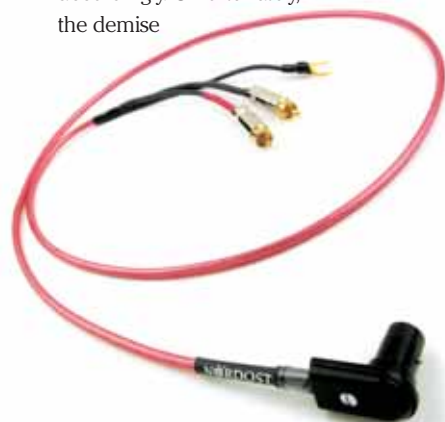


... And The Icing On The Cake

Finally – tonearm cables for Nordost users

Speaking of which, in a world where even the most curmudgeonly tweakaphobe will still spend (albeit begrudgingly) several hundred pounds on an interconnect to hook up their expensive CD player to the rest of their system, many audiophiles are still passing the tiny and incredibly fragile signal from their pride and joy turntable down something not much better than a patch lead. Consider this; the owner of an SME 5 tonearm probably has a combined investment, including record deck and a suitably pricy cartridge, not far short of \$5000 – and quite possibly considerably more. If he (or she) is using the standard tonearm lead then it's a piece of vdH 501, a 20 year old design with a street price of around \$45 once you've fitted the plugs (and believe me when I say that the metalwork and its attachment constitute the lion's share of the budget). You don't need a news flash to tell you that this isn't big and it isn't particularly clever.

But, before you go beating yourself up, this is actually another example (just like internal arm wiring) of owner oversight. Because the lead has been supplied with the arm, we tend to assume that it's someone else's responsibility; that they'll have selected an appropriate lead and terminated it accordingly. Unfortunately, the demise



of the record player, crushed beneath the weight of CD's commercial onslaught, means that many of the tonearms that we rely on today haven't really developed. The SMEs are just one example – there are plenty of others.

Meanwhile, back in the real world things have been moving apace, not least our understanding of cables and how to use them in audio systems. With the emerging realization that employing a consistent cable or connection technology throughout the system brings disproportionate benefits in terms of musical coherence, a properly structured cable loom has become a performance priority. However, generally speaking, the honourable exceptions have always been digital leads and tonearm cables – simply because they each have specifically defined electrical properties not met by the majority of existing interconnects.

Not surprisingly, dedicated digital leads have been the first addition to many cable ranges, allowing users to extend their coherent loom. Now, somewhat belatedly (and with nothing else to do?) cable manufacturers have finally started to add purpose built tonearm leads to the mix. Increasingly too, tonearms are being offered with termination boxes and phono-sockets in place of lead-out wires. It's against this background that Nordost have rounded out their monofilament cable ranges with tonearm wiring, both internal (as offered by VPI) and external.

A makeshift Valhalla tonearm lead has been available for some time, but only to those in the know who also happen to have phono sockets fitted to the back of their turntable. Now, the company has announced dedicated tonearm leads for all but the cheapest of its new monofilament ranges. That



means Heimdahl (red), Frey (purple) and Tyr (grey). Each is available as a phono-phono lead or phono-SME din, the latter plugging into many other arms too. Other terminations are possible on request, but might need the purchaser to source an appropriate plug. Each cable comprises a single circular conductor, incorporating a spade terminated earth wire. Length is 1.25 meters.

What, no Valhalla? The large diameter of the Valhalla leads mean you can't physically attach one to the din-style arm plug. An "official" phono-phono version may become available but isn't yet...

As I intimated earlier, tonearm leads have particular electrical requirements. This is because, just like the loading in a phono-stage, they actually comprise part of the generator damping applied to the cartridge. High capacitance can be particularly problematic, and helps account for the spindly construction of many tonearm leads. So whilst these might look like standard Nordost interconnects simply sharing their conductors between two channels, they are actually optimized designs, specific to their intended function. I tested phono-phono versions of each, inserting them into an otherwise all Valhalla set-up. Also available were Audioplan, TCI and Discovery tonearm leads, although the Heimdahl quickly relegated those to also runs, demonstrating not so much its absolute superiority as the primacy of coherent cable design in the overall scheme of things. In other words, in an all monofilament system, any monofilament cable will beat almost any ►

▶ non-mono-filament usurper, regardless of price or quality.

In fact, the Heimdahl proved a surprising performer, getting close to the incumbent Valhalla in terms of scale and dynamic range, but losing out on detail, musical flow and subtlety. The pace was lacking, the reproduction sounding a little mechanical in comparison to the best; Ricci's bowing on the *Carmen Fantasie* sounded more like a warm up than a performance! Drama, impact and presence were first rate, putting the non-monofilament cables in the shade and it was only against the more expensive cables that the Heimdahl's clumsiness became apparent. Substituting Frey brought a step up in detail, but more importantly the integration and sense made by that detail. Images were more localized, instruments more natural and identifiable. Which is about what I'd expect, being familiar with the clear sonic hierarchy that Nordost's cable ranges exhibit. What I wasn't ready for was the leap in quality to the Tyr...

However, before we go there, a word of complaint. I understand the pressures of pricing, and I know that the best sounding plugs are often the least impressive to look at, but... the metal bodied plugs fitted to both the Heimdahl and Frey were so loose in the sockets of the Groove Plus that I had to crimp them up with pliers. I can understand their presence on the Heimdahl, but if standard Frey inter-connects warrant WBT NextGens shouldn't they be even more important on a tonearm cable given the tiny signals involved. Consulting Nordost on this issue revealed their concerns over providing adequate strain relief when fitting the thin, Frey conductors to NextGens, with their wide apertures. However, it seems the WBT plugs will be available as I suspect, a seriously worthwhile cost option. Just be careful making and breaking connections.

Whatever the reason (and I suspect that the NextGen plugs fitted are a major contributor) the Tyr walloped the

performance of not just the Frey, but the Neutrik equipped Valhalla too. Detail, focus, dimensionality, transparency, dynamic expression and subtlety all improved significantly. Detail was better integrated into individual instrumental shapes, instruments into a more coherent and palpably believable soundstage and acoustic space. But the real kicker was the improvement in pace and flow and as a result, musical expression. Ricci regained his old swagger and verve – and then some. His playing became more dramatic and emphatic, the musical punctuation far clearer. The range of instrumental colour improved on the Valhalla, and so too did the space



and cushion of air around individual instruments, allowing you to pick them out of the orchestra far more readily. But the *Carmen* is a Ricci recording and the Tyr left you in no doubt of that, rendering his instrument solidly separate without any of the glare or screech that can afflict this recording when poorly replayed. Instead, his masterful control and precision are underlined by tonality that never strays into the hard or bright.

Just for fun I also tried a set of regular Tyr interconnects; the results were clumsy and bloated in comparison, again underlining the specialist nature of the tonearm application. As major protagonists of the coherent cabling of systems it should come as no real surprise that Nordost's tonearm leads complement their existing cables so impressively, extending the loom one step closer to the analogue source. Which brings us to a few words of warning. The natural home of these cables is feeding an all Nordost wired

system; results in other circumstances might be just as impressive – or they might not. You'll need to suck it and see. Secondly, I can just see the existence of Nordost internal arm wire setting those DIY digests a twitching. Don't do it! Seriously! Poor cable routing in a tonearm can destroy the bearing freedom, doing more sonic damage than the better cable can compensate for. By all means get your arm rewired, but get it done by a professional and preferably the original manufacturer. If they no longer exist then try Moth Marketing (44(0)1234 741152) as an experienced practitioner. Finally, bear in mind that the flexibility of these leads will differ from those fitted to many existing arms, so they might interfere with the suspension on a deck like the LP12 or Pink Triangle.

These issues are not insuperable but they do need to be addressed.

With those caveats duly noted, the Nordost arm leads can be warmly welcomed. At their respective prices each offers a significant performance upgrade over stock items, as well as non-Nordost alternatives if your system is already Nordost wired. I'd love to hear the NextGens on the Frey, even if it is a cost option. In the meantime, the Tyr has taken up residence in my system, the only non-Valhalla piece of cable I use, an impressive endorsement of both its performance and the coherence and continuity of Nordost's approach. ▶+

Prices – 1.25m phono-phono or phono-SME:

Heimdahl: £249-95

Frey: £349-95

Tyr: £599-95

Allow £30 extra for XLR termination at the amplifier end.

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