

A CLEAR ADVANTAGE

Going up the range with Nordost

By the TONE Staff

Other than fringy room treatments and other various bizarre system tweaks, nothing arouses more anger, controversy and naysaying than the thought of cable, especially premium audio cables. Those subscribing to the religion of ABX testing pretty much claim everything sounds the same and wire is “hoo-hah.”

However, one of the areas most often overlooked in the reproduction chain is the cable carrying the delicate signal from a phono cartridge – especially a moving coil cartridge, typically only generating two to five *ten thousandths of a volt*. So, if there ever was a place where a meter of wire could make a difference, this is it.



Should you be a cable skeptic or cable grumpy, what we've got to say probably won't change your mind one way or another. After spending an amazingly disproportionate amount of time on this review, the differences between these cables jump right out at even the uninitiated. While the \$4,800 price tag on the Valhalla 2 cable is probably out of the range of sensibility for most audio enthusiasts, it will make a sizeable difference on a really high end system, and in the context of a \$50k–\$100k system, the improvement offered by a \$4,799 cable is worth the expense.

Because we had a similar experience a couple of years ago when recabling our dCS Paganini digital player with about \$10k worth of Nordost cable, which is still in place today, trying them again for a range of tonearm cables made perfect sense. Our only complaint is that the gap between the \$839 Frey 2 cable and the \$4,799 Valhalla cable is rather large and exclusionary. Something around two grand would make sense.

The flavor of cable you prefer is, of course, personal choice. As one of the industry's premium cable vendors, (much like AudioQuest, Cardas, Kimber or WireWorld) what we enjoyed most about this exercise with Nordost was that as we went up the range, the level of music revealed did increase. Whether the extra expense is worth it *to you* is a value judgment we can't make *for you*. I have cycling fanatic friends who spend thousands to save grams of weight on their competition bikes.

And while I think they are crazy, because I am equally crazy about hifi, I get it completely and laud their passion. The same applies here, as we feel there is no absolute value judgment. Nordost fans should be able to go to their favorite dealer and get a few of these to take home for a trial, and that's the only way you'll ever really get it.

So to make this clear, while we have always found premium cable to offer an improvement in an audio system, we suggest you optimize every other setup parameter in your system before spending your hard-earned cash on wire. There's nothing worse than spending big bucks on a tonearm cable only to find out that your table isn't level! So let's proceed, shall we?

The test platform

AVID's Volvere SP, with SME V arm and Koetsu Onyx Platinum, proved to be a perfect platform for the test as it is in use every day in our publisher's reference system — and while a high performing combination, is not a six figure table by any means. At the end of the test, our modded Technics SL-1200 with used SME 309 arm and Ortofon 2M Black was a great “real world” table, representative of what is available to the average audiophile for a few thousand dollars.

At the end of the tests, just to push the boundaries further, we installed a \$379 Denon DL-103r cartridge on the AVID/SME table just to see if an upgraded tonearm cable still makes sense. Even with a budget cartridge and even at this level, the differences between all four cables were nearly as apparent as they were with the \$10k Koetsu. *(continued)*

The SME arms were chosen both because we are intimately familiar with them, and because if there ever was a great tonearm that needed a better cable, SME is the one. Using VanDenHul wire in the stock form, this cable is notoriously dark. The nearly \$40,000 SME 30 turntable with SME V arm will benefit tremendously from even a modest tonearm cable upgrade.

The rest of the system is also very familiar: the GamuT RS5 loudspeakers, powered by the Audio Research GSPre and GS150 (our product of the year for 2015) and the Pass Labs XP-25 phonostage. While the rest of the reference system is cabled with Cardas Clear, for the purpose of this review, all components were connected with Nordost Frey 2 interconnects, power cords and speaker cables, so we were working in an all-Nordost test environment. Again, after all the test listening was completed, the Cardas wire was returned to the system, and the differences between tonearm cables remained the same, so while your favorite Nordost retailer would love you to use all Nordost cable, you can start with one of their tonearm cables and achieve excellent results.

While a number of different, well-worn tracks were used during the course of the evaluation, five favorites from Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs were painstakingly listened to with all combinations as close to back-to-back as we

could. The two-input capability of the Pass XP-25 made it easy to change between two cables quickly to try and retain as much user memory as possible.

And to take things to their ultimate end and enrage a few more naysayers, all records were thoroughly cleaned with the VPI Cyclone RCM before each play, and then cycled through the Furutech De-Mag, insuring our getting the maximum amount of analog molecules to come through those tiny wires!

The main test tracks were as follows:

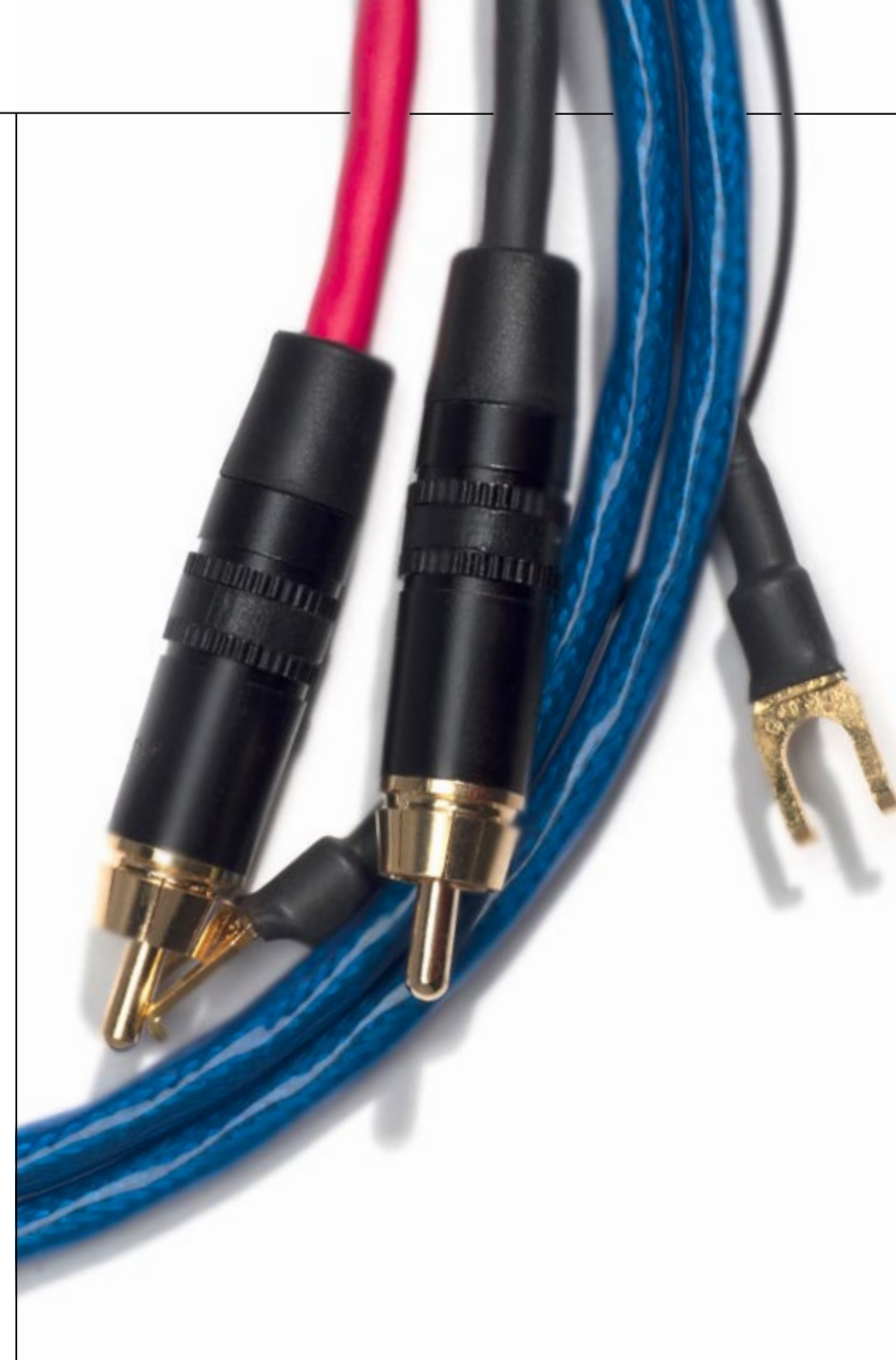
Lynyrd Skynyrd – “That Smell”
Traffic – “Low Spark of High Heeled Boys”
Rickie Lee Jones – “Easy Money”
Beck – “The Golden Age”
Madeleine Peyroux –
“Dance Me to the End of Love”

If you're a believer in premium cable, then there's a good chance you are an advocate of cable burn-in as well. Because tonearm cables carry such a faint signal, they tend to take more time to settle in than most. To accelerate this process somewhat, each cable got 500 hours of time via our Hagerman Audio Fry Baby, which takes the signal from a CD player or other high level source and drops it down to phono cartridge level, making it easy to burn in a tonearm cable with a cheap CD player set on repeat or a tuner. Each cable was given an initial listen, fresh out of the box with notes taken, and then revisited

after some hours were put on each.

To further this process, most Nordost dealers offer the use of their VIDAR device, which uses a broad frequency spectrum signal to burn cables in before you pick them up. We've had great luck with this process and highly suggest it, especially with a tonearm cable.

Here are our impressions, from least to most expensive. It's worth mentioning that all models can be ordered terminated with straight or 90 degree angle DIN connectors, so they should work with any table and arm combination at your disposal. You can also order your Nordost tonearm cable with RCA or fully balanced XLR terminations on the other end. Those with a mega phonostage will be able to take full advantage of this slight advantage in wringing every last bit of information out of your grooves, but when you're dealing with .5mv, why not go for it? Our experience with phonostages offering both balanced XLR and single-ended RCA inputs usually favor the balanced, in terms of the balanced option being slightly quieter, so choosing a Nordost tonearm cable will not hold you back. Should you make a drastic system change in the future, Nordost will re-terminate your cables to suit your current needs. Another great reason to purchase these products from a company with a major dealer network in place!



Blue Heaven

1.25m, \$399

Even a modest step up from the stock SME cable provides an improved musical conduit, and those wanting a quick fix will be well served here. The difference is immediate, on a number of fronts, particularly as regards the cloudiness that is now beginning to dissipate from the overall window.

Blue Heaven is constructed to the same high level of quality that Nordost's top of the line ODIN cable enjoys. Utilizing silver-plated 99.9999% pure solid core OFC conductors, they claim a “velocity of propagation” of 85%. Regardless of how this measurement is achieved, the sheer speed that Nordost cables are famous for comes through in their entry level cable, with the music played having a much more lively feel.

Going through all five test tracks as well as a number of other favorites again bears out the initial impressions. The Blue Heaven cable opens up the soundstage somewhat and brings more extension to the HF spectrum without being grainy. The Skynyrd track is probably the dirtiest of the group, yet the layered guitars come through well-defined, with noticeable delineation between the individual tracks, and the end-of-the-track banter has more clarity as well. We also noticed on a number of classical tracks that the piano has a much larger, more realistic feel than it did with the stock cable.

The only detriment from the stock cable is a result of the fog dissipating. Going back to the stock cable now reveals a bit of mid-bass porkiness that some may actually prefer, but it is easy to see how the SME tonearms have gotten an ill-deserved reputation for being “woody” sounding. It's the cable, along with an overzealous use of tonearm damping fluid — but that's another story.

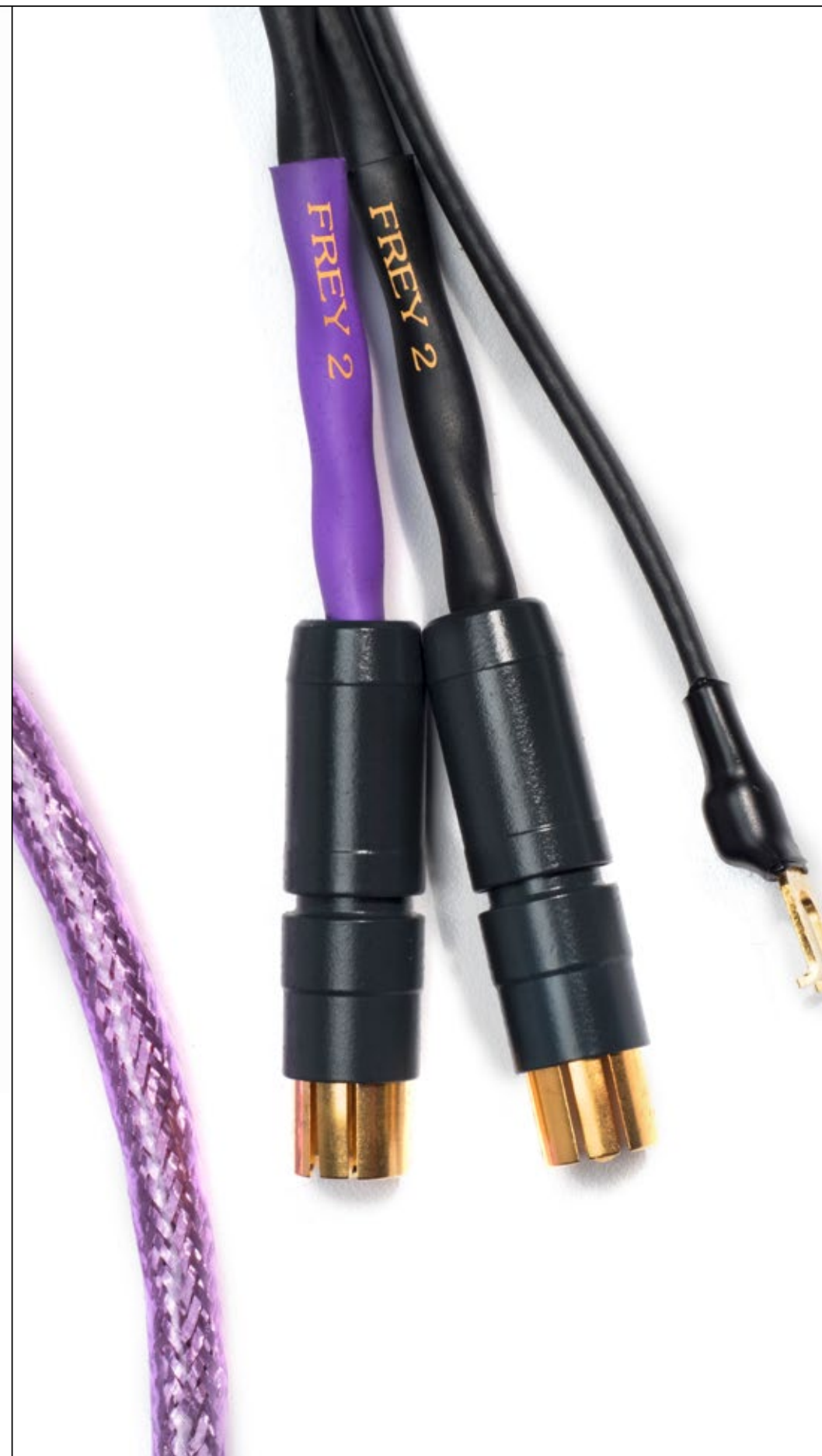


Heimdall 2

1.25m, \$659

Big jump in clarity here. The fast, well-delineated Nordost sound is here in abundance, just more of it. For those wanting a major analog improvement without spending a fortune, this is your cable. In the past, we have always suggested the \$700 Furutech AG-12, but the Heimdall 2 really unmasks the analog picture in a way we never previously thought possible.

The overall soundstage got so much bigger, going from the Blue Heaven to the Heimdall 2, with an increase in LF weight, that it's easy to justify another \$250. Further listening after the first blush of the bigger, weightier presentation also reveals less grain in the high frequencies as well. Going off the established paths to a few violin-heavy tracks illustrates this quickly and easily. Classical music lovers will really appreciate this cable, thanks to its tonal purity.



Frey 2

1.25m, \$839

This one was a bit tougher to discern, but repeated listening sessions where we swapped cables without telling the audience was going on revealed the same comments: a deeper and somewhat taller presentation was observed, though the tonality difference between the Heimdall and Frey cables was tough to tell in our setup. However, returning to the stock SME cable was pretty shocking, the soundstage now collapsing dramatically and the overall sonic picture extremely cloudy.

Listening to some really bass-heavy tracks from Daft Punk, Massive Attack and Kraftwerk through the SME V/Koetsu and switching quickly back to the Heimdall cable definitely hands the edge to the Heimdall. Those listening to a lot of chamber music and vocals, or those with a system having less than major bass extension might not notice the difference between the two cables. All of the improvements provided by the Heimdall were also available with the Frey. So perhaps it's just a question of red or purple?

Valhalla 2

1.25m, \$4,799

That's not a typo. Nearly five grand for a tonearm cable. This is the big league, considering a lot of people don't belly up to \$5k for their entire turntable. As much as haters love to hate the high dollar wire, the Valhalla 2 delivers more music than most, and I shudder to think what more their \$10,000 Odin 2 offers.

Expectation bias might lead you to expect too much or too little, but this cable is damn amazing. Is it \$4,000 more amazing than the Frey 2? In our publisher's reference system with the \$10,000 Koetsu Jade Platinum, hell yes. Moving the SME V arm to the top of the range Acutus Reference SP table, with the Valhalla 2 now an integral component in an almost \$80,000 analog front end, it's a no brainer. Just like the experience we had recabling our dCS Paganini stack with \$10k worth of Nordost cable, noting a major difference, the same holds true here. Keeping that in mind, the cost of the Valhalla 2 is really only adding 5% to the total cost of the front end and it easily reveals 100% more musical information in every dimension. You might even call it a bargain, but wait until we get our Kevlar vests on please.

This is the analog magic that we audio writers are always preaching about. All the differences between the Valhalla 2, and for that matter all of the other tonearm cables on hand, ranging from about \$500 to \$2,500 were subtle, but added up made for a much more engaging analog experience, now much closer to what a master tape offers.

The Valhalla 2 is completely grain-free in its presentation, and where Nordost cables of older vintage have sounded a bit too forward and edgy at times; there is none of that here. This cable is a pure conduit in every way, and none of us were prepared (and a few of us really wanted to hate the damn thing) for the difference switching this one thing would change, actually transforming the experience.

Yes, \$4,799 is a staggering amount for a tonearm cable, but if you've already spent a huge pile of hundred dollar bills on your analog setup, we suggest trying a Valhalla 2 (or maybe even an Odin 2) before you step up to the next phono cartridge – this is that significant of an upgrade.

**So, what have we learned?**

As much as we all wanted to squeal to high heaven that a nearly \$5,000 tonearm cable was bullshit, it isn't. If you have the system to show it off, you will not be disappointed in the least if you purchase a Valhalla 2 tonearm cable. Even hooked up to our modest Technics 1200 table with used SME arm and Ortofon MM cartridge, the gap in performance between the Valhalla and Blue Heaven cables was staggering, but at that level a cable of this magnitude doesn't make sense.

The better news is that even the \$399 Blue Heaven cable will allow your turntable, tonearm and cartridge to reveal more music than it probably is now, and if you've made a cable upgrade at some point, either the Frey 2 or Heimhall 2 will give you a bump without breaking the bank. If you've got an SME table with the stock cable, run, don't walk, to your nearest Nordost dealer and snag one of these.

Like all the other Nordost cables we've had the pleasure to audition, they offer a linear increase in performance as you go up the range, and their products command decent value on the secondary market, so jumping up a click or two won't mean starting from ground zero again.

High performance audio cable is a sensitive subject, but should you be intrigued, Nordost products are supported by a number of great retailers the world over, so you should be able to get a good enough demonstration to decide if this is a route you'd like to explore. We've walked away from hundreds of hours of listening to not only be impressed, but to suggest them heartily. ●

