

Nordost Odin 2 Interconnects, Speaker Cables and Power Cords

by Marc Mickelson, June 14, 2016

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If you want something done well, take your time.

So goes a bit of advice that applies to any endeavor, from installing a bathroom faucet to baking a cherry pie to writing an audio review. Speed and quality are rarely bedfellows, and this helps explain why it took Nordost seven years to replace its Odin line of cables -- the company's only "supreme reference." Over its lifetime, Odin became a symbol of quality and a statement of intent -- at an audio show or within an audiophile's system.

Using a complete set of pearlescent Odin interconnects, speaker cables and power cords meant you were dead serious about attaining all-out performance. Odin was so revealing that its use required careful choice of electronics and speakers. With Odin, you definitely were going to hear both their capabilities and shortcomings.

Odin wasn't ruthless in the way resolved detail -- it was far too complete for that -- but you could definitely count on it to pass along every atom of the musical signal.

In his 2010 review published on *The Audio Beat*, Paul Bolin variously praised Odin's speed, phase coherence, naturalness, reduced distortion, large soundstage, deep bass, midrange verisimilitude and "almost creepy sense of thereness." You get the idea -- Odin did it *all*.

But could it bake a cherry pie? Shortly after Paul's review, I borrowed a single Odin cable to try in my own system, the unassuming tonearm cable with straight DIN connector. Within seconds of the needle kissing the record, before I had even sat down, I heard what sounded like more of the signal -- not just more musical detail, but also increased dynamic range, from an LP that wasn't all that dynamic to begin with. Within a few short moments, I was confounded, and after a few records, I was convinced: I called the Odin tonearm cable "the single most impressive length of wire I've ever used." It might even have been more important to the sound I was hearing from the records I played than the cartridge or tonearm.



It was with that impromptu demo in mind that I was eager to hear and write about Odin 2, which was introduced at the 2015 High End show in Munich. After a few years, would the new Odin make as stunning an impression as that lone tonearm cable? And perhaps even more important, coming on the heels of Nordost's astonishing Valhalla 2, which I reviewed, would Odin 2 retain its spot atop Nordost's cable hierarchy? I had to find out.

The Odin 2 cables have a familiar look -- familiar to anyone who has seen a few Nordost cables, that is: round profile interconnects power cords with a distinctive spiral pattern and flat, wide ribbon speaker cables. Odin 2 uses Nordost's Dual Mono-filament technology: two twisted strands of Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene (FEP) are spiraled around a single silver-plated conductor before extruding an FEP tube around the whole bundle. Nordost calls this "an improved version of Micro Mono-filament," which has been a cornerstone of the company's designs. Odin 2 interconnects use ten 23-gauge eight-nines copper conductors with 78 microns of silver overlaid, and the speaker cables use 26 slightly larger -- 20-gauge -- conductors per leg. Owing to the need for heavier-gauge conductors for passing AC, Odin 2 power cords use seven 14-gauge conductors for positive, negative and ground.

Nordost's Holo:Plug RCAs, XLRs, spades and tonearm DINs debuted with Valhalla 2 and are also used for Odin 2. These serious-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. Low eddy current and a nearly gas-tight connection are additional benefits. Close inspection shows connecting pins on the RCAs and XLRs that are chunky and look to be ever so slightly flared to increase

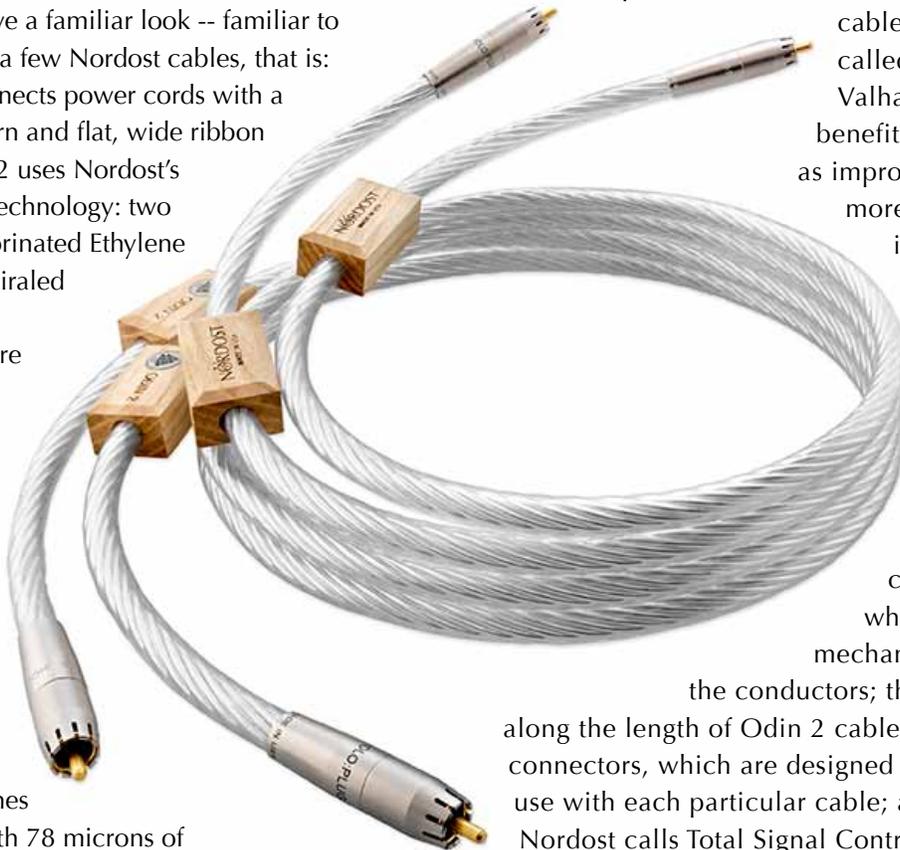
surface contact. The XLRs are devoid of the locking mechanisms, which, given the tight fit, are unnecessary. The fit of the RCAs is even tighter, the inner diameter chosen to provide a "mechanical wipe" of the connection to remove oxidation when the cables are inserted or removed.

With original Odin, then migrating through the Leif and Norse lines, Nordost put an emphasis on mechanical optimization -- "a new frontier in audio-

cable design," as I called it in my review of Valhalla 2. Nordost cites benefits as wide ranging as improved coherence and more accurate harmonic information from the various measures it takes -- everything from the extreme damping of the various cables' conductors; through Dual Mono-filament construction, which improves the mechanical damping of

the conductors; the damping blocks along the length of Odin 2 cables; the Holo-Plug connectors, which are designed and optimized for use with each particular cable; and especially what Nordost calls Total Signal Control: precise shielding and spacing of conductors to maintain absolute signal transfer and rejection of electrical pollution that degrades performance.

Now, for the obligatory statement on cost: Odin 2 is expensive -- really expensive. But there are, in fact, concrete reasons for this. There is the obvious heft of the cables and the silver they contain. There is also the precision required to manufacture them -- every conductor is the product of a series of proprietary techniques and processes -- which leads to a high rate of scrap material and high labor costs. A scene in the movie *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* explains a final point. Walter Huston, father of the movie's director, John Huston, plays a grizzled, fast-talking American in Mexico. He holds court among a group of down-and-out compatriots looking for work and explains

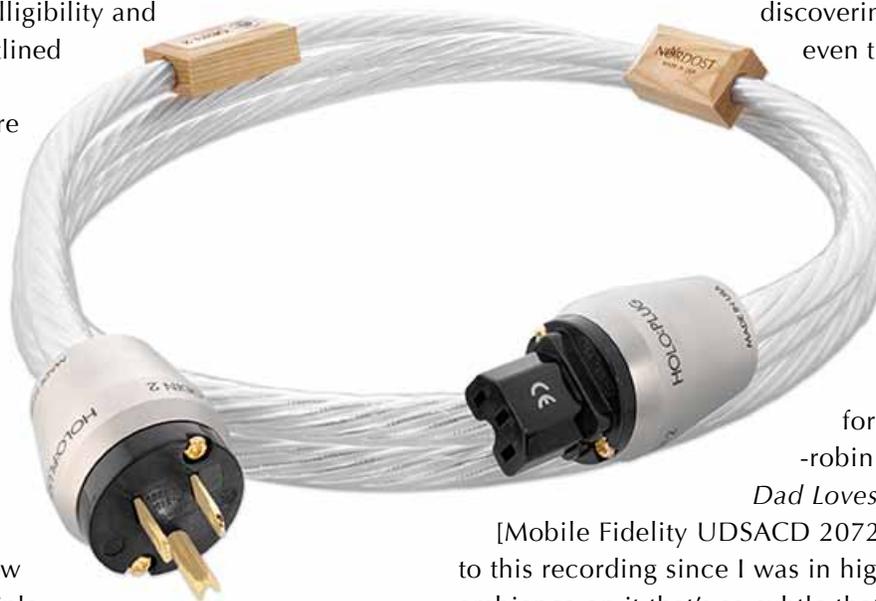




to them why gold is so valuable: “. . . because of the human labor that went into the finding and the getting of it.” The same is true of Odin 2: seven years of research and development preceded its release into a market that will be small by its very nature. Economies of scale are nonexistent; if you want Odin 2, you will have to pay dearly for it, period.

Nordost is the audio-cable industry’s greatest proponent of “a coherent cable loom”: using a particular cable, whether it be from Nordost or another maker, throughout the entire audio system. Use it between electronics, for connecting speakers, for power delivery -- use it *everywhere*, in other words. The rationale for this is simple: better sound -- “a huge improvement in overall musical coherence, rhythmic integrity, intelligibility and musical drama,” as outlined in the “Cabling Your System” Tech InSite here on *The Audio Beat*.

I decided to take a different approach with Odin 2, at least at the outset: I inserted various cables into my system one by one. My thinking for doing this was not based in stubbornness, the decision not to follow Nordost’s guiding principle, but rather a demo I attended at last year’s THE Show Newport Beach. Early one morning, I was the first person in Nordost’s room, and I heard a demonstration of a single Odin 2 power cord, which provided AC to a Burmester CD transport. The Odin 2 power cord replaced a Valhalla 2, which I had ample experience with; the difference -- again, with just one power cord -- was, in my own words, “Astounding.” With this firmly in mind, I repeated the demo in my own system, this time using the Jeff Rowland Model 825 amp, which is one of the purest-sounding and quietest pieces of audio gear I’ve ever heard. The increase in dynamics, both the range from very soft to very loud and the subtle shifts of volume within that range, and the sheer resolution were even more pronounced, and immediately so. The Jeff Rowland amp sounded more authoritative and quieter too.



So, gradually and deliberately, I did the same thing with other power cords, followed by the interconnects and speaker cables: each added one at a time with listening in between until the full Nordost “loom” was in place. I was especially anxious to add the Odin 2 tonearm cable, given my experience with the first iteration. The cumulative effect wasn’t so much the slow spread of certain qualities across the system but a multiplication of them. With each new cable, the music sounded far more detailed and dynamic for sure, but also more poised and organic too. This wasn’t just about the quantity of information, but its quality and intelligibility too. The exercise of listening to a few tracks, adding a cable, then listening again may seem tedious, but the gains across the board made the process thrilling. It was literally like

discovering something I hadn’t even thought was possible: that a set of cables could be so all-encompassing, the most sonically important part of the system.

One of the recordings I used for this cable round -- robin was James Taylor’s *Dad Loves His Work* on SACD

[Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2072]. I’ve been listening to this recording since I was in high school, and there’s ambience on it that’s so subtle that some systems don’t capture it at all and others require the listener to do most of the work to resolve it. It’s musically relevant, especially on “Hard Times” and “Her Town Too,” which sound thick and claustrophobic when the ambience is MIA. I’ve always thought the ambience was actually overtones that are almost beyond many components’, especially speakers’, ability to capture them, not to mention our own ability to hear them. Odin 2 proved this to be wrong. The ambience is exactly what you might expect it to be: the unique spatial fingerprint of the recording studio and the placement of the musicians in it.

This is *fine* detail -- almost imperceptible (*completely* imperceptible with some systems) -- but Odin 2 restored the music’s airy sheen, opening up the



What Odin 2 can tell us about how (and why) cables work

The arrival of Odin 2 is notable for many reasons, not just remarkable performance and eye-watering price. It offers an interesting insight into not just the significance and role of cables in a system but also the *how* and *why* of cable performance and selection.

Cables have long been viewed as an accessory and too often treated as an afterthought, so the suggestion that they be treated as a (sub)system in themselves -- and by extension that you use the same cable right through your system, as suggested by several of the more serious cable companies, including and perhaps most vociferously by Nordost -- can easily be dismissed as the most blatant kind of self-promotion and marketing opportunism. After all, how convenient is that if you make cables? But, assuming that you accept that cables can and do sound different (and I doubt you'll have read this far if you don't), if you look a little closer at what factors actually impact cable performance, the underlying logic soon starts to make sense. That's exactly the opportunity presented by Odin 2.

By now you'll have realized that Odin 2 is a seriously impressive performer, representing a significant step forward over the original Odin. But what is really interesting is where that performance comes from. When it comes to cables, the things that seem to get the most attention are the metal used for the conductors and whatever is used as insulation. Let's face it -- if cables are an afterthought, the plugs on the end of them rarely even get considered. Yet, in large part, that's exactly where the Odin 2's advantage over the original Odin lies. The conductors are identical in material, and both the insulation and the overall topology are also the same. So why the big difference in performance?

Two of the least-understood aspects of cable performance are mechanical behavior and termination. Nordost have looked at the dimensions and mechanical characteristics of the Odin 2 cables to optimize mechanical performance, minimizing the audible impact of microphony. Nordost has also designed their own low-mass connectors, plugs and spades that maintain the critical geometrical relationships between conductors right into the terminations themselves. The fact that such

apparently peripheral considerations can have such a profound musical effect is significant. If understanding cable performance needs to go beyond the basic questions of metallurgy and insulation types to embrace topological consistency, mechanical characteristics and terminations -- with any of those aspects able to make or break a cable's performance -- then the value inherent in a consistent approach soon becomes apparent. Not only are you dealing with a single set of identifiable performance characteristics, those characteristics are consistent across the system. Mix and match your cables and you have no idea which one is doing what.

But beyond suggesting how we should use cables, it also suggests how we should assess them. Clearly, the time-honored habit of simply replacing one lead in the system with another isn't going to work, because its real impact will be masked by the characteristics of the remaining leads. Which helps explain why cable manufacturers -- who spend a lot more of their time trying to listen to cables and assess performance differences -- are so aware of the benefits of running a cable right through the system. It's simply the best way to get the best performance out of whatever cables you are using.

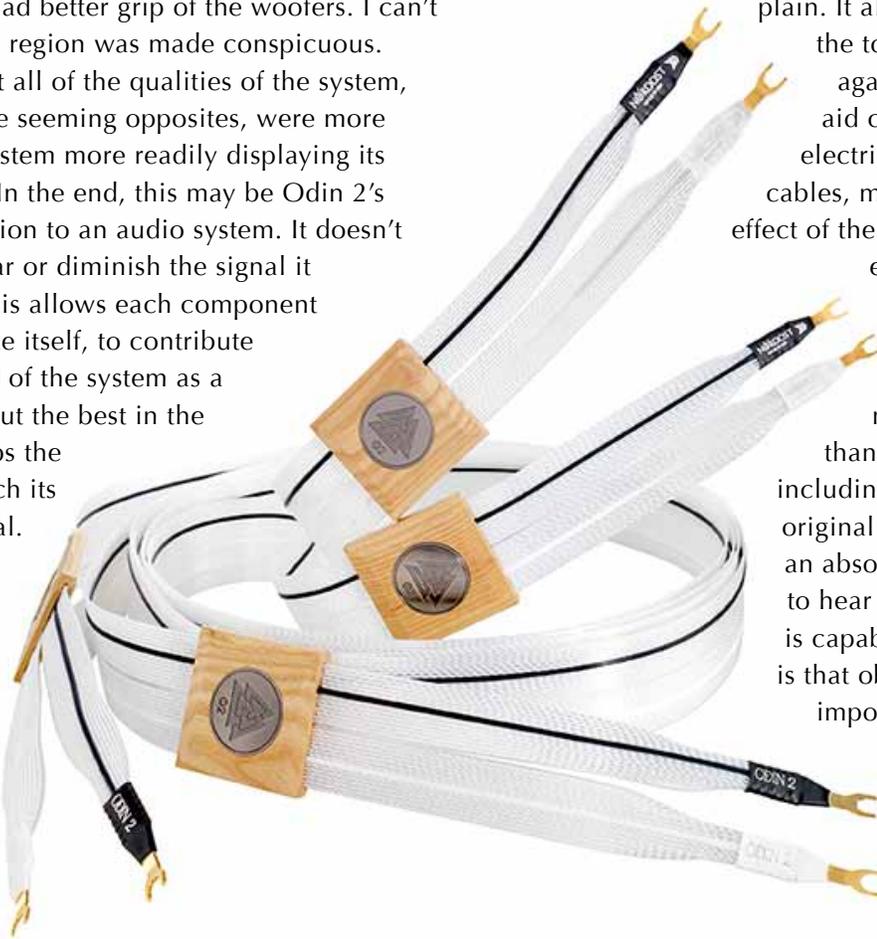
That's why, if you really want to hear a cable, you also need to run it right through the system. But please note, that's not the same as saying that you have to buy an entire system's worth at once. Just like buying a new power amp, in which case you should listen to it with the speakers you ultimately aim to use with it, rather than the ones you happen to be using at present, deciding which cables to use is not the same as deciding to buy them all at once. What's important is knowing where you are going, so that each step gets you closer to your ultimate goal. In the real world, unless someone is buying a complete system, he already owns cables, so the transition is likely to be piecemeal rather than wholesale. Even so, there are natural divisions within the cable system itself: power cords, interconnects and speaker cables, and source cables (digital, network and tonearm leads). You can attack each subsection in turn as funds allow. Just remember that whether we are talking Odin 2 or any other cable family, deciding which cable to buy means listening to the cable system as a whole.

-Roy Gregory



recording and giving insight into its creation. But Odin 2 accomplished big things too. The entire presentation was energized -- a good word for summing up Odin 2's immense contributions. The sound was fast and had great momentum, a sense of unwavering pace and rhythm. There was substance in the midrange, a sense of dimension and body, and muscularity in the bass, as though the amp had better grip of the woofers. I can't say that any tonal region was made conspicuous. Rather, it was that all of the qualities of the system, even ones that are seeming opposites, were more prominent, the system more readily displaying its own personality. In the end, this may be Odin 2's greatest contribution to an audio system. It doesn't choke, gate, smear or diminish the signal it passes. In turn, this allows each component to sound more like itself, to contribute fully to the sound of the system as a whole. It brings out the best in the components, helps the entire system reach its full sonic potential.

Paul Bolin may have discovered this same thing with original Odin -- that there wasn't a part of the musical spectrum or particular sonic quality that went untouched. But just as telling was how the cables brought out the differences in recordings and components. For instance, Odin 2 showed that the amp that captured the ambience of *Dad Loves His Work* best was the Jeff Rowland Model 825, followed very closely by the Ayre VX-5 Twenty. And the remastered CD of *Dad Loves His Work* [Columbia Legacy 69803] may sound more ambient, until you realize that this is due to a subtle "lift" in the treble, along with a layer of fine grain. The Mobile Fidelity LP [Mobile Fidelity MFSL1-356] sounded utterly different, owing not just to the analog playback but also the character of the cartridge, tonearm and turntable and phono stage. What I didn't expect, however, was the transient snap and treble sheen that opened up the recording a bit more.



Playing different versions of the same recording often reveals more about the hardware than the software, letting you know how well it is able to capture and convey differences in the mastering (if any exist) and especially in formats. Here again, analog proved to be king, both for sheer resolution and the relaxed presentation, and Odin 2 made that all the more

plain. It also made me covet the tonearm cable all over again. Nordost has long paid close attention to the electrical properties of its cables, minimizing the sonic effect of the conductors. This is especially pertinent for the tiny analog signal, and the Odin 2 tonearm cable is so much more revealing than any other I've used, including (by recollection) the original Odin cable, that it is an absolute necessity if you want to hear everything your analog rig is capable of. The improvement is that obvious and, more importantly, that musically significant.

But the tonearm cable is not the only product I can be hard-lined about:

used together, the Odin 2 cables are simply without equal. I often include direct comparisons in my reviews, and there is temptation to do that here, especially with Nordost's Valhalla 2 cables, which I reviewed and have used most often since. I won't do that this time, however, not because Odin 2 isn't better -- it is, in every way -- but that I don't want to give the impression that Valhalla 2 isn't superlative -- it is. I would suggest instead that if you are thinking of becoming an Odin 2 owner, you hear Valhalla 2 as well, mostly for the academic exercise of discovering how much additional performance can be wrung out of an audio cable by one of the industry's premier makers, not to mention the efficacy of those seven years of R&D.



Audio scribes frequently consider cables the hardest products to review. It is true that audio cables don't have the tonal aberrations of most speakers or the obvious sonic differences between solid-state and tube electronics. I won't say the influence cables have on the sonic outcome of an audio system is subtle, because it simply isn't. Reviewing cables is a matter of recognizing and understanding the overall gestalt, because they are used throughout the system, instead of calling attention to isolated qualities. In the same way that painting a room makes it not just look different but feel different, reviewing cables is about discerning the whole, not highlighting the parts.

No audio cables embody the phrase "the whole" better than Nordost Odin 2. They are the most sonically far-reaching and consequential audio cables I've used, presenting the truth of the musical signal, the electronics and speakers with unequalled fidelity. They are also musically consonant, their sheer resolving powers never resulting in the mere parsing of the music. While affording a single Odin 2 power cord or tonearm cable is an aspiration more than a reality for many of us, the sonic value of the purchase will never be in question. If you can handle the truth as well as the price of Odin 2, you'll find no more direct and effective way to finally hear the entirety of performance from your audio system.

Price: interconnects, \$22,499 per meter pair; speaker cables, \$29,999 per meter pair; power cords, \$16,999 per 1.25-meter length.

Warranty: Limited lifetime.

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Associated Equipment

Analog: Grand Prix Audio Monaco 1.5 and TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntables; Graham B-44 Phantom Series II Supreme and Tri-Planar Ultimate U12 tonearms; Denon DL-103R and Dynavector XV-1s (stereo and mono) cartridges; Nordost Valhalla 2 phono cable; Audio Research Reference Phono 2 SE and Lamm Industries LP2.1 phono stages.

Digital: Ayre Acoustics DX-5 "A/V Engine"; CEC TL1 CD transport; dCS Vivaldi 2.0 transport, digital-to-analog converter, master clock and upsampler; Timbre Technology TT-1 digital-to-analog converter; Genesis Digital Lens; Toshiba Satellite laptop.

Preamplifiers: Audio Research Reference 6, Lamm Industries LL1 Signature, VTL TL7.5 Series III.

Amplifiers: Audio Research Reference 75 SE, Ayre Acoustics VX-5 Twenty, Jeff Rowland

Design Group Model 825 and VTL S-400 Series II Reference stereo amps; Kenwood L-07M, Lamm M1.2 Reference and VTL Siegfried Series II Reference monoblocks.

Loudspeakers: MartinLogan Aeon, Paradigm Signature S2 v2, Wilson Audio Alexia and Sabrina.

Interconnects: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Nordost Valhalla 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Cobra and Anaconda.

Speaker cables: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Nordost Valhalla 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Cobra and Anaconda.

Digital cables: Nordost Valhalla 2 S/PDIF and AES/EBU cables.

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

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

Equipment rack and platforms: Paradigm J-29 speaker stands, Silent Running Audio Craz² 8 equipment rack and Ohio Class XL Plus² platforms (under Lamm M1.2 amps), Harmonic Resolution Systems M3 isolation bases.