

Nordost Valhalla 2 Interconnects, Speaker Cables and Power Cords

by Marc Mickelson, May 12, 2014

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We audiophiles recognize them, even if no one else does: Sondek, WATT/Puppy, Nait, Giya -- some of the most prominent high-end audio product names. But when it comes to cables, there is a scarcity of similarly memorable names, save for one. Valhalla, Nordost's once top-of-the-line cable line, has been around for an eternity in audiophile terms. It was introduced in 2000 and existed unchanged until the middle of last year, when Valhalla 2 debuted. I came late to the game with Valhalla; I first heard and wrote about the interconnects and speaker cables in 2004. There was no denying their tremendous speed and extreme clarity, the sound being resolutely about omission -- the lack of any easily identifiable sonic character -- rather than commission.

At the time of its arrival and for years thereafter, Valhalla resided at the top of Nordost's deep and wide product line, but all of that changed with the introduction of Odin around 2005, which thoroughly

eclipsed Valhalla's price and, by many reports, its speed and clarity too. When you investigate all that has been changed from original Valhalla to Valhalla 2, which Nordost affectionately calls "V2," that gap in time between Odin's and V2's introduction begins to make sense. Valhalla 2 isn't merely the latest version of Nordost's most venerable cable line; it's a comprehensive reassessment of audio cables in general.

A quick glance at any of the Valhalla and V2 cables will reveal that some obvious differences exist. But what's outward is only an expression of what's inside -- not just in terms of the wire itself, but also the terminations and, most importantly, the overall philosophy. Despite this, some things do stay relatively the same. The Valhalla and Valhalla 2 interconnects continue to use Nordost's Micro Mono-filament technology. This involves winding Teflon monofilament thread around each of the conductors, which are then bundled and encapsulated in FEP Teflon, creating a



virtual air dielectric while maintaining the cable's distinct geometry. Original Valhalla interconnects used eight eight-nines copper conductors with 78 microns of silver overlaid, with the speaker cables using 40 such conductors divided into four groups of ten. V2 interconnects use ten 24-gauge silver-over-copper conductors, with the speaker cables having 28 22-gauge conductors using the same materials. For V2, however, Dual Micro Mono-filament technology, which replaces the single Teflon filament with a twisted pair of thinner ones, is used. Nordost calls this "an improved version of Micro Mono-filament," one of whose benefits is improved mechanical damping of the conductors. Micro Mono-filament with silver-over-copper conductors debuted with original Valhalla. Dual Micro Mono-filament debuted with Odin, V2 being its second use within the Nordost line.

The greatest change from Valhalla to Valhalla 2 is with the connectors, which replace the various and

very good off-the-shelf options that Nordost had employed. V2 marks the introduction of Holo:Plug RCAs, XLRs, spades and tonearm DINs -- connectors with a real difference.

These elegant-looking interfaces were designed to be low in mass and mechanically optimized for not only the connection between each cable and the component with which it's used, but also between the connector and the conductors. Close inspection shows connecting pins on the RCAs and XLRs that are chunky and look to be ever so slightly flared to increase surface contact. The XLRs are devoid of the locking mechanisms, which, given the tight fit, are unnecessary. The fit of the RCAs is even tighter, the inner diameter chosen to provide a "mechanical wipe" of the connection to remove oxidation when the cables are inserted or removed. The Holo:Plug connectors are available only on Valhalla 2 cables right now, but they will surely appear on other Nordost products in the future.





The emphasis on mechanical optimization, which began with Odin and migrated through Nordost's Leif and Norse lines, reaching its current apex with the Valhalla 2 cables, represents a new frontier in audio-cable design. Wire may indeed be wire, but it is also affected by the resonance that plagues all other pieces of an audio system to varying degrees. Nordost cites benefits as wide ranging as improved coherence and more accurate harmonic information. Such claims are normally easily dismissed as marketing fluff, but, as you'll read, there is really something to them when it comes to V2.

If you believe in the stem-to-stern approach to audio cables -- that is, using the same cables throughout the system, not mixing and matching -- Nordost has you covered with Valhalla 2. In addition to interconnects of the single-ended and balanced varieties and speaker cables in various configurations, there are V2 power cords, digital cables and a tonearm cable. I received all of these for review, and while I put them into the system one cable or pair at a time, just to hear how the results accumulate, my comments for this review are the product of using Valhalla 2 from wall outlet to speaker, with Nordost Quantum power products making for a complete, unadulterated, systematic approach and nothing but. Even so, you can extrapolate from what I say if, for instance, you decide to add a pair of interconnects or a single power cord, although easily the greatest perceived difference was achieved with V2 speaker cables, perhaps because they are used at such a critical junction within the system.

And while Nordost may frown on this recommendation, there is one cable here that I can foresee some audiophiles buying on its own to use within a full system of other cables: the Valhalla 2 tonearm cable, which really did reveal more about the cartridges with which it was used than any other tonearm cable I've

used, save for one: Nordost's Odin. I won't say it's better than Odin, which would probably get my vote for the single most impressive length of wire I've ever used, but it similarly caused me to speculate that it may be more sonically important than the tonearm itself, if hearing the most from your records is the goal. In any case, be ready to write the check if you hear either V2 or Odin connected to your tonearm of choice.

Swapping audio equipment, including cables, at least for me, doesn't often create "Wow!" moments. My system is at a level where the room for "Wow!" is almost nil, the differences between



two amps or phono cartridges, for instances, often eliciting a firm "Hmmm" instead.

Yet, with V2, "Wow!" is exactly what happened, though not for any one or two distinct reasons, but rather for top-to-bottom performance that was truly dazzling. As with original Valhalla, V2 revealed an immensity of musical information, nearly to the point of overload, but it also sounded immediately correct and composed in doing so. There was leading-edge speed without



undue crispness and a tapestry of harmonic information that was more vibrant and complex than it had ever been -- and obviously so. "Sheds light without sounding light" say my listening notes, in an attempt to express that while the presentation was massively detailed, this didn't come at the expense of bleached tonality or emaciated texture. There was just more of everything that constitutes the music and a more fully realized sense of completeness along with it.

Detail is a broad term that includes so many things that make up the musical signal. A portion of the detail the V2 cables uncovered with ease were harmonics, the secondary tones that every instrument exhibits. These were more apparent than ever before, better differentiating the unique voices of instruments and especially the technique of the people playing them.

Shortly after the V2 cables arrived and were installed throughout the system, a hard-to-please audiophile friend of mine visited, during which I played DJ, so he could not only hear my system -- especially, at that time, the Wilson Alexia speakers -- but also some of the LPs I had been gushing about for many months. I told him a bit about V2 before playing some of the best LPs from the Music Matters catalogue, like Lee Morgan's *Candy* [Blue Note/Music Matters MMBLP-1590] and Sonny Rollins' *Vol. 1* [Blue Note/Music Matters MMBLP-1542]. Astute jazz collectors know that both of these are mono LPs, and as such the normal sense of a soundstage is not so much compressed to the center as replaced with a different kind of sonic environment, one that relies

more on the tone and timbre of the instruments than their placement in lateral space. V2 absolutely shone with these LPs, the horns propelling into the room and decaying realistically, their full harmonic palette on display. There was, for lack of a better term, an aura around Morgan and Rollins, a mesmerizing correctness that disarmed the critical area of the brain, the suspension of disbelief being that much more final. My picky

friend agreed and has since heard the same thing in his system, though with just a single pair of V2 interconnects.

This network of overtones was also a consequence of V2's coherence, both tonal and dynamic. It's one thing for an audio product of any kind to parse the musical signal but another much more significant thing to reconstruct it in a convincing way afterwards. V2 was truly convincing in the way it relayed all of that information from the top of the frequency range to the very bottom without emphasizing any region. Playing well-known cuts like "Words of Wonder" from Keith Richards' *Main Offender* [Virgin V2-86499] or "Get Behind the Mule" from Hope Waits' self-titled debut CD [Radarproof Records 1019] showed just how coherent V2 was, not just tonally but also dynamically. These cuts are definite workouts for any system, and the density of their bass must be as well preserved as the quick snap of their drums, and as they swell in power the system must project the necessary power without turning hard or petering out. Of course, this is as much the responsibility of the amplifier as anything, but the V2 cables keep it all locked in perspective, the presentation remaining fully resolved no matter the music's demands.





For the first time, V2 clearly illustrated to me what some listeners mean when they cite "timing" in describing sound. Of course, I understand the concept of time and its importance in reproduction, but I've never quite grasped how it manifests itself outside sources and speakers. With V2, the density of harmonic information and, moreover, its overwhelming rightness (for lack of a better term) gave the impression of everything arriving in proper time, with a distinct lessening of

the Telarc's was a head-scratcher, the mass of the orchestra sounding powerfully real and again convincing.

These are not the kind of cables you must match with particular electronics or speakers -- or avoid using with others. So often, a highly detailed presentation like that from V2 is a mirage, the product of the goosing of one region or another. That's not what happens with V2 -- just the opposite, in fact. There is



overshoot or smear and an increase in image focus. While I could specifically cite those Blue Note mono recordings here, in truth this was clear with all recordings, even certain classical LPs and CDs whose soundscapes are more diffuse than the well-focused sound of solo guitar or piano. I have many Telarc LPs and CDs, and they have historically been criticized for not imaging as well as Mercury stereo recordings, for instance. Yet, with the V2 in the system, the sense that there was anything worth criticizing from any of

no highlighting, backlighting or soft lighting anywhere -- the presentation is too evenhanded for that. Instead, these cables come by the wealth of detail naturally -- in more ways than one. It is naturally rendered and integral to the nature of the musical signal. While no cable will fix sound that is fundamentally lacking, the V2 cables will both let you know about the problem and not emphasize it to the point of distraction. This is the kind of truth you can handle; with the best equipment you may find it impossible to live without.



For quite a while before the Valhalla 2 cables were introduced, I used a set of Nordost Frey 2 interconnects, speaker cables, power cords and a tonearm cable, initially to acquaint myself with Nordost's newest wares and then in anticipation of the V2 cables' arriving. Frey 2 sits in the middle of Nordost's Norse series, which doesn't make it a budget cable by any means: interconnects cost \$1460 per meter pair, with the speaker cables running \$2925 per two-meter pair. After a certain point in my listening, I grew to rely on Frey 2 as electronics and speakers were moved into and out of the system, their ability to let the qualities of ancillaries shine through becoming both apparent and very useful for reviewing.

Valhalla 2 and Frey 2 definitely sound like they come from the same maker, as generalizations -- highly resolving, quick paced, coherent, composed -- are the same for both. I wondered aloud before switching from Frey 2 to Valhalla 2 if there would be enough improvement -- as opposed to mere difference -- to warrant such a jump in price. I had convinced myself that the comparison would cement the worth of Frey 2, as it would come exceedingly close to the much more expensive Valhalla 2.

Or so I thought. Just as Nordost demonstrates at shows with its very persuasive cable demos, the jump from Frey 2 to Valhalla 2 was not only clearly audible, it was audibly significant. While V2 sounded even more resolving, especially spatially, it paradoxically was also slightly more mellow and present. With much audio equipment, mellowness and resolution are opposites, but with the best of the best, high resolving power can coexist with a less insistent quality, and so it does with V2 cables. Bass power and heft were also greater -- again, perhaps as a function of greater overall resolution. While Frey 2's resolving power seemed to be a half-step ahead of everything else it achieves, this was not the case with Valhalla 2, underscoring its overall coherence and completeness.

There are two apparent lessons to be learned from this comparison. First, while there is really nothing

to criticize about Frey 2, it definitely has a more apparent character than Valhalla 2. Second, the law of diminishing returns is by no means universal. You pay a lot more for Valhalla 2, but you also get a lot more in return -- a meaningful upgrade to your entire system (provided that your system is up to the task).

In his recent e-mail to the *The Audio Beat*, reader Michael Doukas made a point pertinent to this review -- and any review of audio cables. Mr. Doukas begins, "I can't stand reading threads that claim there is no difference between cables. . ." and from there he goes on to proclaim, "I am a cable believer," underscoring a point that seems self-evident to me and probably to you: sonic differences between cables *do* exist, just as they do with speakers or amplifiers.

In my experience, there is no better line of audio cables to prove this point than Nordost Valhalla 2. While the ways in which I discussed the sound of V2 were rather general -- relying on terms like detail, coherence and completeness -- this doesn't translate to sound that is so broad as to be difficult to hear and appreciate. You will hear what Valhalla 2 is capable of, and you will hear it with any ancillary equipment, although the more resolving the equipment, the more obvious the performance.

I made two points in my response to Michael Doukas's e-mail. First, perception isn't a constant -- we all don't have the same ability to appreciate what audio equipment achieves, so there are many people, and even some audiophiles, who simply deny that anything special exists. Second, skeptics who flood Internet forums with negativity don't have listening to music as their hobby. Instead, it's flooding Internet forums with negativity. The bickering is their hobby, not listening to music.

I doubt that even Valhalla 2 will make believers out of those who deny that one cable can sound different from another, but that doesn't really matter. For people who use their ears and appreciate the broad and fine points of reproduced sound, V2 will cause a chorus of "Me too!" while reaching for the checkbook.



Prices: Interconnects, \$7599 per meter pair; speaker cables, \$9599 per six-foot pair; power cords, \$4999 per four-foot length.

Warranty: Limited lifetime.

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Associated Equipment

Analog: TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable; Graham B-44 Phantom Series II Supreme and Tri-Planar Mk VII Ull tonearms; Denon DL-103R, Dynavector XV-1t and XV-1s Mono cartridges; Audio Research Reference Phono 2 SE and Lamm Industries LP1 Signature phono stages.

Digital: Ayre Acoustics DX-5 "A/V Engine," Esoteric K-01 CD/SACD player, CEC TL 1 CD transport, Toshiba Satellite laptop.

Preamplifiers: Audio Research Reference 10, Convergent Audio Technology SL1 Legend, Lamm Industries LL1 Signature, VTL TL-7.5 Series III Reference.

Power amplifiers: Atma-Sphere MA-2 Mk 3.1, Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference and VTL Siegfried Series II Reference monoblocks.

Loudspeakers: Wilson Audio Alexandria XLF and Alexia, Venture Audio Ultimate Reference.

Subwoofer: Wilson Audio Thor's Hammer.

Interconnects: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Nordost Frey 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Anaconda, Transparent Audio Opus MM2.

Speaker cables: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Nordost Frey 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Anaconda, Transparent Audio Opus MM2.

Power conditioners: Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference-II, Quantum QB4 and QB8, Quantum Qx4, Shunyata Research Hydra Triton and Typhon.

Power cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference-II and MusicCord-Pro ES, Nordost Frey 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Anaconda.

Equipment rack and platforms: Silent Running Audio Craz² 8 equipment rack and Ohio Class XL Plus² platforms (under Lamm M1.2 amps), Harmonic Resolution Systems M3 isolation bases.