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*Nordost Valhalla -
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Nordost Valhalla Mono-Filament Cables

by Roy Gregory

Have you ever noticed how, when you listen to a live jazz group, you can always hear the slapped bass notes clear as a bell below the other instruments. They're not as loud as the rest of the band, and nowhere near as penetrating as brass or piano, but they simply float, independent of what the other instruments are up to, working at their own level, giving the music their own particular momentum.

Have you ever noticed how totally inadequate hi-fi systems are when it comes to reproducing this effect. They are either low and slow, robbing the notes of their air and rendering them as earthbound and, all too often, tuneless thuds; or their truncated low frequencies give a reasonably agile impression of the notes leading edges but rob them of the harmonic bloom that allows them to float free of the rest of the low frequency information. There's no middle ground. I'm afraid that hi-fi systems just don't do it for the upright bass. Until now.

There I was playing Analogue Production's superb re-issue of Basie's *Farmer's Market Barbeque* (APJ029), and before I'd even settled into the listening seat I knew that things would never be the same again. 'Way Out Basie' opened with Basie's familiar insistent piano chords and, glory be, the unmistakable accompaniment of a living, breathing upright bass. James Leary's undulating line simply breezed along, each note distinct in pitch and time, each with that lovely lobe of harmonic decay trailing off from the

initial vibrant impulse. In came the low thrumming of the Guitar swiftly followed by the opening flourish of the first brass tutti, building into that hay-maker of a crescendo, and beneath it all, standing firm and unperturbed was the weaving flow of the bass notes, and

not just the strings but the volume and substance of the soundbox too, clear of the floor on its spike. On into the opening solo and still it floats, adding that subtle propulsive push to proceedings that it does in life. I was captivated, my whole body seemed sucked into the groove, this is what it should be like. But I guess you had to be there...

And as you weren't, and as I'm supposed to act as a surrogate I suppose I'd better spell it out. This is a seventeen piece band I'm talking about here, and still that bass just kept on going, quite distinct beneath even the most shattering crescendo (and remember, we're talking Basie Big Band at the top of their form). This is an audiophile pressing, but it's far

from an audiophile recording. What made this worth the re-issue was the stellar performance, and if you don't believe me then listen to a few other early 80s Pablo recordings. What's more it's a record that I know inside out, and whilst I hadn't played it on this precise system before all the elements have been to hand for months at least. Yet it stopped me in my tracks, flooding my consciousness with pleasurable surprise (and filling my body with a thoroughly undignified desire to dance!). Like I said, this is how it should be.

A bit of 'Psycho Killer' (Talking Heads 77)? Never have I heard so clearly the pluck and release of those bass notes, even underneath the relentlessly driving piles of guitar, until even the manic energy of those stacked, abrasive chords can't be sustained and they collapse, allowing the bass to finish what it started. Never has the release of tension been quite as palpable or nearly as effective, and you know that I've played this album to death, partied it through student days, hung on its every nuance. Yet here it is, capturing my attention anew.

How can I put this in perspective? Well, back in Issue 1 I waxed lyrical about the musical accuracy and transparency of the ruinously expensive Nordost SPM interconnects and speaker cables. In the couple of years since they arrived, those cables and the Quattro-fil interconnect have become as near indispensable as



▶ anything in my system, an invaluable reviewing tool. They've reigned supreme (despite my earnest endeavours to seek out a more affordable alternative) until, very recently I finally discovered a viable alternative. Only to discover that Nordost have moved the goalposts again! And not just onto the next pitch or playing field. They're gone. Way, way over the border. And SPM? I find it difficult to listen to these days without its previously minor shortcomings standing out like a wart on the Mona Lisa's nose.

One day I got a visit from Lars. He came to show me his titanium rack, and working with the Morgan mini system (£600 a box) he proceeded to work his way up the Nordost cable range and his own titanium bits and pieces until these mid-price electronics were producing a sound to die for. Just



ask their designer who was in sitting in a state of shock beside me! Titanium rack, pulsar points, and Nordost El Dorado mains cables, Quattro-fil interconnects and SPM speaker cables; that's some set-up. "And you know" says Lars, with one of those evil grins that vikings do so well, "what the weakest part of this system is? It's the speaker cable!" And as he delivers his punchline there emerges from the depths of his bag a roll of broad flat black wire

which he plugs in with a flourish. And blow me if he isn't right. The system simply takes off: louder, more dynamic, more weight, better timing, much more solid and most importantly, much, much more real. Going back to the SPM made it seem like bell-wire and whilst that is partly a psycho-acoustic trick, the difference is real enough, and it's huge. This had nothing even remotely to do with the law of diminishing returns. This was the demo that caused Victoria to say "S&*%\$@ me! If you can't hear that you're so deaf you're dead." This was the first time I heard a system wired entirely with mono-filament cables.

Mono-filament - what's that then? It's a proprietary technique in which a micro filament of Teflon is wound in an elongated spiral along the length of a conductor, thus spacing it from the outer Teflon insulation and creating a virtual air di-electric. It first appeared concealed inside the Quattro-fil interconnect, followed by the El Dorado mains lead and Silver Shadow digital interconnect. All are good products. All received excellent reviews in this and other magazines. All are very expensive.

Time for another interlude, and another visit from Lars. This time I was hoping to ambush him with the Clearlight interconnects, to see if I could dent that complacency a little. We started out with the system wired with Quattro-fil and SPM and very nice it sounded too. Then I introduced out the Clearlights (at around a quarter of the price of the Quattro-fils) and even Lars had to admit to being impressed. Not as focused and transparent as the Nordost leads but so much more weight and body, so much more purpose in the music. But he's nothing if not resilient, and hastily papering over the cracks in his confident façade he plugged in the new Valhalla speaker



cable, the finalised version of the cable he'd played me before. "Do the comparison again" he suggested, and sure enough, not only did the system sound miles

better than before, but the Quattro-fil had re-established a clear superiority over the Clearlights, a superiority that was significantly extended by the substitution of the matching Valhalla interconnects. Picking up the discarded Clearlights he looked at them and then said, "You know, that's a really fine cable for the money" I bit my lip. I tell you, it's so much more difficult to be gracious in defeat.

Which brings us by a somewhat roundabout (but as we shall see, necessarily so) route to the Nordost Valhalla cables, the subject of this review. At first glance they look not unlike their older, and cheaper(!) brethren, although there's no denying that the pearlescent white finish adds a touch of class, as does the cables' greater girth. The Valhalla interconnects are twice as thick as Quattro-fils, carrying as they do eight rather than four conductors, while the speaker cable is thicker and broader than SPM. Connectors are however, still the same: Neutrick phonos on the signal leads, the familiar low-mass 4mm plugs on the speaker cable. And the price? Almost exactly double that of the already expensive SPM/Quattro-fil cables!

Can they possibly be worth that sort of money? I really wish that ▶

► I could say it wasn't so, but you only need refer to the experiences recounted earlier to see that, correctly applied, they will provide an absolutely fundamental improvement in almost any system. And (just as with the mains cabling reviewed elsewhere) the nature of the improvement is such that it will be near impossible to obtain it in any other way. But you'll note the caveat, "correctly applied". I can't stress how important it is to use these cables as a system. Unless you have mono-filament technology right through the signal chain you'll only receive a fraction of the performance described. Note the lesson of the Clearlight interconnects, which used with SPM gave the Quattro-fils a run for their money, but faded into insignificance once they tried to take on the mono-filaments on home ground. Expensive yes, but if you're going to spend this kind of money only a fool (a very rich fool) doesn't take steps to ensure the maximum return. It should also go without saying that they need running in. The review set had something over two weeks on the Cable Toaster, and still continued to improve in use!

Assuming you do it right, what should you expect? I'll run through this relative to SPM/Quatrofil, partly because it's the people who own these cables who are most likely to take the plunge, and partly because even those who don't own them will have heard them, either at a dealer's or at a show. As references go it's certainly amongst the most accessible.

The simple answer is more, or rather, MORE! The first thing that strikes you when you put the Valhallas into a system is the massive increase in the overall energy level. This is no illusion. The increase in dynamic range and weight is real enough. Just crank the original system up to a goodly level and play something loud and dense,

about as loud as the system is happy to go. Put on the Valhallas, making sure that you leave the volume the same and repeat the treatment. It will be louder. Quite a bit louder. Loud enough to send you diving for the volume control, loud enough to de-centre your bass drivers as they struggle to cope with the increased energy levels. In other words, do it, but be careful.

I opened this review by talking a lot about the bass, but don't make the mistake of assuming that low frequencies are the only thing these cables are about. It just happens to be the area in which most hi-fis are least convincing, and consequently, the one



where improvements are most obvious. In fact, the improvement in dynamic range is consistent right across the musical spectrum. High frequencies which could sound a touch thin and exposed on the SPM/QF set-up have greater body and solidity, leading to much better definition and air. Complex instruments like tambourines and beaded cymbals become the sum of their distinct parts, and that definition applies even at the back of a loud and busy stage, in exactly the way that it applies to acoustic and electric bass. Of course the kicker is the midrange.

Add the foundation that you get from bass that arrives on time and in the right shape, lock in those hi-hats and percussion touches and the mid just snaps into focus. The Valhallas are at once more transparent than previous cables, but also dramatically more present and immediate. The overall effect is a serious injection of life into the proceedings, placing you much closer to the original performers. Which is where, finally, we reach the most important point of all.

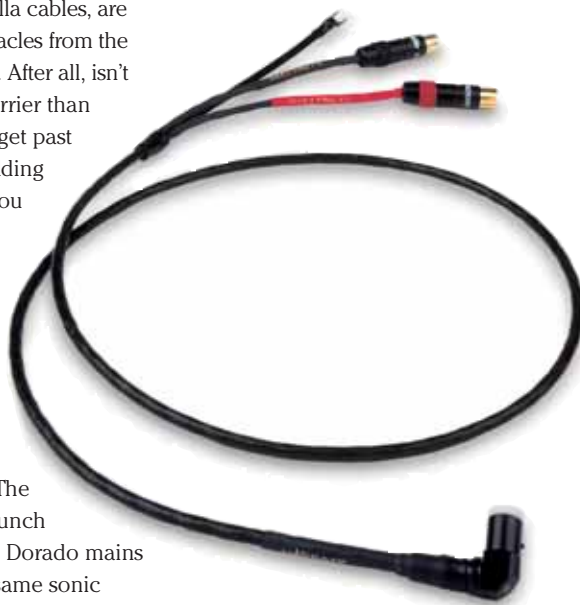
We've all heard (or should that be suffered) 'high definition' systems that claim to extend performance to such an extent that only the very best recordings are acceptable. Boy, have they got it wrong. The Valhallas seem to work in exactly the opposite way. They let more of the recording through which means that where they really score is with those mediocre recordings which can least afford the losses imposed by more conventional leads. Suddenly they spring to life. No one would make great claims for 77 as a great recording, but play it through the Valhallas and listen to the power, precision and edgy purpose of the playing. The Nordost cables seem to pull down the barriers between the various elements in the system, pushing the performance spitting and snarling out into the light of day. They just give you more of what is there, but somehow the music always gets out first.

Don't get the idea that these cables are coarse or ragged. They are just as precise and focussed as the SPM, delineating dynamic steps and propagating micro vibrational harmonics with just as much dexterity. It's just that they can draw from a wider range, colour with a broader palette. They can jump so much further, more quickly, and carrying more weight when they do it. Take all these attributes and combine them with the phase coherence, speed and instrumental texture provided by the existing Nordost ►

► cables and the result is a performance which advances the state of the art not in any one area, but on the broadest and most important front of all, musical coherence. Four things reside in my current system which have resulted in it being more musically satisfying and making more musical sense than ever before. The Clearaudio Master Reference playback system provides more information than I've ever lifted from records before. But the Russ Andrews mains set-up, the Groove phono stage, and most importantly of all, the Nordost Valhalla cables, are all about removing obstacles from the path of that information. After all, isn't it better to remove a barrier than employ extra power to get past it? The proof of the pudding is in the listening and you only have to hear what all these products can do with even modest equipment. Try it and you will be shocked.

How far can you take the mono-filament loom? All the way to the mains if you want. The clarity, dynamics and punch that you get from the El Dorado mains leads are cut from the same sonic cloth as the other cables, especially the increase in energy. Overall I'll stick with the Russ Andrews or Audioplan solution because they benefit from their more sophisticated approach, but in a straight extension block and power leads set-up feeding a mono-filament system then the El Dorados really score, offering extra drive, focus and dynamic range over the others. Likewise, the Silver Shadow digital interconnect seems to lock into the system as a whole, gaining a measure of freedom and rhythmic subtlety. But it was the Quattro-fil tonearm cable that really shocked me. Substituting it for the excellent Hovland lead that I usually use on the SME produced a huge improvement. Re-playing 'Small Blue

Thing' from the first Suzanne Vega album (the Vivante Productions 180g pressing) was like listening to a new track. The soundstage blossomed both in size and presence; the guitars took on a new richness, attack and body; the bubbling punctuation in the bass ceased its bilious excess and took on shape and place. But it was the voice. The whole thing was dramatically more natural, but the voice was just there. The merest hint of sibilance remained, the languid phrasing perfectly at one with the instrumentation.



Special. Very special indeed.

The bottom line here is that I can't tell you how good these cables are. The value of audio reviews has been so undermined by the perpetual presentation of molehills as mountains as to be almost totally debunked. When a truly important advance arrives the vocabulary to describe it has already been appropriated and abused. I was genuinely impressed by the SPMs, feeling that they established new standards in many important areas. The Valhallas have just rendered them obsolete as any sort of reference. 'Tis ruined that I am.

Those of you who come from the world of Music Hose and found the

SPM bright or thin should think again; the Valhalla has changed the rules. And whilst it's expensive, I have once again to point out that there are a whole range of even more expensive products out there. Does that make it a bargain? Monetarily it'll never be that, but musically? That's another matter. And just to ease the burden those nice people at Nordost are going to offer a trade-in on SPM. If you've got the funds I'd strongly suggest you try it. That way you'll end up deliciously ruined too! ➤

PRICES

Valhalla Interconnect (1m pr):	£2195-00
Valhalla Interconnect (1m balanced):	£2225-00
Per extra linear metre:	£329-00
Quattro-fil Interconnect (1m pr):	£1250-00
Quattro-fil Interconnect (1m balanced):	£1280-00
Per extra linear metre:	£250-00
Quattro-fil Armlead (1.25m)	£650-00
Silver Shadow 75 Ohm (Phono or BNC 1m)	£335-00
Silver Shadow 110 Ohm (Balanced)	£375-00
Valhalla Bi-Wire Speaker Cable (2m pr):	£4200-00
Per extra linear metre:	£650-00
El Dorado Mains Lead (2m):	£400-00
Per extra linear metre:	£150-00

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