

Nordost Valhalla V2 Tonearm Cable +

by Andrew Harrison



Anyone familiar with Nordost's bottom-up cable hierarchy could be forgiven for wondering why we should invest heavily in a tonearm cable. Nordost, like most cable specialists, started by promoting the primacy of quality loudspeaker and interconnect cables. And then the Valhalla power cable joined the range, when the sanctity of the mains power link became indisputable. The company's interconnects and speaker cabling are all justly praised, but if one is upgrading piecemeal, the power cable is demonstrably the place to start.

Several months' experience with the Valhalla v2 Tonearm Cable + has convinced this listener though that there's plenty of mileage remaining in nurturing the audio signal at the other end of the system, where voltage levels dwindle from 240 down to microvolts. The care with which Nordost has wrought an extremely well-shielded, low capacitance conduit to pass pick-up cartridge signals from tonearm to phono amplifier ultimately reaped dividends well beyond expectation.

The V2 tonearm cable was relaunched this year with some mild revisions, and is now marked out by an additional '+' sign. Like the rest of the V2 overhaul, the first V2 tonearm cable saw substantial improvements designed to uprate performance, making the V2 series in general a serious performance threat to the original Odin series. In place of the trademark Micro Mono-Filament layout came a dual-filament

“The new approach is said to minimise any crosstalk and electromagnetic radiation between channels.”

► principle of applying two twisted strands of FEP dielectric, further reducing contact area around the conductor; and likely responsible for the lowered capacitance, from around 72 pF/m to 56 pF/m. Terminating each end of V2 were brand-new plugs, Nordost Holo:Plugs that replaced a generic right-angle DIN plug at one end and locking WBT NextGen phono plugs on the other.

The new ‘plus’ edition builds on all this, and takes a new layout internally, with the left and right channels wound individually as a twisted pair inside their own shield, in place of four insulated conductors all wound loosely together. The new approach is said to minimise any crosstalk and electromagnetic radiation between channels, although conducting copper had to be reduced slightly in cross section from 22 to 24AWG in order to maintain flexibility. That was probably a wise move: some compliance is essential in a tonearm cable that must be carefully ‘dressed’ in a sub-chassis turntable, to avoid unwanted mechanical loading on the delicately tuned suspension bounce. Perhaps tellingly, Nordost no longer trumpets the specification of V2+ capacitance, so this has likely increased in the new twisted-pair configuration.

Also new to this year’s plus-rated cable is a clever new earthing arrangement that allows more options when grounding the arm and turntable. Unusually, the earth lead, or ‘Bond Ground Wire’ does not connect to any part of the DIN plug. It runs parallel to the left and right channels, straight through to the other side (completely isolated in its own FEP extrusion and shielding). In my setup this resulted in the turntable chassis and arm mount being effectively earthed, and in practice was found to be enough to provide totally hum-free operation. There are two whip leads or “Detachable Ground Wires”; one that plugs into the amplifier end, and the other the tonearm end. On the amplifier end, when it is plugged in, this whip connects to the main shield of the cable. On the SME tonearm at least, this could enable the armtube plus cartridge body to be earthed independently of the turntable chassis, such that one earth line could be bonded to phono stage ground and the other to mains distribution ground, for example. For the most part though, the single default ground wire was sufficient and preferred.

Many plug configurations are offered, with prices starting at £4,470 for the simplest 1.25 m length with phono plugs both

ends, for those turntables that include RCA outputs. A 90° DIN plug that befits many popular tonearms adds £100, while each subsequent half metre in length is £575. For the holy grail in cartridge wiring, connected to a fully-balanced phono stage, XLR terminations are available at the same price as RCA.

When measuring up for installation, bear in mind Nordost’s ‘over-delivery’ in cable lengths, which are described as mechanically tuned to optimise performance. In the case of the tested 1.25 m cable, this was 110 cm from DIN plug to the metal barrel that marks the stereo cable split, then a further 30 cm to RCA Holo:Plugs, a total of 1.4 m.

Listening tests were with a Michell Orbe SE and SME 309 arm, connected by the Nordost cable to MFA step-up transformer and Longdog Audio Reference Phono amplifier, the latter combination a perfect partner to witness the extreme resolution and low-noise potential of the cable.

Shortly after installation it became evident that my reference vdH Grasshopper III SLA cartridge was showing the early signs of advancing age – now plain to hear through the new cable – so was away for service in the Netherlands for part of the testing. A search through the cartridge spares box turned into a marathon spree to hear every pickup again and afresh, as it quickly became evident how much this augmented front-end was telling me about each cartridge for the first time.

Setting up a cartridge can be considered a chore – that’s certainly been my view at various times – or conversely an odyssey into what’s musically attainable, as more and more fine fettling brings greater rewards. Time spent with this cable reawakened the eternal tweaker in me. Half a dozen cartridges later I realised what an exceptional tool the tonearm cable had become in cartridge setup, as literally microscopic changes in VTA and azimuth were laid bare between (and all around) the loudspeakers. When the sweet spot in alignment is near, the increasing cohesion in sound is usually recognisable as ‘getting better’; here it was simply and unmistakably either close, or bang on.

So how does this piece of wire sound? In line with the revised Valhalla 2 series, the ‘plus’ tonearm cable follows a lean and mellow voicing, in contrast to original Valhalla interconnects which were sometimes found bearing a sin of commission through their spotlit treble. ▶

“An effectively transparent conduit carrying tiny signals from deck to amp.”

► There's no such over-exposure here, just guileless revelation from bottom to top. The comparatively darker shading is nonetheless entirely natural in character, refusing to draw unwanted attention to the upper registers, instead allowing more relaxed attention equitably throughout the musical spectrum.

Listening through the Valhalla 2 Tonearm Cable + was more like unlocking the back door to the recording studio, or blagging the best concert seats in the house. Once the deck/arm/cartridge are perfectly tuned, which as discussed becomes a whole lot easier with an effectively transparent conduit carrying tiny signals from deck to amp, an LP side becomes a personal musical event.

Barenboim is at the seat of the piano, a grumbling monster of lacquered wood, cast iron and steel from which he coaxes these tender melodies as his right hand ripples back and forth, while the left punctuates with heavy yet deft low groans of bass in the opening of the *Waldstein* [EMI SLS 794/12].

The fine patina of tape hiss from the 50 year-old recording is part of the event and easily ignored, and instead I'm always captivated – in turn for instance by the incredibly soft vibration of barely touched keys in *Der Sturm*'s first movement. With the Nordost cable, I was hearing deeply into the incredibly long sustained open chords that drift through the piece, seemingly lost to the faint hiss but no, still there and ringing on and gently on.

A recently acquired box of the cycle by Alfred Brendel [Philips 6768 004] shows the Czech pianist's touch with wider dynamic shifts but similarly thoughtful musical timing. Beethoven sonatas have never sounded so conversational, ranging from somnolent to downright scary but always uncannily expressive.

King Crimson's debut album has just seen its anniversary reissue, replete with ruinous digital mastering, but a pink-rim Island pressing sounded the fresher after the cable upgrade, and crucially with correct on-the-beat timing. With the aid of a supporting cast of the LCR phono stage and a transformer volume control, surface noise melts away to inconsequence, another unexpected dividend of V2+. Somehow, more mortal tonearm cables seem to accentuate impulsive clicks where the Nordost ushers them through without emphasis.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Tonearm cable

Insulation: High purity 1.1 extruded Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene (FEP)

Conductors: 4x solid-core, Dual Mono-Filament design

Construction: 2x twisted pairs, individually shielded

Mechanically tuned lay and lengths

Material: 24AWG silver-plated, 99.99999% Oxygen-Free Copper solid core conductors, 24 AWG silver-plated, stranded Oxygen-Free Copper, Micro Mono-Filament design for bond and grounding whips

Velocity of propagation: 87%

Termination: HOLO:PLUG® Straight or 90° low-mass 5-pin Din, RCA, or XLR connectors. Whips and bond wire terminated with gold-plated 5mm spades

Price: from £4,470

Manufactured by: Nordost

URL: nordost.com

Distributed in the UK by: Renaissance Audio

URL: renaissanceaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)131 555 3922

A final word must go to bass replay, as the cable truly opens this area up being variously lean and fast, but rich and thunderous when demanded. Low-octave content comes across as staggeringly honest, whether delivering tuneful bass figures from an accomplished player, or the incidental effects of distant train and road traffic rumble, inadvertently captured at the edge of perception in 1960s recordings of chamber music. It may come as a surprise how much the stylus is reading when a tonearm cable is finally able to retell the whole story it receives. It's only natural that one of the most sensitive cables in the whole audio pantheon should garner big differences in performance, but even so... wow!

The V2+ tonearm cable follows the house V2 sound of exceptional transparency and stunning transient playback, without ever falling to the temptation of over-sharing the treble content. The midband and top are deliciously open and see-through, seamless and nearly organic in naturalness, while bass is disarmingly honest and musical in its flow. This is a staggeringly insightful wiring upgrade to hear what's hiding in the groove. +