

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Nordost Odin 2 cable system

by Alan Sircom

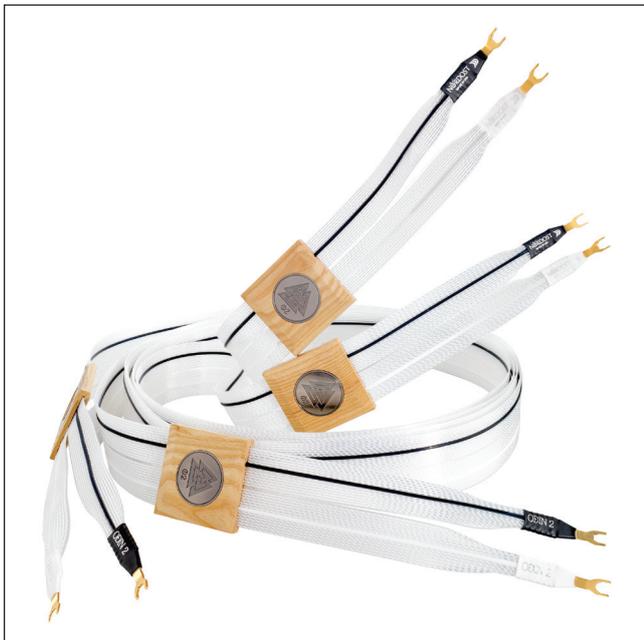
There are other cable systems that cost more than Nordost's Odin, but none of these rivals seem to draw as much fire from the sceptics and cynics. Odin is the most visible high-priced cable system in audio, and now Nordost's new Odin 2 raises the bar... and the price. I can almost hear the sound of pitchforks being sharpened and torches being lit.

Odin 2 was possibly the worst kept, most blindingly obvious secret in audio. Nordost has been systematically improving its lines for several years, starting with Leif and the Norse 2

ranges, and most recently with Valhalla 2 (tested in *Hi-Fi+* issue 112). Given that Valhalla 2 improved the performance of Valhalla to a point where the difference between Valhalla 2 and Odin was beginning to blur, the development of an Odin 2 was almost inevitable.

The problem is you don't just 'update' Odin. The original Odin cable system from 2008 already set a high standard of attention to detail and uncompromising focus on getting a signal from source to speaker with the least possible compromise. Where do you go from there? Fortunately, the ▶





► key to this was the design and development criteria that went into turning Valhalla into V2, blending that with what set the original Odin apart from the first version of Valhalla, and then adding Odin 2's technological distinctiveness in its own right.

The principle element taken from Valhalla 2 is the HOLO:PLUG terminator for phono, XLR, power, and spade connectors. The HOLO:PLUG is designed to create an optimum interface between cable and component, with precisely aligned 360° low eddy current terminations for each conductor in the relevant cable, a rear termination grounding ring, and sophisticated vibration control. This means that the individual HOLO:PLUG must be designed in tandem with the specific cable, so there are no components shared between a Valhalla 2 phono plug and a Odin 2 phono plug. It also means that building the individual cables is a slow, specialist, and painstaking task. But, the path to perfection is paved with such dedication. The one missing element from the HOLO:PLUG list (at the time of writing) is a 13A UK plug, and fellow traveller in the Nordost bus Quantum has produced a new fused version of its Qbase with Schuko sockets that will get the job done, thereby limiting the number of Furutech UK 13A sockets. The HOLO:PLUG carbon-fibre IEC socket, together with Schuko and US wall plugs are available in HOLO:PLUG form.

The element taken from Odin was its Dual Monofilament layout, which is also now featured in Valhalla 2. A precision double-helix of Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene-wrapped

monofilament cables itself encased in a further layer of FEP, in Odin 2, the individual conductors are formed of a number of silver-plated high-purity solid-core copper strands. The actual thickness and number of individual strands that make up a single Odin 2 conductor vary according to their ultimate purpose, and the composition of a Valhalla 2 conductor for a specific cable may have little in common with the make-up of an Odin 2 conductor in the same situation.

Since Norse 2, and especially after Valhalla 2, Nordost has placed increasing significance on making sure the mechanical properties of a cable are optimised to a degree of precision that borders on the obsessive. In Odin 2, however, it crosses that border and marches on Compulsville. Odin 2 features what Nordost refers to as TSC, or Total Signal Control. TSC comprises additional shielding and spacing tubes, most easily seen in the black and white tubes separating the paired cable sets on the 'send' and 'return' conductors. These help create an optimum mechanical positioning for the individual conductors in each cable. The wooden resonance/serial number blocks are retained from the original Odin: the branded name, numbers, and direction indicators are now joined by a metal circle (with the three sets of interlocking triangles that make up the Odin rune) set into one side of each block.

Although Odin 2 should be considered as a complete system because of its gestalt totality, it's wrong to lump the various cables in Odin 2 together as one. This is because Nordost Odin 2 is not isomorphic. In an isomorphic cable ►

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▶ family, the same layout is used to develop the loudspeaker cables, interconnect cables, and power cords. Nordost instead develops a series of different designs that apply specifically to the task in hand, but are calibrated through rigorous listening tests to work together. As a result, the power cord uses 7×14 AWG solid-core wires per conductor, the analogue interconnects use 10×23 AWG wires per conductor, and the loudspeaker cables 26×20 AWG wires per conductor.

While there are also tonearm cables, digital interconnects (no USB as yet, however), and bi-wire jumpers in the Odin 2 range, we concentrated on the core elements: power, interconnect, and speaker cables. We also went with spade connectors rather than 4mm banana plugs for loudspeakers, because my Wilson Duette S2’s don’t eat bananas. With the exception of a single Furutech 13A plug reaching to the wall, every connection and cable to the speaker terminals was pure, unadulterated Odin 2. We also had identical lengths of Valhalla 2 to compare and contrast, as well as some top-end rivals. Our runs of Odin 2 were fully conditioned with one of Nordost’s VIDAR burn-in conditioners.

Valhalla 2 shifted the goalposts. Although it was priced between Valhalla and Odin, Valhalla 2 came dangerously close to the performance of Odin, and Odin 2 is Nordost’s response. Odin 2 is, to use a touch of British understatement, ‘a bit good’, in that while you listen to V2 and think it’s outstanding in its absence of tonal character, if you compare the cable to Odin 2, Valhalla 2 almost sounds ‘broken’. And given V2 already made most other cables sound arch and similarly ‘broken’, Odin 2 makes it all but impossible to listen to lesser cables, even in the context of cheaper audio equipment.

This is a conceit to reviewing, because putting around £100,000 worth of cable in a £10,000 system is likely only ever going to happen in a reviewer’s listening room, but the odd thing about Odin 2 is it makes such a system appear understandable and logical. The £10,000 system produces a more integrated, coordinated sound as a result of the Odin 2 upgrade, making that system hang together in the way most systems at the price don’t. It also makes the system more



receptive to the improvements brought about by Nordost’s Sort Kones, Sort Füt, and other devices with similar intent.

The scale of personal epiphany and re-education that takes place with Odin 2 means I can’t quite bring myself to cancel the idea of that seemingly cable-heavy system out as ‘unrealistic’, because I can envisage someone perfectly content with their system as it stands wanting to bring out the best from it, and ultimately settling on Odin 2 as a logical extension of that process. In reality, someone settling on Odin 2 is extremely likely to be using a system that uses £10,000+ components as a bare minimum, rather than a £10,000 system. But while I understand that intellectually, having spent a considerable amount of time listening to Odin 2, I can’t shake the idea that if that £10,000 system was made up of the devices that went really well together, Nordost’s Finest would just tie that system together better than almost anything else on the market, all other things being equal.

So, precisely what does Nordost Odin 2 do that makes it so exceptional? Nothing. It does nothing to the sound of your system, but it does nothing better than almost every other cable out there. You quickly realise just how active that ‘nothing’ really is, which means mixing your mythos – out go Norse gods and in comes Buddhist metaphysics – and Odin 2 is like a Rinzaï Zen monk meditating on ‘Mu’ or ‘nothingness’. The devices in the system are unconstrained by Odin 2 to a point that even cables like Odin and Valhalla 2 are unable to attain. ▶



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cables as tested:

Nordost Odin 2 Supreme power cord: £13,599/1.5m

Nordost Odin 2 Supreme interconnect cables:
£19,999/1.5m RCA pair

Nordost Odin 2 Supreme loudspeaker cables:
£43,399/4m terminated pair

Manufactured by: Nordost

URL: www.nordost.com

Distributed in the UK by: Atacama Audio

URL: www.atacama-audio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1455 283251

► All this sounds like pretentious nonsense, but spend time with Odin 2 and how its calming ‘absence’ nature influences both the system and the way you interact with that system, and you will understand why this ‘nothingness’ is crucial to good sound. You also might discover how the regular audiophile vocabulary is past its limits when trying to describe Odin 2’s performance thresholds. And ‘performance thresholds’ is possibly the best description of where Nordost Odin 2 exists. Alongside a very select list of rival cables, Odin 2 takes your system to new levels of performance you might not have thought possible: in this respect, it’s like listening to great old recordings played back on top-notch new equipment – you end up asking yourself, “did they know how good this is when they made it?” Odin 2 does that to both music and the equipment upon which that music is played.

Bringing this down to single musical examples seems like a constraint in its own right. Describing Odin 2 in terms of “the soundstage width...” or “Beck sounded like...” seems like defining a camera by its strap or the tree you photographed. More importantly, it seems like breaking down something best experienced as a whole into its component parts, and (staying with Buddhist thought a while longer) the parable of a group of blind men trying to describe an elephant seems relevant here. The whole is comparatively straightforward – “it’s your system, only better” – while the sum of the parts is a complex list of tick-boxes in terms of imagery, detail, dynamics, leading-edge attack, trailing-edge resolution, articulation, solidity, and transparency. All of these things are improved, and improved relative to the system you are using. So a system that throws out a wide soundstage will either deliver an even

wider soundstage or a more solid soundstage depending on what your components are doing. You can hear more of the recording, too, but not in a hyper-analytical way (unless your system is designed for such hyper-analysis) and yes, Beck sounds more like you would expect Beck to sound on his pained-yet-brilliant *Sea Change* album [Geffen]; more broken, more emotional, and more melancholic. I’ve not singled Beck out here; what applies to alt-rock acoustic guitar noodling works just as well with an orchestra in full throat, or a taut small combo playing modal jazz. Most other cables at best ‘tease’ out the musicianship of people at the top of their game playing together, but Odin 2 simply has more in reserve and makes this a natural part of the audio replay process. What strikes you when pulling back from Odin 2 is just how rare and fleeting such honesty and integrity to the recording really is in the cable world.

All the usual audiophile clichés apply, so I’m not even going to spout them. Pick the one you like the best and it fits here. Pick another, and that also applies. And yes, the *Hi-Fi+* trope of using a complete cable family works too – I’m trying to consciously avoid using the words ‘coherent’ and ‘loom’ together, but sadly it fits. From the power cord on out, Odin 2 just dresses the system in its Sunday finest, and keeps it there.

In short, Nordost’s Odin 2 doesn’t just push the envelope of how unforced audio can sound through a cable; it breaks the sound barrier. Nordost’s original Odin set high standards for cables, whether viewed individually, or in ideal circumstances taken as a complete system. And Odin 2 takes that to another level. The best that became ‘one of the best’ has just returned to its place at the head of the table. Wow! +