

Cheap(er) But Still Cheerful...

The Nordost Frey interconnects and loudspeaker cables

by Roy Gregory

It seems rather odd to describe Nordost as part of the cable “establishment” but looked at in the cold light of day, that’s exactly what they are. High profile and unquestionably high-performance, both the company and its products are amongst the most visible and respected on the market. So why the surprise? Well, it’s partly a case of just how far they’ve come and how fast, and partly how quickly that time has passed. Firstly with Flatline Gold and SPM and then later and even more emphatically with Valhalla, Nordost shook the cable market to its very foundations. Prototypical young Turks, their approach was different and so were their products. But it was an ethos that captured the imagination of public and press alike, with demonstrable benefits over and above the status quo. But as astonished and surprised as we were, few of us realised quite where that first exposure would lead. Seven years on, well over four years into the lifespan of Valhalla, and with the king’s unruly offspring about to take the stage, it’s time to take stock.

What Nordost achieved with the Valhalla was nothing short of revolutionary. The governing notion of “cable as tone-control” was exposed for the rickety dam on system performance it truly represented – and duly swept aside. Extending the concept of the “no-cable” first established by the performance of SPM, the introduction of mains cabling and finally

distribution, underlined the concept of the holistic cable loom constructed with shared materials and technology and its critical function as a foundation stone for system potential. In the process, it removed cable “sound” as a hobble on ultimate system capability, allowing us to see and hear further into both the music and the means of its reproduction; no mean feat for a mere



wire! But its true importance is in

some respects less obvious. Firstly, and like any real breakthrough, it forced other cable manufacturers to re-examine their products and respond, a process that has seen the demise of more than a few dinosaurs and the parallel rise of other, vibrant young companies. Secondly, it represented the opening shot in an internal civil war which has seen the gradual undermining of the

massive (and massively over-priced) but under-performing products that previously held sway in the high-end. Suddenly, real dynamic and spatial coherence were available from smaller, simpler systems; the sonic equivalent of taking a car and running it on asphalt rather than across a ploughed field - not surprisingly you can get much better performance with a lot less power, shorter travel suspension and smaller tyres!

In effect, the step change in cable performance revealed the error of our ways. Re-evaluate and reallocate your budget and you’ll get a huge improvement in actual musical results. But hold on; isn’t that just saying spend the money on cables rather than amplifiers? You could be forgiven for thinking that, but in actual fact the sums work out quite differently. Ludicrous though the proposition is (given its price and accessibility to the average enthusiast – even one who has made the necessary paradigm shift) Valhalla really isn’t that expensive when compared to the competition. In truth, at the outer reaches of the high-end people were running crazy expensive electronics through even crazier priced cables – and generally achieving considerably less performance as a result.

Unfortunately however, that fact doesn’t make Valhalla any more affordable in reality. The reasons for the price are actually three fold. Firstly there’s the complexity of the mono-filament construction, in





which a fine spiral is wound round each conductor before the multiple wires are then arranged and encased in extruded Teflon, all the while maintaining the air-gap around each individual strand. The development of the tooling and machinery for such a process, as well as the process itself, is far from cheap. Second is the cost of the materials themselves and ensuring that the product (and just as importantly) its termination is consistent. Finally, the relatively short runs and low volume production of any flagship cable exacerbate all of the above factors, further adding to the cost of the final product.

But, as I observed earlier Valhalla is four years old, time in which production techniques have been perfected and refined. Combine that with reduced material costs (as a result of physically smaller and fewer conductors) as well as the much longer runs justifiable for more affordable products and finally it's possible to offer mono-filament cables at more approachable prices. How approachable? Well, current costs on Valhalla run out at £2200 for a metre pair of interconnects and £5700 for a three-metre pair of bi-wired speaker cables. Compare that to £300 for a metre pair of the Baldur interconnects and £1175 for the three-metre Heimdahl speaker wires. That's one-seventh the price for the interconnects and around a fifth for the speaker

cables, bringing the interconnects in particular, squarely into consideration for even the cheapest genuine hi-fi systems.

The new range of cables consists of four different models. As already suggested the Baldur, resplendent in translucent blue Teflon, is the cheapest, its interconnect consisting of a pair of shielded 26AWG mono-filament conductors, terminated with Neutrik plugs. The matching, bi-wire speaker cable uses six 28AWG wires for each leg, although these are conventional rather than mono-filament. Temper your disappointment with the fact that this makes it the spiritual equivalent of the SPM – which at \$875 for our notional three-metre pair represents a considerable saving.

Next comes the red tinted Heimdahl, which doubles the number of conductors in the interconnect and adds WBT's excellent NextGen plugs. It also represents the first of the mono-filament speaker cables, with six 24AWG wires per leg. Prices are £370 and £1175 respectively. Third in line is the purple Frey (six 26AWG conductors in the interconnect, seven 24AWG in each leg of the speaker cable) which will set you back £550 for the interconnects and £1775 for the speaker cables, while Tyr sits at the top of the new hierarchy, tinted grey and replacing the existing Valkyrja. Costing £1100 for the interconnect and £3750 for the speaker cable, it also offers a glimpse of the future, its interconnect consisting of four 24AWG conductors, but in this instance employing the dual-filament technology (in which the spacing filaments are themselves twisted to further reduce di-electric contact) first introduced in the Valhalla mains and digital cables. The speaker

cable is also beefed up, its five conductors per leg being 22AWG mono-filaments

Of course, Valhalla remains at the head of the range, although it now also features the silver version of the NextGen plugs. Existing owners can have their cables upgraded by the factory, but the cost and turn-round time for this exercise will depend on location. I'll be making some direct comparisons betwixt the new and old terminations for Valhalla shortly, although past experience with the copper NextGens indicates significant benefits for the comparatively modest outlay so I'd suggest that existing users get themselves in the queue as soon as possible. Don't however be tempted to do it yourself; termination quality and consistency is a vital and oft underestimated aspect of cable performance and you risk spoiling the ship for a ha'peth of tar. The other comparison that awaits the return of the re-terminated Valhalla involves the dual-filament Tyr interconnect and it will be fascinating to see just how close it gets to pinching the monarch's crown.

The other thing that goes without saying (given the Nordost style of demonstration) is that the various cables in the range constitute a coherent ladder of performance benefits, each clearly superior to the one below. With all the options in mind, and balancing the need to both assess the performance of the new cables and place their achievements in the context of both the market and the Valhalla benchmark, I opted to start with the Frey. At around a quarter of the flagship's price it is significantly more affordable than Valhalla whilst still offering a full mono-filament solution. The question is what proportion of the big cable's performance are you getting?

The answer is – a surprising amount. From first listen this is unmistakably a Nordost cable. ▶

► All the hallmarks are there: the astonishing evenness of the energy spectrum from bottom to top, the uninhibited dynamic range, the uncanny presence and separation. Oh, and the ridiculously long burn-in period too. Even after a solid two weeks on the Cable Toaster you can still hear the Frey gaining polish and subtlety as it works in the system. If you want to hear what this cable can do it needs to be thoroughly run-in – and I don't just mean used in a dealer's show room. If it sounds brash, bright and lean then it needs more time, but given that time it will fall into balance.

How does it differ from the Valhalla? Close comparison (and I do mean close) between Frey and old-style, non-NextGen Valhalla reveals the flagship's superiority in terms of bass depth, weight and definition and more importantly, micro-dynamic resolution right across the range. It's a subtle effect but it's enough to bring added sonority to Basie's left-hand chords as he plays the beautifully hesitant intro to 'Beaver Junction', an ease and delicious flow to this fractured musical line, reaffirming that this is a master at work rather than a system failing to keep up. Likewise, there's a natural quality to vocal inflexions, an added inner transparency that resolves space around and between instruments and voices, all of which brings a recording to life. It's an easy confidence and grounded stability that the Frey can't quite match. But then it's not without tricks of its own.

The astonishing inner textures and subtle tonal shadings of Valhalla might be beyond the junior cable, but it makes up for it with superior immediacy and front-of-stage clarity. The Frey displays more sheer presence and greater impact than the Valhalla. Like I said, the differences are subtle, but it's enough to tilt the cheaper cable's balance of virtues away from

the low-level subtlety of Valhalla and towards sheer life and musical enthusiasm. Play Lucinda Williams' *Car Wheels...*, track seven, 'Can't Let Go' and just love the purpose and intent in those angry, frustrated, chopped



guitar chords, the power in the vocal. Yes, you sacrifice a bit of depth and some weight, but it's a trade that many a listener will deem worthwhile for the added drive and presence that you get instead (not to mention the added weight in your wallet). An impressive performance made doubly so by the impressive pricing.

I suspect that much of this immediacy and life comes courtesy of the NextGen plugs, known performance benefits of their use. It's enough to significantly narrow the gap betwixt these two cables, eroding the Valhalla's erstwhile crushing superiority and making its value somewhat programme dependent. Play the Piatigorsky Walton *Cello Concerto* (from the RCA SACD) and you'll love the tonal subtlety and rhythmic sleight of hand of the Valhalla. Play *Faith* and the choice becomes far more difficult, especially given the cost differential. Play the Basie and the Frey's ripping brass tuttis are awfully attractive, even if Basie's own contribution is diminished.

All of which makes the Frey an extremely attractive prospect.

Ultimately it fails to match the Valhalla, but then it is around quarter of the price! And what of the other new cables in the range? Tyr looks especially interesting, although I suspect that the all mono-filament and NextGen Heimdahl is the bargain in the bunch. In the meantime, Frey has significantly raised the bar when it comes to cable performance at this price point, as well as lowering the price of serious, top-end cable performance in absolute terms. It stands as a stunning endorsement of mono-filament technology. Nordost's range used to have something of a top-heavy "Valhalla – then everything else" look to it. With the introduction of mono-filament technology right down to the bottom rung of the serious hi-fi ladder, all that has changed. Now everybody can enjoy the considerable benefits and appreciate what all the fuss has been about. So, how close does Frey get to Valhalla? Close enough to change updating my own leads to NextGen status from a luxury into a matter of considerable urgency! ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prices:

Frey 1m pr. (phono-phono) - £550
Balanced XLR - add £34.95/pr. of cables
Frey 3m bi-wire speaker cables - £1775

NextGen upgrade to existing Valhalla leads:

In the UK - £300/pr. of cables (inc. return shipping to the USA)
In the US - \$500/pr. of cables

Contact local distributor or if in the US, sales@nordost.com for details and lead-time.

UK Distributor: Activ Distribution

Tel. (44)(0)1635 291357
Net. www.activdistribution.com

Manufacturer: Nordost Inc.

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