



The Nordost Brahma Mains Lead

by Roy Gregory

When I described Nordost's Thor mains distribution unit as "the final piece in the jigsaw" I was only partly right. Yes, it meant that it was finally possible to have a coherent, mono-filament cable loom from wall-socket to speaker terminals, but what it didn't do was close the yawning price chasm between the Vishnu power cord at £425 and the Valhalla at £1700. Well, now Nordost have done something about that too, in the shape of the new Brahma power cord, priced at £900 for a two-meter IEC lead.

Aimed squarely at those folks who want something better than the Vishnu but who can't stretch the considerable cost distance to the flagship leads, the Brahma is a logical synthesis of the two products that flank it. The problem in any such exercise is selecting the bits you are going to include and the ones you are going to leave out. So, to put the Brahmas in context a brief recap on the construction of its brethren is essential.

The Vishnu consists of three, mono-filament conductors twisted into a conventional mains lead and terminated with a Wattgate 320 IEC plug and whatever wall plug is appropriate to the user's national grid. The External insulation is a

tough, transparent layer of THV, while the tubes that are extruded over the mono-filament spiralled conductors are Teflon. That thin filament of Teflon that winds around the silver-plated copper solid-core keeps the insulation spaced and creates a virtual air dielectric. It's the same technology that's used in the Valhalla and Valkyrja signal and speaker cabling, but with much heavier conductors.

The Valhalla power cord is a far more complex beast, and in certain respects represents the first in a new generation of Nordost products. It uses seven, heavily silver-plated, 16 gauge copper solid-core conductors – three for live, three for neutral and the last for earth. It also uses higher grade connectors, but the real difference lies in its use of dual-filament construction. By twisting two, thinner filaments together before winding them around the conductor, an even lower level of physical contact is achieved, a costly and complex exercise but one that delivers a serious musical dividend if performance is anything to go by.

Enter then the Brahma, clad in an unfamiliar yet fetching translucent blue. It uses five of the heavier gauge conductors from the Valhalla, albeit with a thinner silver coating inherited from the Vishnu, along with the latter's mono-filament spiral and connectors. The end result is a far more substantial lead than the cheaper version, and one that certainly looks the part. The other thing that the Brahma has in common with the rest of the Nordost family is an absurdly long burn-in period.

However, its place in the overall scheme of things is pretty apparent even from new, and things, as they say, can only get better. I managed to get

three weeks of continuous use on the Brahmas before settling down to assess them in earnest, and even a cursory listen revealed the extent of their improvement over that time. As far as auditioning went, I used the Brahma leads, together with a Thor distribution unit in a variety of systems. However, when it came to closer comparisons I relied on a combination of the Metronome four-box CD player and Levinson 383 integrated amplifier, just to keep things manageable. The rest of the Cabling was Nordost Valhalla and the speakers were either Living Voice OBX-R2s or the B&W 805s. The other element was of course the Thor distribution unit, the foundation stone of the Nordost mains loom and the starting point as far as purchasing goes. Thus, anybody considering Brahmas should already have (or at least have considered) the Thor, which, whilst it might seem expensive, will make a far greater difference to the sound of the system overall than a couple of Brahma power cords. It's something that's readily demonstrable so if you don't believe me, factor it into your mains lead auditioning. It's also the approach assumed and intended by the manufacturer, so ignore it if not at your peril, then with considerable care.

Whilst I listened extensively to the Brahmas in isolation, for the purposes of comparison and in order to place them in the context of the other Nordost products, I compared them directly to the cheaper Vishnu and flagship Valhalla to see how effectively they bridge the gap. Most of the listening concerned their superiority (for it's abundantly clear) to the Vishnu. Substituting Brahmas for the cheaper cables brings an immediate improvement in dynamic range, ►



▶ discrimination and definition. Playing the Reference Recordings disc of the Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* (Eiji Oue conducting the Minnesota Orchestra RR-96CD) demonstrated the differences perfectly. Right from the opening violin notes the improved focus and spatial definition is obvious. The acoustic space is blacker, with a quieter background which makes the side and rear walls of that space much more apparent. The texture of the insistent notes is also more obvious, as is the sweep of the awakening orchestra as the opening bars pass across the strings, the punctuation of the percussion that much more emphatic. Starting from a quieter noise floor, the ramped dynamics that build into that opening crescendo (not to mention the even bigger one that follows) are more precisely delineated, more convincing in their substance and body.

All of which is nice to have, but the really important difference is the combined musical effect of those advances. The superior micro dynamics allow greater instrumental texture and character across the range, making for more colour and more contrast, but it's the greater drama that scores. Oue takes the opening at a fast tempo, one that sounds hurried and a little headlong with the Vishnu, robbing the music of structure and tension. The Brahma's greater control and easier instrumental distinction makes sense of the rapid tempo so that it becomes a musical decision rather than a nervous charge. With it comes the sense of

tension that is so crucial to the opening passage and that creates the contrast with the second, more pastoral one. Whilst I don't think Oue's approach enjoys the powerful, almost ponderous inevitability and shattering eventual impact that Johanos achieves with the Dallas, the Brahmas allow you to see where he's going with the lighter, fleeter touch employed. It's an important musical insight and one that if it doesn't entirely escape from the Vishnu, is certainly well buried.

The added colour and separation serves vocals equally well. Shawn Colvin's cover of Steve Earle's 'Someday' (*Cover Girl* Columbia 477240 2) takes on new attack and twang in its guitar lines, better separation, placement and identity in the percussion, but it's the greater presence, immediacy and internal subtlety that makes the voice more convincing and intimate, giving the song a new focus and core. Here's the small-town girl, secretly confessing her frustration and longing to escape from her humdrum existence. The Brahmas deliver that confessional hesitance just as they also deliver the triumphant escapism of the chorus. Once again

they simply make more musical sense, delivering more dynamic resolution and sheer information, but also binding it together into a coherent and legible whole. As impressive as the Vishnus are in the context of their price peers, the Brahmas more than justify the two-fold increase in cost, making a fundamental contribution to the musical message.

The next question, naturally enough, is how they compare to the Valhallas, and do they offer flagship performance on the cheap. Well, the differences are just as cut and dried – and the sad answer to your question is “no”. It's interesting that simply substituting a single Valhalla betwixt wall socket and Thor produces a pretty dramatic difference, a result that underlines the fact that the Valhalla possesses qualities that are quite distinct from those of the Vishnu and Brahma. Listening to the more expensive lead, as above but more so when used throughout the system, brings a degree of natural colour and dimensionality to instruments and voices that renders them far more present and convincing. But the real kicker is the way that everything opens out temporally as well as spatially. Rhythms become unforced and much more expressive, everyone having more time and space within which to make their contribution. Suddenly the internal shape of musical strands and the chemistry between the instruments weaving them becomes totally clear. This new accessibility constitutes a transformation in the musical integrity of the system, and returning to the Brahmas is a sobering experience – albeit one that saves a colossal amount of money: over £3500 in this fairly straightforward system!

But don't get too depressed. If we return to what the Brahmas do, the impact they deliver over lesser cables is just as emphatic as the coup de ▶

▶ grace administered by the Valhallas. High-frequency definition and resolution is a particular and dramatic example of their lack of grain and ability to focus energy. Just listen to the gentle cymbal strikes that accent the opening bars of 'Someday'; the strike and shimmering decay is astonishingly natural and beautifully defined despite the other, louder instruments hogging centre stage. This control of musical energy has always been the attribute that separates Nordost cabling from the competition. Getting the right amount of substance in the right place in the soundstage and at exactly the right time is what defines the shape of notes and the structure of the music. In this regard the Brahma power cord is better than anything short of the Valhalla, and in the same way that a single Valhalla will lift the performance of a Thor feeding Brahmas, so a single Brahma will elevate a loom of Vishnus. The hierarchy is clear, with genuine benefits delivered in terms of added bass weight, power and pitch definition, pace and placement of notes. These are the musical foundations on which the rest of the musical spectrum is built, a fact that will soon become abundantly clear if you start experimenting with these various cables. Understand that and the musical value of the Brahma also becomes clear, which in turn translates into its monetary value, which is exceptional. Whilst it's difficult to consider a £900 mains lead as a bargain, its performance and more importantly, the options it creates within the context of a Nordost mains loom as a whole, make it exactly that.

By delivering improved dynamic definition, resolution and transparency, the Brahma makes a real, musical contribution to the system, providing greater sense and legibility rather than simply more sparkle and fireworks. Of course, it does that too, but only when appropriate, opening the gate wide for the signal rather than simply forcing it

through the same narrow gap, giving it space to breathe rather than imposing its own parameters. Inserting Brahma into the mains loom quite simply broadens the expressive scope of the system. Along the way (and not surprisingly) it reduces grain and mechanical intrusion, the subtle mains artefacts that undermine the

illusion of real people and real music. Indeed, it fulfils its brief perfectly, significantly extending the attributes of the Vishnu whilst failing to erode the position of the Valhalla.

In fact, that sums it up nicely. Consider the Brahma as a natural progression onward and upward from the Vishnu, bridging the price gap to the Valhalla – if not entirely the qualitative one. The additional flexibility it brings to the range and the additional cost/performance options it opens up are welcome indeed. Unfortunately, Valhalla performance still needs Valhalla technology and the top of the range mains lead remains for me Nordost's most impressive single achievement in a short history littered with impressive, musically expressive and commercially successful products. With the arrival of the Brahma power cord, the performance gap becomes easier to live with while the price makes the savings an effective salve. I'd like to say that it really is the final piece in what is now a very sensible jigsaw – and in many ways it is. But once you let technology out of the box you can't un-invent it back inside



again and dual-filament interconnects and speaker leads must be somewhere out there in the future. But for mere mortals and those for whom Valhalla remains a distant dream, the Brahmas take mono-filament technology about as far as it will go – which is a pretty long way.

Yes, I realise that the cost of a Thor and a full suite of Brahmas is a frightening (yet scarily cost-effective) prospect, but the real value of this lead is as an upgrade for Vishnu users, delivering additional performance in bite sized chunks. Suddenly, the next rung on the ladder got a whole lot closer. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| Type: | IEC power cord |
| Mains Plug: | Most types to order |
| Prices – | |
| 2m Terminated: | £900 |
| Each Additional Meter: | £160 |

Manufacturer:

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