

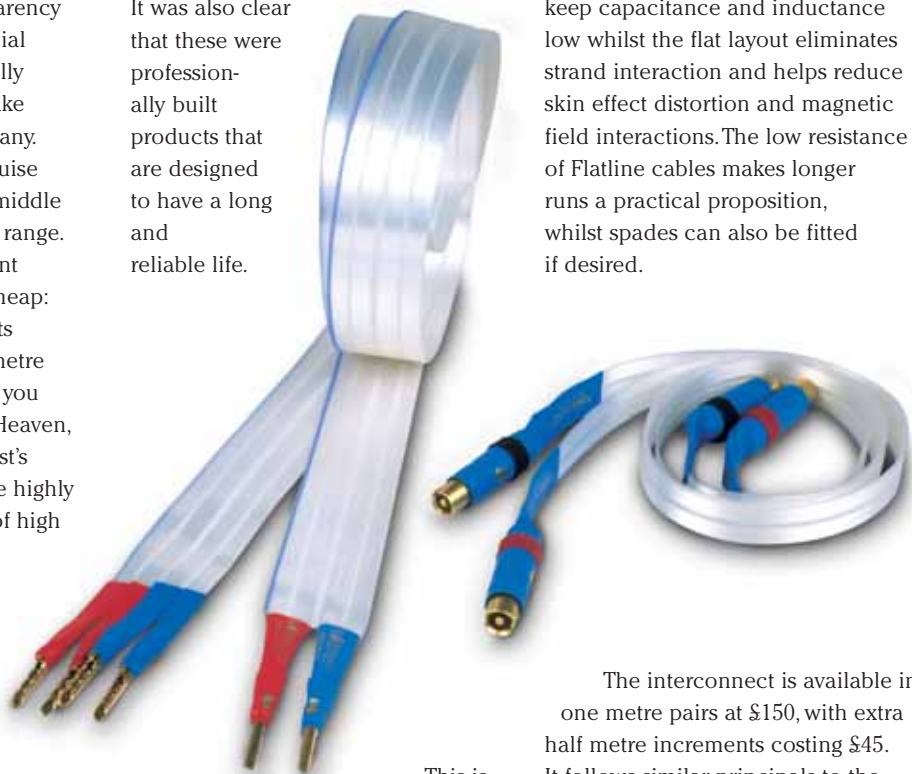
Nordost Blue Heaven Cable Audio Nirvana?

by Dave Davies

Nordost's 'high end' cables such as SPM and Quattro Fil have quickly gained an enviable reputation for startling performance, particularly with regard to overall transparency and speed. Those rather special products come with an equally special price tag that will make them but an aspiration for many. Blue Heaven (in its mark 2 guise since August '99) sits in the middle of the Nordost Flatline cable range. Let's not assume for a moment though that that means it's cheap: a metre interconnect set costs around £150, whilst a three metre set of speaker cables will set you back £462. This places Blue Heaven, which remains one of Nordost's most popular products, in the highly competitive middle ground of high performance cables.

The first thing that struck me on unpacking the cables was their sheer quality. Clearly well constructed with the recommended orientation well marked, the speaker cables sport Nordost preferred low-mass 'Z' plugs whilst the interconnect is fitted with Neutrik gold RCAs. Both plugs formed an immediate, tight and fuss free connection. The flat cable

construction is attractive and compared to the weighty silver coloured Audioplan hose I normally use, is exceedingly room friendly. It was also clear that these were professionally built products that are designed to have a long and reliable life.



This is borne out by the limited lifetime warranty offered by Nordost.

The speaker cable is constructed of 72 OFC conductor strands, each plated with 50 microns of silver.

Importantly, each conductor is ultrasonically cleaned to remove any contamination before being encapsulated in Teflon. This process helps keep capacitance and inductance low whilst the flat layout eliminates strand interaction and helps reduce skin effect distortion and magnetic field interactions. The low resistance of Flatline cables makes longer runs a practical proposition, whilst spades can also be fitted if desired.

The interconnect is available in one metre pairs at £150, with extra half metre increments costing £45. It follows similar principals to the speaker cable but with only 30 silver plated OFC conductors. Din terminations are also available, or at extra cost, balanced XLR connections.

So, how would the Blue



Heaven sound? Hooked up to the little Morgan Audio Deva amp, CD and to my Ruark Paladins, there was an immediate and obvious difference over my usual (and somewhat more expensive) Audioplan MusiCable. The prime virtues of the latter are a good level of transparency and speed, coupled with excellent bass definition, weight and staging. The Blue Heaven takes a quite different approach. From the first notes its qualities were obvious: detail retrieval, air and speed were improved and the soundstage was a little more open and forward. On the negative side bass was a tad lighter and slightly less well defined. It was clearly a cable from the Nordost stable, showing many of the qualities of its bigger brothers, in particular it's remarkable dynamic range and discrimination.

On Lyle Lovetts 'North Dakota' (from *Joshua Judges Ruth* MCAD 10475) there was an immediate increase in definition and fine detail. Little instrumental subtleties like the way the cymbal was being struck, the sound of Lovett's fingers on his acoustic guitar strings, the decay as each note died and the delicacy of the piano work were more obvious – I didn't have to dig for them in the mix. This I think was brought about by a combination of increased clarity and sheer dynamism. Lovett and Rickie Lee Jones' vocals were more precisely defined and stable. Stage depth was a little wider than with the Audioplan but not as deep, the vocals were projected 2-3 feet forward of the speaker plane, with stage depth that felt much more bounded by the rear wall than with the Audioplans. Bass was deep and reasonably well defined but not as powerful or harmonically rounded. This was hardly a problem – just a sign of a different approach.

Moving to the new Steely Dan Album *Two Against Nature* the Nordost cable came into it's own.

The slightly lighter bass balance made the most of the punchy production and the layers of detail in the complex mix were very clearly laid out. From the breathy backing choruses where every word was clearly defined, to the snap of the leading edge of driving bass notes and precise sound of the muted horns backing 'What A Shame About Me'. Here I felt that the Nordost had a definite edge over the Audioplan which whilst it did a fine job with the album felt that crucial bit slower and less well defined. Given that the Audioplan is some 20% more expensive than the Nordost, this was a creditable performance.

On classical material the qualities of the Nordost also shone through, although the advantage here was slightly less clear cut. Solo violin tone was very well captured, the splendidly natural sounding Fone recording of the *Violins of Cremona* with Salvatore Accardo (Fone 94 F 04 CD), sounded, well, splendidly natural. With lots of airy acoustic and a lovely tone, each string was seemingly clearly differentiated as the bow danced over it. Massed strings too, in orchestral pieces such as the Intermezzo from Mascagni's 'L'Amico Fritz' (Fone 93 F 10 CD) were well captured and the effect as the applause bursts out at the end of this live recording puts you there in the concert hall. The applause itself has no trace of that metallic harshness that can highlight failings in lesser cables, a sure sign that things were right. The Audioplan cable also did a fine job with these pieces, adding a touch more warmth and a further degree of realism, but it was a close run thing between the two. The Audioplan ultimately wins out because of its uncanny ability to trace a melodic line.

In summary my Audioplan MusiCable is more 3D and 'solid', mak-

ing performers that bit more tangible. It has an innately organic quality that favours acoustic recordings and instruments. It has more bass grunt and offers a deeper soundstage, but Blue Heaven is a very credible alternative, offering a different viewpoint that happens to be cheaper too! The Nordost cable has a touch more delicacy, and makes you much more aware of the finer dynamic nuances of a recording. If it had just a little more bass grunt I'd be very sorely tempted. As it stands it poses a very real challenge to my more expensive cable bettering it in terms of speed and overall transparency. It's also heart-warming to know that a good proportion of the more costly Nordost 'big brother' cables performance is available at a relatively modest cost. If you are planning to purchase cables in, or anywhere near this price range (up as well as down!) Nordost Blue Heaven is strongly recommended for audition. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Blue Heaven Rev II Loudspeaker Cable

Price: £462.95 per terminated 3 metre pair.
£58.95 per half metre stereo increment.

Blue Heaven Interconnect Cable

Price: £149.95 per terminated metre pair.
£44.95 per half metre stereo increment.
Din plugs available at same price, Balanced XLR + £29.95.

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