and can best be described as resonance control devices. ▶

Internally, they incorporate a mechanically tuned, loosely coupled, three-element design. A circular base with a cut-out houses a coupling ball supporting a pivot post that rises upwards to make direct contact with the equipment via a soft curved edge. The whole unit is contained within a black casing marked on the outside with the particular configuration of metals. There are four different types available. The AS comprises an aluminium post and base with a steel ball, the AC adds a silicon-nitride ceramic ball, the BC utilises a bronze post and base while the most expensive, the TC, comprises a titanium post and base separated by a ceramic ball. These can all be employed in groups of three, four or even greater numbers. For the benefit of this review, I limited myself to the AS and TC versions. But why are they so tall? Sort Kones are about 58mm in height which means that, where shelf space is tight, they may be impractical. The ratio between the Sort Kones' height and their base-width is not arbitrary and the constructional elements, especially the dimensions, are absolutely critical to the performance of both the Nordost and Quantum products.



between them and the extensive resonance control technology that I already use. To this end I thought it most informative to assemble a 'clean' system using an entirely different set of components and incorporate the Qbase and Sort Kones in stages. I used an Ayre C-5xe

mp multidisc CD player and a pair of Focal's Diablo Utopia loudspeakers on their own stands. The amplifier choice was admittedly unusual. I chose a Carat A57 integrated amplifier because it is a very good low-cost amplifier that would never usually be deemed an adequate partner for the Focals. But I wanted to see how far the influence of the QRT and Nordost components could lift the system generally and the amplifier in particular toward a musical viability that I certainly doubted at the outset. To level the playing field even more I sat the electronics on two acrylic sheets straight onto the floor to remove the influence of another support system and used Chord Company Rumour cabling.

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QRT can supply their new Qbase mains distribution block in four and eight-way versions, configured for US, Australian and European markets (UK versions are six-way only, due to the size of the sockets). They have no Quantum technology inside them. Initially I found this puzzling before I understood that the Qbase is one component of a modular system. Including Quantum in the package would have increased its cost considerably and individual or collective Quantum units can always be added later. But there is also the issue of placement to consider. Where the mains distribution block would tend to sit outside or at the periphery of the system to allow for cable dressing the Quantum units must be sited physically at its heart to be at their most influential. This is an in-line mains distribution block containing no active components and certainly no filtering. The star-earthed system has the marked preamp outlet firmly at its centre. A very small lift in the earth impedance of every socket, except this one, routes the earth both to the centre of the star and also to the external connector fitted for use with supplementary grounding, like a sunken copper rod in the garden. As with Nordost, it became clear when speaking to QRT that the QBase is also a mechanically tuned device. Even the size and shape of the small raised lip the unit sits on has been carefully chosen and in many ways mirrors the prominent base contact edge of the Sort Kones. It is superbly finished and not surprisingly incorporates Nordost cabling internally.

I decided to look at both the Sort Kones and the QB8 (eight outlets, US-sockets) distribution block together. I did not want to just slip them into my home system because of the confusing interactions that would certainly occur



Obviously I listened to a lot of music over the time of the review but I want to illustrate the way things progressed by highlighting Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong's Ella and Louis CD (Verve) and the track 'Moonlight In Vermont'. This is a great recording, dating from 1956, produced by Norman Granz with only a high level of tape hiss to betray its age. Now, I confess I can listen to Ella any time and enjoy it. Even on an AM station in the car her tone, warmth and beautiful phrasing will always fascinate me. So even with a cold system unceremoniously strewn on the floor I needed no convincing as to

► her greatness. She embraces and dominates this song by making the lyric, pace and the phrasing all her own. With the untreated system the tape hiss was painfully prominent though and she sounded like a small woman, singing from her throat, through her nose, while Oscar Peterson's piano played a distinctly background role of fiddly embellishment rather than being involved in the song's progression. Armstrong's trumpet was thin, sour, shrill and uncomfortable. It made me want to turn the volume down and see what was on TV. The Diablo's tweeter gave the instrument full rein and also ensured that the glaringly obvious tape hiss became annoyingly intrusive as listening progressed. Evaluating this system at this stage I would say that the balance was wrong and that the amplifier was way out of its depth. I certainly couldn't have lived with it as it was. It promised much but cruelly failed to deliver anything approaching a satisfying musical performance. Time for the first change then, so the Qbase was installed, using the standard mains leads that are supplied with the equipment. The sound immediately took a massive leap upwards in quality. There was a new solidity and more powerful resolution, as if a serious amplifier upgrade

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a feeling of weight

to the piano that took a step forward to become part of the song. Ella's vocal is still a bit breathy though, but now with a tonal richness and depth that was previously absent. The rasp of Louis' trumpet no longer had me reaching for the volume control but it was still astringent and came as a shock every time it burst in. Overall though, the improvements were hardly subtle and the system now had a feeling of musical harmony that it never got close to before. So I began to add Sort Kones. I started with the basic AC models and slipped three beneath the Ayre CD player. First I felt the weight to ascertain where the transformer was and mounted one Kone directly beneath it and then balanced the unit with two others. Ok, the tape hiss was still there but it seemed to have detached itself from the music, making it easier to ignore. The body of the sound had increased still further and the separation was much improved. The Qbase QB8 had brought a growing feeling of Ella's control and the addition of the Kones firmly established that fact; she has amazing breath control. I installed another three AC Kones beneath the amplifier using the same positioning method and the system sounded unrecognisable from earlier. Now that beryllium tweeter became an asset instead of a liability. The trumpet still had enormous impact when it arrived, but now it was part of the

flavour of the song and it too had grown in colour and tone. It was still strident, but no longer painful. Oscar Peterson was now doing a lot more work. Earlier he was embellishing with floral lines but now his chords were underpinning and lighting the shape and direction of the song. His playing is a joy and so beautifully tasteful. The noise floor dropped and that tape hiss was becoming less and less noticeable.

At this stage I spent quite a while fiddling with positioning the Kones and found that this is critical to the performance you can wring from the components. I tried using four and then five under both CD player and amplifier. Up to five you can achieve really noticeable improvements with positional experimentation but I have to warn you not to rush this as it can become confusing and three Kones does look more elegant. It was time to swap the AC Kones for the Titanium-shafted variety. Wow, the improvements were much greater than I had expected and Nordost's prophesy of black ►



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► backgrounds was coming true. The sheer range of that amazing voice now had a gentle sweetness and the drops and rises in pitch had a fascination of their own. The tonal inflections and way she shapes her words, flowing some into each other, leaving others resonating by themselves brought home with a bang why she was one of the greatest female singers ever. Now you can appreciate that her tasteful vibrato, gently caressing and modulating the tails of the lyric is nothing short of magnificent because, at this level, you become very aware of her breathing and physicality. The music itself had grown, but, in true Nordost tradition, it was also obvious that the system’s presence and balance had also become a lot more full on. The aluminium/ceramic Kones are good but these are way better in every way. Slipping three inverted TC Kones between the floor and the speaker’s stand bases detached the soundstage from within the confines of the Diablos and stretched the depth too, bringing Ella even closer while knitting the band together as a firmer, even more concentrated unit.

Then finally I hooked the garden earth to its dedicated connector on the Qbase. The tape hiss magically fell away and the noise floor went with it. The system was a now million miles from where it started and the amplifier seems more than up to the job I doubted it was capable of. Then I started to disassemble the system to check the results backwards. I removed the Qbase first and the music immediately began to unravel. It

became clear that the QB8 is the rock upon which the other improvements are founded. I started with a great song, ill served by an audio system and ended up with a real performance and that was a massive leap to take. And remember that all this was without the aid of any dedicated racks or superior cabling. The Qbase QB8 is something of a bargain because system building from the mains socket not only works but I believe is fundamental and a really worthwhile musical asset to systems of all levels, even more so if you have a dedicated external earth. It has replaced the Thor in my own system. The AC Sort Kones too are excellent and will musically pay back their modest cost. The TC versions are expensive but the improvements they bring are not subtle. These are things you need to hear for yourself.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

QRT:

QB8 Distribution Block: \$1299.99

QB4 Distribution Block: \$799.99

Available in US, AUS and EU configurations

QB4 Distribution Block: UK only

Net: www.quantumqrt.com

Nordost Sort Kones:

AS – Aluminium/ Steel \$65 each

AC – Aluminium/ Ceramic \$80 each

BC – Bronze /Ceramic \$135 each

TC – Titanium /Ceramic \$350 each

Net: www.nordost.com

[Worldwide Distributor for Nordost and QRT:](#)

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