

The Audio Beat

Nordost • Odin Interconnects, Speaker Cables & Power Cords

by Paul Bolin | October 13, 2010

There are constants in the universe. Three of these are the speed of light (so far as we know), the bore centers of a Chevy small-block, and the way in which reviews of audio cables and power cords usually plow much the same ground over and over. *Usually.*

Nordost? Are they Norwegian or something?

Way back in 1997 I attended my first Consumer Electronics Show -- with all of three days' notice from my editor at the time, one Harry H. Pearson, Jr. It was overwhelming, amazing and exhausting. On the last day of the show, I wandered into the demo room of a company I had never heard of before, some cable guys from Massachusetts called Nordost. An unprepossessing-looking system featuring smallish floorstanders, a CD player and a moderately powered, well-made integrated amp greeted me, as did a hugely tall, silver-bearded Irishman of gracious mien named Joe Reynolds and a tall, husky, enthusiastic, dark-bearded Dane who answered (and still answers) to Lars Kristensen. (As an aside, to this day something about Lars, the most genial and affable of men, always reminds me of a Viking headsman well pleased by the fact that he just found a nice bonus in his pay packet.) Lars proceeded to play CDs of my choosing with, first,

a motley mixture of decent-to-very-good high-end cables of the day; second, a suite of Nordost's Blue Heaven cables; third, a suite of Nordost's Red Dawn cables; and, finally, a full loom of Nordost's then-top-of-the-line SPM cables. I watched him like a hawk, and he

watch Lars perform this magic on the unsuspecting and uninitiated, and the results have always been the same: stark disbelief from audiophiles of all factions.

At the end of the demo, Lars and Joe gave me a short course in the science of Nordost's cables, along with the statistics and measurements to back their claims. They then asked for my cabling requirements and address. A few weeks later, complete looms of Red Dawn and SPM arrived at my house, and my world was turned upside-down. I wound up being the first American audio writer to do a full review of Nordost's SPM



never touched, much less changed anything but the cables. As Johnny Carson might have said, at no time did Lars' fingers leave his hands.

As the demo progressed, my mouth fell ever more open and the Nordost guys' amusement grew geometrically. By the time Lars finished with the SPM demo, I stood up and asked him just what the hell was going on. Every substitution of cables had elevated the system's sound, which was decent if unspectacular to start with -- not by inches but by yards. The SPM cables advanced the ball a mile or more down the field, metaphorically speaking. For years now, I have gone out of my way to

cables (although it must be said that Harry Pearson had discussed them in nearly reverential terms, albeit in commentary rather than a full review, before I wrote about them). The SPMs transformed the sound of my Apogee Duetta Signature speakers in ways I'd not thought possible -- and in ways no other cables of that time could begin to approach. It took Nordost's own Valhalla to surpass them definitively some years later.

Nordost came to the field of audio cabling in a rather odd way. The company was founded in hard science -- developing and manufacturing cabling for ultra-high-precision aerospace, aviation

and medical applications. Somewhere along the line a clever Jack decided that the same technology just might be the proverbial cat's meow when applied to high-end audio. Whoever he was, he was right, and the company now makes cables for every wallet -- from the bargain-basement Best Buy shopper to the enthusiast who owns a penthouse overlooking Central Park or Malibu Beach.

While I have had flirtations, sometimes extended, with other cables since that fateful day nearly fourteen years ago, I must admit that I have always come home to Nordost. So I thought I was prepared for Odin. I had, after all, used the superb Valhalla cabling as my principal reference for most of the last decade.

Wires worthy of description

Let us get one thing out of the way right now: Odin cabling is expensive. Tiffany's expensive. Patek Philippe expensive. Lamborghini expensive. It is not the most expensive audio cabling to be found, however, which is somewhat frightening in and of itself.

There are reasons for Odin's extreme cost. There is a lot of very high-purity metal in these surprisingly heavy wires, and a lot of it is silver. Odin is also hard to make. The micron-level precision tolerances necessitated by the design result in a crazy-high scrap rate. There are also nearly ten years of research and development in this product, and that investment of man hours has to be recouped.

Like its preceding brethren, SPM and Valhalla, Odin speaker cables are ribbons. Twenty-four 20-AWG seven-nines copper conductors, each plated with 85 microns of silver and wrapped with a helical "dual mono-filament" of fluorinated ethylene propylene (FEP), comprise the innards. A jacket of FEP is extruded over the array of conductors, and the result of using the monofilament spacer is that

the dielectric surrounding the actual conductors is almost entirely air. The extrusion process requires tremendous precision in order to get the spacing of FEP to the precise level of microns demanded by the design brief. Terminators are triple-rhodium-plated Furutech spade connectors or optional Nordost Z plugs of similar metallurgy.

A similar design approach is taken with the relatively conventional-looking interconnects, where eight 23-AWG seven-nines silver-plated-copper conductors using the same dual monofilament construction are helically wrapped around a central spacer that contains two silver-plated OFC drain wires encased in the same FEP jacket. WBT NextGen RCA connectors with solid-silver contacts or Furutech triple-plated-rhodium XLR connectors complete the package.

Both the interconnects and power cords employ Nordost's Total Shielding Concept, which involves wrapping each conductor in its own lapped, silver-plated copper shield, creating a conductor tube. The tubes give Odin its distinctive appearance, but their true importance is the shielding they provide -- a level beyond encasing each conductor in a solid copper tube. This is another manufacturing fine point that adds to Odin's cost.

The power cords, which don't look all that big, weigh a lot. They share their basic construction with the interconnects: seven 15-AWG conductors of the same design, construction methodology and FEP jacket. Connectors are again Furutech, this time carbon-fiber plugs with rhodium-plated contacts throughout. The Odin power cord is also shielded, and this is, if I remember correctly, a first for Nordost. Though not hugely thick in the manner of cords from Shunyata Research, they are quite stiff, and it's a real pig to twist the AC plug around in the event that it doesn't happen to dress out at quite the proper angle to the socket.

There are also Odin tonearm and digital cables, each specifically designed for its application.

Come, mortal, and enter the presence of Odin, King of the Norse Gods

Several months ago, Roy Gregory, Nordost's very knowledgeable and highly entertaining vice president of marketing, arrived at my home a couple of days after several heavy boxes had been delivered. I asked Roy where we should start changing cables. His puckishly unexpected response was, "The power cords on the [Lamm] amplifiers." I gave him a sideways look and set about replacing the Valhalla cords I was using with the Odins. We gabbed about our common musical denominators for a while as the amps warmed up -- the Lamms like a half-hour to stabilize thermally -- and set to listening.

Within seconds I was blinking owlishly, then staring goggle-eyed at Roy. Mind you, my system at the time was nothing to sneeze at and featured an Esoteric X-01 D2 digital player, an Atma-Sphere MP-1 Mk 3.1 preamp (used as a line stage with my Aesthetix Io phono stage), the aforementioned Lamm amps and Wilson Audio Sasha W/P speakers. Yet, two power cords made a difference, all for the better, that left me absolutely gobsmacked and jabbering at a grinning, chuckling Gregory. He had obviously seen such reactions before.

Things like this are not supposed to happen, but it was impossible to deny what my ears were telling me about a system I knew as intimately as any I have ever used. Recording venues and recorded soundstages were immediately and drastically larger, with every detail of placement and spatial relation between instruments refined to almost shocking effect. Bass was appreciably deeper and defined with tremendous spatial volume and exactitude of pitch. The midrange, especially voices, had added body and verisimilitude, and

the Sashas' highs took on new purity and extension. Most notable, even above all of this, were an unmistakable sense of enhanced speed from top to bottom and a vivid uptick in overall dynamic range.

After a half-hour or so we repeated the exercise, swapping out the Valhalla speaker cables for the Odin. Over the course of an extremely lengthy evening, every interconnect and power cord in my system was eventually replaced with Odin. The Odin Effect was the same with every change -- more of what I have described above. It was consistent and cumulative: the more Odin in the system, the better the system sounded. By the time Roy and I were finished with our labors, my system, as good as it had sounded before we began, had not been so much altered as transformed into something I had not imagined possible. The Sashas sounded much more like MAXX 3s, and the Lamm M1.2s sounded purer and more solid. These superb components, in the context of a well-balanced and really excellent-sounding system, were now something beyond.

For all that Odin does, it struck me that the most immediately outstanding characteristics were astonishing speed and phase coherence, which are two sides of the same coin, and a disconcerting impression of much greater background quietness. With Odin cables, every note of every kind of music sounded more natural in terms of attack, decay and harmonic structure. They allowed whatever music I played to arrive at the loudspeakers more continuously and expand into the

room with a much higher sense of reality than even Valhalla. As for the sense of background and interstitial quietude, this was most pronounced with the shielded power cords, though the interconnects and speaker cables plainly added to it. Taken as a whole, a measure of discontinuity that I had never heard before vanished, but, paradoxically, the presence of that discontinuity could only be heard and detected in its absence. This is what great



components do: transcend that which has come before by eliminating or dramatically reducing distortions or non-linearities of various kinds that had previously been accepted as part and parcel of the listening experience. What is left is a new and different sort of experience defined by new boundaries of possibility.

This was not a one-off experience where lightning struck once on that night that Roy and I did the cable swap. Since then, I have played around with Odin in different contexts, different systems and with varied combinations of components, and the results have never varied. Even one pair of Odin interconnects never failed to add body, speed, definition and an almost creepy sense of thereness,

regardless of the system it was placed in or what surrounded it. The nearly incredulous thing about Odin is that it works exactly as Nordost claims it will -- everywhere and every time.

Frankly, it damned well better do what it does considering that a loom of Odin will, for most systems it would ever be used in, cost at least as much as an upper-level Mercedes sedan or a nicely kitted-out Porsche 911, including tax and title. But that isn't the point of a product like Odin. Nordost invested huge measures of time, money, and engineering acumen to create it -- first to see if it could be done and second to make a statement about what is currently possible in the realm of audio cabling. In that sense, its closest analog is something like the Ferrari Enzo;

few will experience it and fewer can afford it, but it serves to establish the benchmark of benchmarks and exists as a target for its creator and others with the highest aspirations to excellence.

Furthermore, technology, unlike economics, is one place where the trickle-down theory actually works. Valhalla midwived the excellent cables in the Nordost Norse series, all of which were derived from what was learned in the creation of Valhalla. It seems certain that much of what makes Odin so special will eventually be available for a less kingly entry fee.

A view from the top

Fifteen years ago, Nordost's SPM shattered all of my previous expectations of

what audio cabling could do and its importance in assembling and optimizing a system. Nearly ten years ago, Valhalla blew by the SPM. Today, Odin has decisively surpassed the still-excellent Valhalla and gone where no cabling has gone before. There is not one thing about any of the Odin cables that is remotely practical or conventionally sensible, but if

you have pockets deep enough to afford the best of the best, I am sorry to report to you that you will not be hearing everything that your system can do unless Odin holds pride of place.

I have spent much of the last fifteen years reviewing audio components. In that time, Odin stands as one of the five most

important and game-changing products I have heard. It is therefore impossible for me to not give these interconnects, speaker cables and power cords my most enthusiastic endorsement. Those interested in the bleeding edge of the audio arts simply must hear them. 🎧

Associated Equipment

Analog: SOTA Cosmos Series III turntable, Graham 2.2 tonearm, Dynavector XV-1s phono cartridge, Hovland Music Groove phono cable, Aesthetix Io Signature phono stage

Preamplifiers: Aesthetix Calypso, Atma-Sphere MP-1 Mk 3.1, BAT VK-51SE.

Power amplifiers: Atma-Sphere MA-1 Mk. 3.1 and Lamm M1.2 Reference monoblocks.

Loudspeakers: Wilson Audio Specialties Sasha W/P.

Interconnects: Nordost Valhalla.

Speaker cables: Nordost Valhalla.

Power conditioners: Shunyata Research Hydra Model-8 (front-end) and Shunyata Research Hydra Model-2 (power amps).

Power cords: Shunyata Research Anaconda Helix Alpha and Anaconda Helix Vx; Nordost Valhalla, Vishnu, and Brahma.

Accessories: Grand Prix Audio Monaco stands and two F1 carbon-fiber shelves, Ultra Resolution Technologies Bedrock stand, Ganymede isolation footers, Nordost Titanium Pulsar Points, Shun Mook Iso-Qubes, Caig Labs Pro Gold, Ayre/Cardas IBE system-enhancement CD, Argent Room Lenses, Disc Doctor and LAST record-care products.

Prices: Interconnects, \$15,999 per meter pair; speaker cables, \$28,999 per eight-foot pair; power cords, \$10,999 per four-foot length.

Warranty: Limited lifetime.

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And Now For a Bit of Quantum Theory

Along with the Odin cables, Roy Gregory sent a full complement of Quantum power-line devices, which were installed throughout my system. An eight-outlet Quantum QBase 8 power strip (\$1299; there is also an otherwise-identical four-outlet QBase 4, \$799) was wrestled into the somewhat constricted space at the bottom of my right equipment rack, and plugged into it were all of the front-end devices (turntable, CD player, phono and line stages). Four Quantum QX4 devices (\$2499 each) were arranged around the system -- two, placed at right angles to each other, on the second-highest shelf of my left rack, under the Esoteric X-01 D2 and above the phono stage's power supply, and one near each power amplifier. A second QBase 8 was placed behind the television that sits behind and between the Wilson Sashas to handle the amps and the pair of QX4s.

Einstein comes to high-end audio: several years ago I was chatting with Joe Reynolds and opined that there were things going on at the molecular level that could have a significant impact on audio signals but were not yet understood. Joe leaned back, chuckled and told me to just bide my time, as Nordost was investigating just that. The results are the Quantum products

According to the Quantum Source Book (available at www.quantumqrt.com), "the QBase is a straight-line AC power distributor combined with a star-earthed topology for connection to a clean ground." No line filtering or active filtering are employed. The QX2 and QX4 devices use, respectively, two and four "field generators" in solid and very inert-seeming, nicely machined aluminum boxes, and they are equipped with 15A AC inlets and an outlet into which a component may be directly plugged. The QX boxes in no way limit voltage swings or lower the impedance of the AC power supply.

Just how the Quantum products actually work is not so easy to describe. The QX boxes are "based on research into Quantum Field Theory, the fundamental basis of quantum mechanics" and apply "a non-intrusive, field-based approach to system treatment." They are claimed to "order and reduce the impact of stray electro-magnetic energy within the AC power loom and the equipment it supplies" acting as a sort of pollution and interference reducer. Placement and orientation of the devices to most effectively utilize the fields generated by the QX devices are suggested, but end users are encouraged to improvise to obtain the best results in their systems.

Much to their credit, Nordost and Quantum are willing to back up their claims with scientific evidence. During a panel presentation at 2009's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, Roy Gregory and Steve Elford of Vertex AQ presented the results of third-party testing of the digital output of a high-end CD player with and without the Quantum devices. The result was a 50% reduction in error value and a 5% reduction in total error as compared with the original signal.

The effect of the Quantum boxes is more subtle than that of the Odin cabling, but it is still significant. The odd thing is that their effect on a system's sound is very much the same and is nicely cumulative with the Odin cabling. As they are active devices that can be turned on and off for comparison purposes, doing A/B testing is easy. Like the Odins, though slightly less dramatically, the Quantum QX4 boxes add by subtraction. They undoubtedly stripped away more previously unnoticed noise -- even though there was little enough left after Odins were installed -- and allowed a greater sense of purity to manifest itself timbrally, dynamically and spatially. There was an enhanced sense of focus and intelligibility on all types of music with both CDs and LPs. It is not an easy thing to put into words, but my entire system simply synergized better with the Quantum boxes in use. There was a greater sensation of totality and coherence in every aspect of the music.

The Quantum products should provide a definite benefit to any audio or A/V system regardless of cost, and they are very fairly priced for the degree of improvement they provide. Their effect may well be even greater in systems sporting less remarkable cables than Nordost Odin.