

Nordost Valhalla V2

NORDOST'S CURRENT FLAGSHIP CABLE RANGE IS AGAIN DESIGNED TO WORK BEST WHEN USED AS A COMPLETE LOOM. TO MIX RELIGIOUS TERMINOLOGY, DOES IT BRING ANDREW HARRISON CLOSER TO NIRVANA?



In January 2001 Nordost release an interconnect and speaker cable to push it into the rarified strata of super-fi. Over ten years since its founding, it had developed a successful range of affordable cables based on its *Flatline* design, featuring flat ribbons of extruded Teflon, and evolution through the likes of *Blue Heaven* would lead to the flagship *SPM Reference* in the late '90s.

Valhalla launched with eye-watering price tags and quite astonishing transparency, and remains a trusted part of my reference loom: after assessing other products I've always come back to its bi-wire speaker cable, RCA and XLR interconnects and power cable.

A comprehensive overhaul in 2013 created *Valhalla 2*: the main focus of the revamp was the consistent application of certain techniques found in new overlord *Odin*, and advanced proprietary connectors, a running upgrade early in the original's life seeing the Neutrik spring-loaded phono plugs on the RCA

interconnect replaced with locking BulletPlug-style WBT connectors. Notable gains in focus and tonality demonstrated the significance of these terminations.

My existing V1 loom is nicely run-in after more than 15 years' steady use so, wanting to see how revisions have affected the once crowning product, I set about a piecemeal upgrade of my existing cables, starting with the new power cord.

The original Valhalla used silver-plated solid-core copper encapsulated in Teflon, with physical contact with the insulating polymer reduced by first winding a single filament thread in a slow helix over the polished conductor. This serves as a spacer between metal and plastic, said to bring the dielectric constant to 1.38 (interconnect) or 1.12 (speaker) – closer to the 1 of air or a vacuum.

Nordost has long been secretive about aspects such as wire gauges and filament material, with staff bound by NDA to not discuss technicalities beyond the brochure. Even today, while Valhalla's filament is assumed to be FEP (fluorinated ethylene propylene), this is not explicitly spelled out. The company abandoned the Teflon® trade name in marketing around 2004, substituting the term 'FEP' perhaps after changing supplier from Teflon inventor DuPont. FEP is, however, a more specific description: the Teflon name is confusingly used for other fluoropolymer variants such as PTFE and PFA.

Power

Nordost emphasises the primacy of the power cable in a system, a philosophy I appreciate given my own epiphany on first testing the Valhalla mains lead. Superficially the V2 version has changed the least – it already relied on a dual-filament dielectric, following a technique devised for Nordost's first ever power cable, the *El Dorado*. With *Odin*, Nordost rolled out the use of twin filaments across the range, twisting two fine strands together before winding the resulting yarn over the conductors to allow increased air gap, without expanding individual filaments' diameters and thereby contact area.

Valhalla power's heavy gauge solid conductors – seven 16 AWG (1.291 mm diameter) strands – are carried over to V2, but now with a different weave. V1 has three conductors each for Live and Neutral in a slow rope lay over a single central Earth wire;

ANDREW HARRISON

V2 intertwines all three wiring groups together. V2 also has new plugs: in place of the heavy-duty MK three-pin is a substantial *FI-UK-N1* from Furutech, and the C15 connector from WBT is replaced by Nordost's own *Holo:Plug* IEC connector.

Three V2 power cables were plugged into a QRT *QBase QB6 Mk II*, a six-way distribution board from Quantum Resonant Technology now sold by Nordost. This simple fused unit has no filters, instead focusing on a star-earthing strategy with one outlet earthed direct to ground, and the other five via 0.5ohm resistors. The primary outlet is dedicated to the system's principle grounding component, typically a preamp, while remaining components plug into the other sockets. Replacing my Music First Audio passive I dutifully wired up the Chord *SPM 1200C* power amp's matching preamp, the *CPA 3200e*, to the favoured outlet. The other V2 cables fed the power amplifier and MFA *Reference Phono*.

While the Chord preamp musters a little more slam and attack than the passive preamp, albeit at the expense of transparency, space and sweetness, the V2 power cabling saw timing and swing improved dramatically, bringing greater drive and dynamic realism. Stereo focus also improved, with layers now more secure and solid, and the whole system seemed to breathe more deeply, with heightened shading and colour. The improvements were maintained with a return to the MFA pre-amp, this time with the power amp taking the direct outlet: the overall uplift in system integrity was so profound, I could have stopped there – in fact I kept the system at this level for two weeks to adjust to the elevated performance.

Remarkably, the V2 power cable improvements were felt when drums and bass kick in together on rock tracks and in orchestral crescendos.: the difference is incremental but undeniably there, felt in the low-frequency pulse of music.

Valhalla V2 interconnect cables, available with RCA and XLR connectors, also take a conventional round-section construction, with signal flowing through five-plus-five 24 AWG (0.511 mm) silver-plated solid copper wires for signal and return, individually encased in dual-monofilament inside FEP tubes (V1 totalled eight single-filament lines). The overall screen is two layers of silver braid, the outside diameter increasing from 7.5 to 8.5 mm, but the iridescent exterior is no more: there's now a satin ivory sheath through which the braid texture can just be seen. The new machined Holo:Plugs that grip phono sockets exceptionally tightly, with a circular ground ring inside the mouth of the round barrel.

The interconnects sounded smoother than the at-times rather explicit original, in particular the earlier Neutrik-plugged variant. There was a taming effect

here, flattening the faintly over-sharpened response of V1 and reducing any tendencies to unnatural sparkle. The new cable sounds altogether more 'organic', reminding me of the deliciously grain-free sound of van den Hul carbon cables, but without trading leading edge zip or generous bandwidth.

The V2 loudspeaker ribbon has gained a little width – it's now almost 60 mm rather than 54 mm – while the number of conducting cores has reduced from ten per 'track' to seven. These might be a slightly heavier gauge, at 22 AWG (0.644 mm): V1 gauge was obfuscated as 'optimised diameter'. The wider ribbon permits increased spacing between conductors and tracks, part of Nordost's secret concept it calls 'mechanical tuning'.

Also new with V2 is a company policy not to supply speaker cable in biwire configurations with four plugs at the speaker end, despite the familiar four-track ribbon layout: this presented a potential issue with my B&W *802D* speakers, which are less effective single-wired, but I kept an open mind and set them up with matching V2 terminal jumpers.

Compared to original biwire Valhalla, single-wire V2 showed a hint of improved HF definition, even if low-frequency pitch definition was compromised, the soundstage had narrowed and lowered in height, and the midrange sounded unbalanced. The *802D* was clearly designed and voiced for biwiring so to hear more of the tantalising V2 effect, I re-wired with jumpers removed and one pair of V1 on the bass drivers, with shotgunned V2 on the mid/treble head. A benefit was clearly audible, with apparent bandwidth again greatly extended – actually, with quite incredible subjective bass depth – and bewitching stereo openness. Returning to biwired V1 alone, instrumental colour now sounded a touch blanched, and large-scale dynamics subtly restrained.

A crucial aspect of Valhalla speaker cable is the sensitivity of either generation to floor placement: whether microphony or an electrostatic phenomenon, significant gains in bass tautness, timing and even treble transparency were found as the ribbons were lifted a few millimetres clear of a suspended wooden floor. Blu-Tack or Nordost's own Sort Lifts work a treat: these cables truly demand careful placement.

Conclusion

Overall, *Valhalla 2* cables bring an extraordinary upgrade, addictively communicating the essence of music. The essential speed and transparency of Valhalla has been preserved, but with a more dynamic and tonally authentic sound in V2. It's more colourful where required, and darker when not, and with in particular V2 power cabling in place music's foundations are seemingly set in bedrock.

HIFICRITIC
AUDIO EXCELLENCE



Pricing

QRT *QBase QB6 Mk II* mains distribution block (16 A) with 2 m (16 A) power cable
£6380

2 m *Valhalla 2* power cable
£4900 each

2 m RCA interconnect
£8000 pair

2 m XLR interconnect
£8000 pair

6 m speaker cable
£19,700 pair

www.nordost.com

UK distributor:
Renaissance Audio
www.renaissanceaudio.co.uk