

NORDOST BLUE HEAVEN

By Chris Thomas

Photography by
Simon Marsh

A cable review is always an interesting proposition as it provides the writer with an almost infinite amount of holes and pitfalls that can be plunged into headfirst. Even in these more enlightened times cabling is still, surprisingly enough, a contentious subject. I find it hard to see why myself but it would appear that nothing causes the audiophile angst level to rise quite as much as cables and their contributions. Now we are entering the age where computer based music systems are more widely used, I anticipate that the furore that will follow when USB cable comparisons appear in the pages of this and other magazines will be a terrible thing to behold. Cables are the messengers of the system, conveying delicate, precious and easily corruptible musical information between electronic components and as such, have been regularly shot for many years for crimes they did not and could not have committed. With this in mind, perhaps a few personal guidelines forged through the heat of adversity and attested by my own ears might be a wise move so you can see where I am coming from where cable reviews are concerned.

Some years ago I realised that reviewing individual cables by inserting them in an existing system was unsatisfactory, but it was the way it had always been done. It encouraged the idea that cables were mere accessories and the results of doing things this way were a combination of luck (if it worked) and system chemistry rather than a balanced and informed assessment of what a particular cable choice might bring to a system. To say that this is an unreliable approach is a gross understatement and many a good cable suffered in this way.

This is why, in these more enlightened days, I will only review a complete cable

loom, regardless of which manufacturer is supplying it. This should comprise of everything from the mains leads, through the interconnects to the speakers and might also incorporate data cables if a computer is included in the system. It seems obvious to me that, to give both the cable manufacturer and the reader an honest and fair view of the performance, then there really should be a continuity of concept, design and manufacture that provide the cables with every opportunity to do their thing and see what they can bring to the whole musical experience. Viewed in this way the audio cable ceases to become an accessory and is more accurately viewed as an absolutely vital component to system quality.

Most of the serious cable manufacturers can provide a whole loom these days, but one of the companies who have been at the forefront of this idea is certainly Nordost, whose Blue Heaven range has just undergone a complete re-design. It now comes under the Leif (pronounced Life) banner and ranks second from top in a four cable family, with the revised Red Dawn above it and the all new Purple Flare and White Lightning in turn below. It might be number two in the family, but it is also right at its heart. While the other cables are available as interconnects and speaker cables, it's the Blue Heaven line that provides all the other essential options, from power to dedicated tonearm and digital cables, allowing customers to mix and match according to budget and priorities, but still maintain a coherent cable set up.

This is a bold ambition but Nordost are a very thorough company where every cable is individually designed for purpose. The one thing they do not do is to get in a pile of existing cables from manufacturers and decide which one they like the sound of before stamping their name on the outside. Each cable starts life as a series of specially drawn conductors designed specifically for a certain cable. The plating process meets clinical standards of consistency, purity and absence of contaminants. The Blue Heaven speaker cable uses 14 solid-core copper conductors of 14 AWG (American Wire Gauge), silver-plated and laid within an extruded FEP (Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene, which is very close to what we would call Teflon) ribbon, chosen for its exceptional dielectric properties. Designing their speaker wires to lie adjacent to each other as opposed to being wound allows Nordost to maintain excellent spacing accuracy along the entire cable length. The interconnect cables were supplied to me in both balanced and single ended configuration and are a fully shielded design. Internally they use 4 x 24 AWG, solid core copper conductors, also silver-plated by Nordost and wound in a minimum cross-section configuration with no extra padding. Again FEP is used, the connectors are quite deliberately low mass and Nordost also pay considerable attention to their termination and grounding. Making their own wires means that Nordost can ensure that those materials, methods and terminations are totally consistent across the whole family.

The mains lead, or power cord as Nordost like to call them, is the exception to this rule. Electrical standards dictate that the conductors must be stranded and experience shows that once you use a stranded conductor in a power cord, silver plating is actually detrimental. So the Blue Heaven mains lead uses stranded copper conductors, but also uses Micro Mono-Filament (MMF) construction. ►



► Borrowed from the more expensive cables in the Nordost line, this is confined in the Leif series to just the power cords and digital leads, critical applications in which the company feels it makes the greatest difference. MMF topology means that a thread of FEP is wound around each of the conductors before an FEP sleeve is extruded over them. This reduces the contact between the conductor and the FEP dielectric by more than 80% making them a virtual air dielectric design.

Perhaps no other company have extolled the power cable so exuberantly as Nordost as being the most important in the system and I am sure that many of you will have seen their demonstrations of this at Hi-Fi shows around the world. Having tested the theory myself many times it is something that I wholeheartedly agree with, though I do understand that it is an ideological step too far for many. It is available with a number of plug-types and it is worth mentioning that all Nordost cables are terminated at the factory in the US and cannot be re-terminated anywhere

else if the full performance is to be maintained. Because of this, second-hand offers of one metre interconnects that have been home-fashioned from hacked-down longer lengths are best avoided.

As ever, it is going to take a fair old time to run the whole loom in and even though Nordost's own burn-in machine, used by some of their dealers, can help reduce the wait, for me there is nothing like putting some long, hard hours into the system before making any hasty judgements. The other thing I have found with Nordost cabling is to get it as neatly installed as you can and then leave it alone. Don't move it around and certainly do not coil it. Just leave it be. It is certainly true that Blue Heavens of the past have been slightly glossy tonally, especially when fresh and this has only served to reinforce their undeserved reputation as bright, especially in certain systems that mercilessly exaggerated this. The new cable is quite different, surprisingly so in fact and impeccably balanced with no trace of any tonal lift through the bandwidth at all. What remains is the superb speed and rhythmic delicacy. There is no sense of blurring confusion whatsoever as the music remains assuredly cohesive from top to bottom and under all types of musical duress. When I speak about the speed I also mean the way in which the cable is able to focus its energies so efficiently as if it is carrying no excess fat or artificial weight as a handicap. The sound is always crisp, very transparent with a slight dryness in the bass perhaps. Installed into a dCS CD player, Vitus SS 010 or David Berning Pre One/Quadrature Z amplification driving a pair of Focal Utopia Diablos the Blue Heaven excels at sheer articulation in that it can show you musicianship and style through very small dynamic shifts and contrasts. Compared to a some of the pure solid wound cables I have heard it gives away a small amount in sheer

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Blue Heaven Leif Series interconnects:

1.0m pair £259.99

Blue Heaven LS speaker cables:

5.0m pair £954.99

Blue Heaven LS power cords:

1.0m £149.99

Blue Heaven is also available in tonearm cable and data cable configurations plus of course many lengths with various terminations for all applications. Contact dealer for details.

Manufacturer: Nordost Corporation, USA.

Email: info@nordost.com

UK Distributor: Atacama Audio

Tel: 01455 283251

Url: www.nordost-cables.co.uk



weight and overall scale, but I prefer the leaner and extra delicacy that the Blue Heaven provides plus of course the extra speed of musical delivery and recovery which allows the system to loose energy as fast as it gains it. The Blue Heaven skips through the music with remarkable rhythmic focus and intensity where so many cables seem to wade through.

After about three weeks of daily use the cables began to undergo a change. There was always a slight question mark in my head over their absolute resolving power through the midband and after initially feeling very complimentary of their impeccable balance they seemed to grow a little soft and somewhat dull. But, gradually a new performance level was taking shape and they just grew in sophistication and balance as the weeks rolled by. What emerged was an even livelier cable set than before with an extra edge and clarity to their dynamic resolving power. The system had put on some weight, but in all the right places, drawing the electronics together as a more enjoyable whole with an even better feeling of stability to the musical picture. Now the system was sounding like a single musically focussed unit rather than a collection of expensive components.

One of the interesting things about assessing a cable loom is that you can reverse engineer the process by replacing just one of the cables and listening to the effects it has on the whole. I changed the balanced interconnects that carried the signal from the CD player to the amplifier with a more expensive cable from another manufacturer. If ever any validation was needed for the complete loom approach this was it. I am not saying the system sounded bad. In fact the sound became warmer and fatter, but the rhythmic togetherness and the whole swing and beating pulse of the music had vanished. Now it stuttered along like so many high-end systems I hear. It was certainly impressive hi-fi, but the detailed focus and explicit telling of the musical story was severely compromised. This is where the Blue Heaven and the full loom approach really show its benefits and strengths. The way the system responds as the going gets tough, especially during multi-instrumental passages, is so much better because the cable's influence and uniformity of speed brings a sense of harmony and balance that the mix 'n match approach simply cannot match.

The Blue Heaven seems to me to suggest a slight shift in the Nordost sound and it is a move that I think will give the range a far broader appeal. This is a very sweet set of cables indeed that can offer tonal balance that is just about perfect with a depth, image stability and quietness that you normally only hear in much more expensive models. Combine this with the virtually unique speed and rhythmic delicacy that has always been a hallmark of the Nordost approach and you have a cable that is not as brutal when it comes to exposing system flaws as it once was. Some will still prefer the heavyweight, bigger scale of the multi-strand heavy copper cabling on the market. They will like the warmth and cosy musical weight and punch of those cables as opposed to the Blue Heaven's stunningly articulate and expressive abilities. It is also true that, while the Blue Heaven has notable resolution, the monofilament cables higher up the price scale take this and pure musical transparency to entirely new heights of sophistication. But, for systems of all prices and qualities, the Blue Heaven represents a brilliant solution to an age-old problem and for very reasonable money too. +

