

First Sounds: Nordost Valhalla 2

What Nordost's Valhalla 2 means
for the existing Valhalla owner

by Dennis Davis, January 6, 2014

© www.theaudiobeat.com

Nordost Valhalla has been a constant in my system since 2005. Other than some VPI Bricks and a VPI record-cleaning machine, nothing remains from the 20th century, and over that same time span everything from cartridge to speakers has come and gone several times over. That stands as reassuringly powerful testimony to just how successful the original Valhalla has been -- how satisfying its performance has been, no matter how other components changed around it. It's nice to have at least one element in the system that's stable and reliable; it's almost unheard of for that constant to be a cable.

But then a couple of years ago I heard the first muttered rumors of Nordost developing a new product, shrouded in mystery and known only as V2. I assumed that even

Odin couldn't bring Wernher von Braun back from the dead, so it didn't take me long to figure out that Nordost was updating its venerable Valhalla line, which led to the next, inevitable question: how much better could a cable like Valhalla really get? Rapidly followed by the equally inevitable concern: would it actually be better, or would the baby disappear along with the bath water, lost somewhere in the attempt?

Both questions were answered a few months ago, when I got to compare four different Nordost speaker cables in my system, including Valhalla, Odin and a prototype of the new V2. I've heard this kind of demonstration many times at shows where the dexterous Nordost crew runs through comparisons that stack up different cables, but nothing beats hearing the same thing in your own



system. The results were fairly dramatic. Not only would no amount of blindfolding have made these four speaker cables sound the same, but the superiority of the V2 was blatantly obvious -- and not just to the original Valhalla. What really whet my appetite was the fact that in many musical respects, the prototype sounded significantly better than Odin.

Much has been made in the entertainment press of Beyoncé's recent surprise release of a new album, without the usual marketing buildup. But Nordost had already tested these waters -- Beyoncé was just taking a page out of Nordost's V2 marketing plan. Without any pre-announcements, press buildup or reviews, Nordost released V2 in 2012 and let its new product speak for itself. The result has been a massive worldwide success -- in no small part down to the efforts of Nordost's well-established dealer network. But it also tells a story about just how musically impressive this new cable really is. Once the full V2 complement arrived in my listening room a few months ago, it was obvious that this was more than just a facelift. While the V2 is instantly identifiable as a Nordost product, if not for the labeling I would not have immediately recognized it as Valhalla. The new interconnects look quite different from the originals, and while there are some obvious similarities when it comes to the power cords and speaker cables, these too are distinctly different. Throw in the unique appearance of the Holo:Plug terminations and you've

got a product that both looks very different and feels different too.

The reason for those differences is what sets V2 apart from not just the original Valhalla but also the rest of the Nordost range. There are plenty of common elements: the flat speaker cables, the Micro

Mono-filament (MMF) construction (dual MMF in this case, just like Odin), the solid-core, silver-plated copper conductors and the all-FEP insulation.

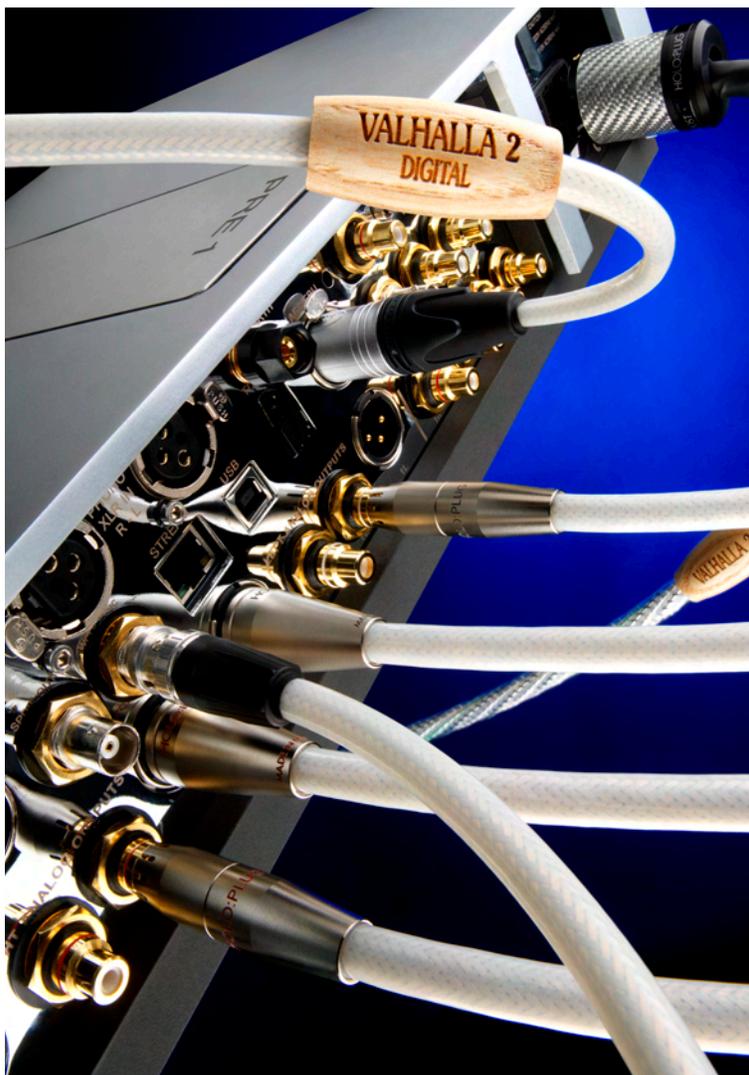
But experienced Nordost watchers will have noted the term *mechanical tuning* creeping into the company's literature, first with the budget Leif series and then the revised Norse 2 cables. In fact, working with the cables' mechanical characteristics started with the Odin and has been slowly but surely becoming more and more important to each successive range. But just as the original Valhalla marked a step-change for Nordost, introducing the first complete Micro Mono-filament cable family, V2 marks another technological leap. It represents Nordost's first fully mechanically optimized cables, a family of products where the mechanical tuning extends beyond the



cables themselves and into the terminations, a step that in turn necessitated the design and manufacturing of Nordost's first in-house connectors. One glance at the Holo:Plugs on the V2 will tell you that they're not like other connectors, but I'll leave the full story to Marc Mickelson and his forthcoming review of the V2 family. It's enough to say that Nordost believes (and the original demonstration also showed) that the new connectors are a major part of the V2's performance.



On a more practical note, I envy those who have no space restrictions and can place their equipment racks far enough out in the room to be able to walk behind the components to position and dress the cables at their leisure. The rest of us place component racks in close proximity to a wall and spend considerable time on hands and knees attempting to dress the resulting snake pit of cabling for best sound. In this respect, V2 is somewhat easier on my knees. First, the power cords are stiffer than the originals, so they hold a shape better, allowing more precise placement. The new interconnects, on the other hand, are more flexible, perhaps a function of the different-looking and -feeling outer sheath. This added flexibility makes them far easier to dress and get positioned just so on my Shunyata cable elevators.



integration and musical geometry unmatched by any other upgrade I've heard in my system. Ever. Considering that recent significant

system advancements include the addition of the Lyra Atlas cartridge, I was not expecting to be bowled over again anytime soon. Indeed, I was beginning to think that improvements in electronics and phono cartridges over the last few years had revealed so much detail previously hidden in my record collection that the only way to make a significant improvement would be to move my system into a new custom-built room with much larger speakers than I can now accommodate. As much as I knew how important cabling and component-support structures are to musical presentation, and as many times as I have attended or helped present programs intended to demonstrate the critical importance

of these foundational system ingredients, I was ill prepared for the deluge of new musical information exposed by the switch to V2.

But the good looks and slicker tactile quality are of little consequence unless the new cables sound better, and at this elevated price (\$7600 per meter pair of interconnects, \$9600 per 1.25-meter pair of speaker cables), V2 will have to sound a *lot* better than the already excellent-sounding original Valhalla. I knew from my sneak preview of the speaker cables that there was a significant improvement, but how would a complete loom of V2 sound?

What kind of information? Bloggers, and even some writers who should know better, dismiss hearing more detail as irrelevant because, they claim, added detail is merely the artifact of a boosted upper midrange or some other trick that brings out things best left unheard. They listen for the music, the vibe, or just something to get their toes tapping. They can't be bothered with building a system that improves the definition of a chair scraping along the floor of the stage or reveals that surprisingly explosive quality of a cough in the audience. Certainly there are musical cretins who look for and glory in these

Rather than dance around this one (I'll also leave that to Marc and his review!), let me say right from the (almost) start that I was stunned at the improvement delivered by the V2 over original Valhalla. My immediate reaction was that I was hearing an advance in the overall



things. However, the suggestion that capturing more detail is antithetical to musical enjoyment is little more than a conjurer's trick to suggest that less revealing components have as much capacity to accurately portray musical events as systems that deliver sufficient detail to flesh out a full three-dimensional musical image. Music is made up of myriad details -- and there is a big difference between highlighting the upper midrange to make certain detail stand out and allowing a system to reproduce more information. So when I talk about detail, I mean all the musical and spatial information and cues that bring greater texture, dimensionality and pattern to the sound we make out of the electrical signals that comprise recorded music.

And that is precisely where V2 excels, preventing the full benefits of your front-end and amplification from being choked into submission. Why would a mere set of cables be able to deliver any significant enhancement in presenting the riches of detail inherent in real music? Once you think of the cabling as an essential foundation for your system and analogize to photographic reproduction, the point is not difficult to grasp. You can use the finest Leica camera, composing the most sublime frame, but if you don't know how to set the camera or can't hold it still, the resulting composition will look no better than an Instamatic snapshot. Like a fine camera, the best cartridge and phono stage will never be able to deliver on their promise without a proper foundation. While William Blake was not talking about musical appreciation (or taking drugs) when he wrote about cleansing the doors of perception, his observations are an apt commentary on today's devolution of musical reproduction. Listening to music through a set of earbuds and an MP3 delivery system involves slamming the doors of perception closed in the face of music. As Blake observed, ". . . man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern." And what better way to cleanse the doors of musical perception than experiencing a good audio reproduction system?

How much cleansing is V2 capable of? I left the newly arrived box of V2 unpacked for a week or so and first listened to an array of LPs and CDs that I've had in constant rotation for decades -- music I know so well I can play it back in my memory without need of electronics or cable. Unlike a component that can be switched in and out of a system, a complete loom of

cabling takes a bit of effort to change. And cable sounds best left in place rather than moved about.

First up after the cable switch was Fairport Convention's *Unhalfbricking* LP [Island ILPS 9102], a pink-label gem I thought I had squeezed every nuance out of after years of equipment swaps, yet my listening notes exclaim "What a disappearing act!" Richard Thompson, Sandy Denny and crew were beamed into the space between and around my speakers as never before, as though the Starship Enterprise transporter mechanism had finally been perfected and the musicians appeared whole for the first time.

Not yet ready to leave my visit to the British Isles, I pulled out Nick Drake's *Pink Moon* and listened to both the recent reissue LP [Island 3713433] and the original [Island ILPS 9184]. *Pink Moon* is one of those incredibly well-recorded LPs that sound so good that they make virtually any stereo system sound good too, while at the same time holding enough magic in reserve to show off just what an exceptional system can do. As good as it sounded only a day earlier using the outstanding original Valhalla cables, listening to *Pink Moon* with the V2 made me feel like I was hearing the entirety of Drake's lush guitar tone for the first time, revealing musical cues that had escaped me before, bringing Nick Drake back to life as never before.

Among larger works, I listened to Marty Paich's *I Get A Boot Out Of You* [Warner Bros RHI 1360572], a Kevin Gray remaster of the original and one of the best big-band sessions ever recorded. Just as important (and unlike some well-recorded audiophile big-band LPs), the Paich is also an outstanding musical performance. Like *Pink Moon*, this LP can make any system sound good, and it will also clearly show improvements in the reproduction chain. What showed up immediately, with this and other large-scale music played through the V2, was the increase in dynamic capacity and the sense of almost unlimited headroom. I could crank up the music more comfortably with the V2 without the soundstage collapsing and without the sense that the amplifier or speakers were running out of steam. Without fail and with the V2 installed, each of my test LPs came to life as never before, and before long I was off on an exploration unfettered by the demands of review methodology. Simon and

Garfunkel's Bookends [Columbia KCS 9529], Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* [Argo ZRG 575], RCAs and Mercuries, and virtually the entire Beatles catalog were thrown at the V2, and each LP in turn gave up new secrets and a new sense of life in the performance.

At the end of the day, while I can describe the impact of the V2 in terms of its more coherent and unobtrusive soundstage, better headroom and dynamics and greater resolution and unforced sense of musical organization, these individual characteristics simply don't tell the whole story. What really matters about V2 is the remarkable sense of "rightness" it brings to the music -- to every piece of music I listened to. While it didn't



stop my yearning for a large dedicated listening room, V2 did allow my modestly sized speakers to deliver more life, detail and a larger soundstage than I previously thought possible without a significant step up in speaker size and cost.

Most times in audio new is just different; other times it's a whole lot better. This is one of those rare occasions when a product has changed not just my expectations but what I thought was possible. The good news is that for those lucky enough to be able to afford it, V2 offers not just a slightly wider but a whole new window into the music. For those who can't, V2's introduction should make for a lot of original Valhalla cable available on the used market. It's still a great cable, but it's not V2!

