

The Nordost Odin Cable System



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by Roy Gregory

As an audio reviewer, your system inevitably presents an ever-changing face to the world. Even the static elements, your own system as opposed to kit that's in for review, changes with a greater frequency than most, exposed as it is to the need to stay current and the temptation presented by a constant passage of enticing alternatives. Looking back across the last five or so years there are few pieces that have been ever present in my listening room. There's the Wadia 861SE (although that's off being modified and in danger of replacement by ARC's CD7 or the new one-box Zanden) and the Hovland RADIA. Everything else has been and gone at least once, with one exception that predates even these two stalwarts: the Nordost Valhalla cable loom. In fact, it's hard to remember a time before Valhalla, so fundamental a part has it played in the development of both my system and my thinking.

Of course, it didn't all happen at once, and when it did it was in reverse – sort of. First came the interconnects and speaker cable, soon to be joined by digital leads. Then came the power cords and finally, at long last, the Thor distribution unit. Yet, if there's one thing that the Valhalla experience teaches you it is that we've grievously underestimated the importance of cables, both collectively and relative to each other. So, not only does the cable loom create the foundation on which system performance is built, but it starts not with the signal cables but at your wall sockets. The cable hierarchy runs in reverse to popular wisdom. First priority is the cable from your electricity supply to your distribution block: then the block itself, the rest of the power cords (star earthed through the block and with a clean earth too, of course) then the speaker cable and

finally the interconnects. Sounds dumb, huh? Try it and see. Listen to music rather than hi-fi and you'll soon see what I mean.

So, here I am with a cable system that I both like and understand to the extent that it has redefined what it's possible to do with a hi-fi system. But, just as I'm getting really comfortable in the halls of Valhalla, what should happen along but Odin. And he doesn't just arrive – he kicks the doors in, demanding attention with such commanding presence as to establish immediate authority; that's the thing with Gods – they know how to make you sit up and take notice.

Time I think, for a reader health warning. All of you who struggle with the concepts of cable performance outlined above, all those who still believe that all cables sound the same, all those who blanch at the price of Valhalla – for your own peace of mind, read no further. For, the first thing you learn when you've got over Odin's entrance, is that he doesn't travel cattle class! (It's the retinue, you know – they just won't tolerate the leg-room!)

So, just how expensive is expensive? Well, there's two ways of looking at this: either Odin is around three times the price of Valhalla, or it's a third the price of Transparent's flagship cables. I guess it depends whether you're a half full or a half empty kind of guy, but either way that's a bit of a gulp. For that, you don't just want a cable to move the goal posts, you want them set up in another stadium – and one a lot further than the Emirates is from Highbury. Well, rest

assured that you'll not be disappointed. This is no Pyrrhic victory or dour "one-nil to the Arsenal". No, this is a *bona fide* revolution in cable performance, blending the key strengths that have made Valhalla's position so unassailable with the harmonic weight and complexity, the tonal subtlety and finesse that were its last remaining weaknesses. Disappointed? Listen to Odin and I can't see you being disappointed. Impoverished possibly... just thank the Gods that its so darned expensive!



Or perhaps more to the point, what makes it so darned expensive? Well, at a quick glance, not a lot. There are the same basic materials and they're in much the same basic arrangement as before. Conductors are silver plated copper, wrapped in Teflon insulation, twisted and shielded in the interconnects, laid flat in the speaker cables. But look closer and you'll see that the Odin benefits from the logical application of two proprietary technologies. Indeed, Valhalla was itself the first step on an evolutionary path that extended the performance of Nordost's original extruded Teflon, ribbon construction. These cables combined solid-core conductors with a spiral wound, Teflon filament that spaced the insulating sleeve away from the metal's surface. The interconnects ▶

▶ also introduced conventional shielded construction to the range. Well with both those technologies now extending further down the product line in the shape of the “Norse” range (Heimdahl, Baldur, Frey, and Tyr) it’s clearly time to take the next step – and that’s Odin.

The new flagship cable again takes two technologies and adds them to the quiver. First up is dual-filament spacing of all conductors. By wrapping two filaments around each other before in turn wrapping them around the conductive core Nordost have achieved several benefits: reduced surface contact, greater air gap between the conductor and the insulating sleeve, better damping and greater geometrical consistency when bent. All these are good things. The difficulty and precision required to manufacture the conductors isn’t. First seen in the Valhalla power cords and later the Tyr interconnects, this is the first full signal family to enjoy this technology.

That’s one half of the problem. The other half is in the shielding of the interconnects. Look closely and you’ll see that the tubular Odin cables are constructed of individually shielded conductors, each shield in turn seemingly formed from linked, flat rings, rather like a worm’s skin or a stack of mints. This unusual appearance reflects the silver plated copper ribbon used and the complex and innovative construction, an approach that manages to combine flexibility with shielding capabilities only matched by (extremely rigid) copper pipe configurations. Dubbed TSC by Nordost (for Total Signal Control), you guessed it – difficult and costly to achieve. These are no off-the-shelf products dressed up to look special. They’re ultra high-tech, precision manufactured to incredibly

tight tolerances and that’s reflected in the price-tags.

Conductors are only part of the story. And you can easily ruin a good cable with poor termination (which is why you should never buy

shortened or “home terminated” cables second-hand). The Odin’s connectors don’t disappoint either, with silver plated copper versions of the established WBT NextGen and XLR plugs, with Rhodium plated Z plugs or spades on the speaker cable. Oh, and then there’s those wooden blocks – about which the less said the better. They serve to inhibit amateur retermination but otherwise, as far as I’m concerned do little to enhance the appearance of the cables. Be gone I say. You shouldn’t need bits of wood to separate these wires from the herd – one listen should be perfectly sufficient!

What should you expect to hear? Well, Odin is unmistakably a Nordost cable, but it’s also like no Nordost cable you’ve heard (with one exception which I’ll come back to). The lasting impact of Valhalla was the effortless temporal and spatial organisation it brought to musical signals. It’s quick, uncluttered and seamless in its delivery, making the heavyweight opposition sound lumpy, ill-defined and rhythmically bent out of shape, one part of the frequency spectrum pushed forward in time, another lagging behind. Ultimately it was the coherence of its temporal presentation and dynamic range that have kept Valhalla at the top of the

tree, a position that, save Odin, it still occupies. Wire it into the system and you know exactly what to expect: instant insight into the pacing and placement of each note, top to bottom of the music. It brought playing to life – and closer to life.

Now Odin takes those temporal and spatial capabilities and grafts on a whole new dimension of harmonic definition and texture – without even slightly diluting the speed and order that set Valhalla so far apart from the crowd in the first place. In fact, the effect is quite the opposite, the whole being considerably greater than the sum of the individual performance parts. Valhalla sounded as near to “No Cable” as I’d heard, because its sins were unintrusive on a structural level, purely subtractive when it came to the clothing. But it was that subtractive element that stopped it shortening the gap to reality, a gap that Odin apparently crosses with ease – at least until I can actually work out what it’s not doing.

Swap your Valhalla for Odin and prepare for a shock. The extra harmonic information translates into a far more real rendition of each note, not just the timing and placement of its leading edge, but of its shape and duration, its pace as an individual entity if you like: a pace that alters with instrument and frequency. So, rather than simply adding colour and weight to the proceedings, Odin ▶





► adds temporal texture as well. Combine the extra weight with undiminished dynamics and musical impact, a note's ability to jump, a band's explosive potential increases dramatically (in every sense of that word). All of which is impressive enough believe you me. But changes at the frequency extremes are just as significant. The bottom end, perhaps as a result of shifting to fewer, heavier gauge conductors, is significantly weightier and more powerful, yet more clearly defined too, with more air and space around and below notes. At the opposite extreme, notes carry more energy and information, but are accompanied by less glare and hash. It's an effect akin to the cleaner but much less obvious performance of the latest generation exotic-dome tweeters. It seems like less but it's actually more.

Musically, the end result is greater presence, drama, musical and dynamic contrast, colour, texture and shape (generally areas in which the Valhalla already excelled, which gives you some idea why I think this cable


represents a performance step-change).

The impact is particularly noticeable on acoustic music.

Indeed, the more the natural the recording the more obvious the benefits. It's not that Odin is unimpressive with manufactured sounds, just that you have no benchmark against which to measure its achievement. The reality of its presentation is such that reality itself is the necessary moderator. The litmus test is natural musical expression. Just listen to Jacqueline du Pre's pizzicato interjections at the opening of the *Lento – Allegro Molto* on the Testament live release of her 1966 Elgar performance from Moscow. The placement and weighting of each note, the spaced pauses between them, is captivating, the restraint and colour of each note setting up the tension that and expectation that erupts into the dramatic sprays and rapid runs that characterise the movement. It just makes sense: sense of the music and sense of the performance. You can really hear the empathy she has, both with the score and Barbirolli. It's a fleeting, magical quality and part of what makes a performance live – and here it's HERE, boldly dramatic, quivering with suppressed emotion, searching for release. If music is about human expression that's what Odin delivers – and shockingly so, seemingly presenting it with the same absolute authority we identify with the live event.

This cable has rendered my system significantly more convincing, more alive, more compelling than any other single change I can recall – simply by allowing the rest of the equipment free-rein. Which is what a cable loom should be all about. I started this article by looking at priorities within the loom, suggesting we've been looking at things the wrong way round. Does Odin force me to reassess that proposition?

In fact it underlines it. The dual-filament technology in the mains leads doesn't distort the result, it just makes it more obvious. When I suggested that the Valhalla mains leads were Nordost's most impressive product to date, little did I realise...

But, as astonishingly good as the Odins' musical performance is, it comes at a wallet wrenchingly heavy cost that few will ever be able to contemplate. For those who can I suspect that a single brief listen will be enough to convince them of the cables' value. After all, if you already own speakers that cost £120,000 then its false economy to feed them with less than the best. The crazy thing is, that even on a whole system costing less than a single pair of Odin interconnects the benefits are so stunningly obvious! And that's the way most of us will experience Odin – courtesy of the inimitable Lars at one show or another. It's a trip worth taking. Besides which, there are two upsides to the Odin saga: mono-filament technology has finally reached the real world in the shape of Heimdahl, and so too, eventually will dual-filament. Secondly, the sheer cost of Odin casts Valhalla in an entirely different light. Suddenly it looks like quite a bargain – and I never thought I'd be writing that. 

Prices:

Interconnects – 1m pr (RCA or XLR)
£8500

Speaker Wires – 3m pr (shotgun or bi-wired)
£17500

UK Distributor:

Activ Distribution
Tel. (44)(0)1635 291357
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Manufacturer:

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