

# the absolute sound

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## Nordost Purple Flare Cable

My Blue Heaven

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**T**he original Nordost Blue Heaven cable was, for many years, one of my budget reference wires. It debuted in 1994 and featured Nordost's now iconic Flatline cable design. I knew this cable backwards and forwards—its many strengths (excellent transparency and detail) and its modest weaknesses (a slightly upward frequency tilt and a hint of opacity and edge in the top octaves). Blue Heaven has been improved at least a couple of times since I reviewed it. However, Nordost's Purple Flare, considered a rung below the current incarnation of Blue Heaven, doesn't just conjure up fond memories. It's a little trip to heaven of its own.

The visual look of Purple Flare speaker wire is unadorned classic flatline. It comprises fourteen 15-gauge silver-plated 99.9999%-purity OFC solid-core conductors in FEP (Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene) insulation. The interconnect is fully-shielded with six 26-gauge, silver-plated 99.9999% OFC solid-core conductors wound in a minimum cross-section configuration—a design Nordost uses to eliminate unnecessary fillers or padding elements. Insulation is also a high-grade FEP. There are two termination options: balanced or single-ended. Like all Nordost cables, Purple Flare is manufactured and hand-terminated in the U.S.A.

When a new wire enters my system for an initial round of listening, my habit is to glean an overall impression of the cable's signature. It's a casual, even subliminal process that helps me get

a handle on tonal accuracy, dimensionality, dynamic anomalies, general transparency, transient attack, and so on. The more time I spend with the wire, the more specific and critical these impressions become. Straight out of the blocks the Purple Flare evinced sprinter's speed and did not suggest any serious tonal-balance discontinuities. Its treble range was wonderfully free from constriction. Not overly brilliant, it was, on balance, as open and transparent as I've heard from a cable in this class. It was highly revealing of the finer dynamic gradations and low-level details of well-recorded orchestral works. (The huge orchestra required for Ashkenazy and the Berlin Philharmonic's performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* [Decca] is a superior test for this purpose—particularly the quieter moments featuring the delicate and colorful interplay between clarinet, bassoon, and oboe.)

During Norah Jones' "My Dear Country" from *Not Too Late* [Blue Note], there was a natural amount of vocal air riding along with her voice, which imparted a relaxed warmth that settled the track into a smooth groove. This trait was also on display during James Taylor's "Only One" from *That's Why I'm Here* [Columbia/Legacy], a track that catches the clarity of Joni Mitchell's high harmony during the chorus. Like tapping a fine crystal goblet with a fingernail, the "ring" of Mitchell's soprano was pristine and impeccably defined. I can't say that the Purple Flare fully explored the dimensional component that exists on this pop track, but more on that later. Still, Purple Flare

## SPECS & PRICING

Price: Speaker: \$518/2m,  
\$596/3m; Interconnect:  
\$260/1m, \$365/2m

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really shines in the midband with a slightly forward, driving energy that imparts a dynamic liveliness to all genres of music.

Tracks that I'm especially attuned to, like Rosanne Cash's "If I Were a Man" from *10 Song Demo* [Capitol Records], were as familiar as an old friend. This is a cut where you can select the right volume and almost forget it is a recording as Cash eerily begins to materialize in the room. And it's not just the vocal or the reassuring, almost metronomic strumming of the acoustic guitar that springs to life; it's the sound of the strings radiating off the soundboard, amplifying the note and projecting its energy in your direction.

One of the reasons I continue to listen to familiar tracks like Holly Cole's "Take Me Home" on *Temptation* [Capitol Records] is because the sparseness of the arrangement rewards the ear with a lot of reverberant information, low-level detail, soundstage layering, and the dimensionality of Cole's voice. The Purple Flare left the familiar cues in place and lined up remarkably close to my current reference cables, the Wireworld Platinum and Synergistic Research Element Tungsten.

One of the few tonal concessions Purple Flare makes to reference-caliber wire is the lowest bass, where it is not quite as full in extension or bloom. Also there's a bit of coolness in the middle treble that leads to a tiny hint of etch in the sibilance range, although overall this critical region is strikingly free from grain or grit. Transient speed is also very good but, as with the aforementioned sibilance region, there remains a bit of hardness on smartly struck percussion and high-intensity brass.

No doubt about it, Purple Flare has significant macro-dynamic punch. Orchestral crescendos, full-blown percussion breaks, brass section blasts, and so forth are impressive. However, after listening to a great deal of solo piano from Keith Jarrett to Evgeny Kissin, I noted that the Purple Flare reduces micro-information just enough to suggest a bit of damping of the player's touch during lightening-quick arpeggios, such as those flying from the fingers of Kissin's right hand. Similarly, low-octave chords that typically rev up the soundboard with wave-upon-wave of resonances come off just a bit lighter in color and power.

The best cables I've heard reveal ambient and reverberant cues that ultimately give shape to the soundstage. They define the venue's scope, and if the recording is especially good, its wall boundaries. As good as the Purple Flare is, some of this bass bloom and ambient expansiveness was curtailed a bit during Vaughan Williams' *The Wasps* Overture [Chandos]. The stage narrowed ever so slightly and there was the distinct sense that orchestral sections were cozying up to one another a little more closely. That said, perspective please! These minor flaws will seem almost silly when the Purple Flare is placed in context with the entry-level audio systems it likely will be paired with.

My recent experience with WyWires Blue (a little cool, pacey, and highly dimensional), Analysis Plus Silver Oval (superb balance and a sweet, smooth treble response), and now Nordost Purple Flare continues to reinforce my opinion that the world of superior entry-level and mid-priced cables is actually expanding rather than contracting. And for those naysayers who promulgate the view that wire is wire—blah, blah, blah—I can only recommend they listen to this exciting segment.

Far be it from me to preach to anyone on a budget, but let me offer two cents of advice. No one I know builds a system around cables. Rather, cables permit us to realize a system's potential. They add polish and patina and need to be selected in proportion to the system they'll be use with. How much to allot for wire? There's no hard-and-fast rule. But Nordost's Purple Flare certainly makes the decision less painful and expensive. I can't say it enough—Purple Flare is like a little trip to (Blue) Heaven for those of us earthbound on a budget. **tas**

  
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MAKING THE CONNECTION