

Nordost Norse cables: Heimdall 2

by Steve Dickinson

Following the revised Leif series (Red Dawn, Blue Heaven et al), Nordost has stepped up the process of revising its line. The Norse series of cables from Nordost, comprising Heimdall, Frey and Tyr, were next, followed more recently by Valhalla 2, which will be the subject of a later review. Sitting below the 'reference' Valhalla, V2, and the Odin über-cables, the Norse series is still 'reassuringly' expensive, and very high performance but, in high-end terms, occupies a rather more accessible price stratum than the reference cables. This series 2 iteration promises further improvements in performance, so I was intrigued to see whether it could deliver on those claims.

I've used Nordost as my default cable for some time now, since my first experiences with Valkyrja several years ago. Valkyrja gave way to Tyr, now supplanted by the review samples of Heimdall 2. I've had the opportunity to hear a fair few cables over the years, but I find myself returning to Nordost because – while I hear and recognise the strengths in some other cables – the Nordostian balance of attributes suits me. Some cables might time more accurately, or give freer voice to dynamics, but I usually find myself missing something that the Nordost has always given me; perhaps most often it's that wideband competence, the even-handedness of its approach.

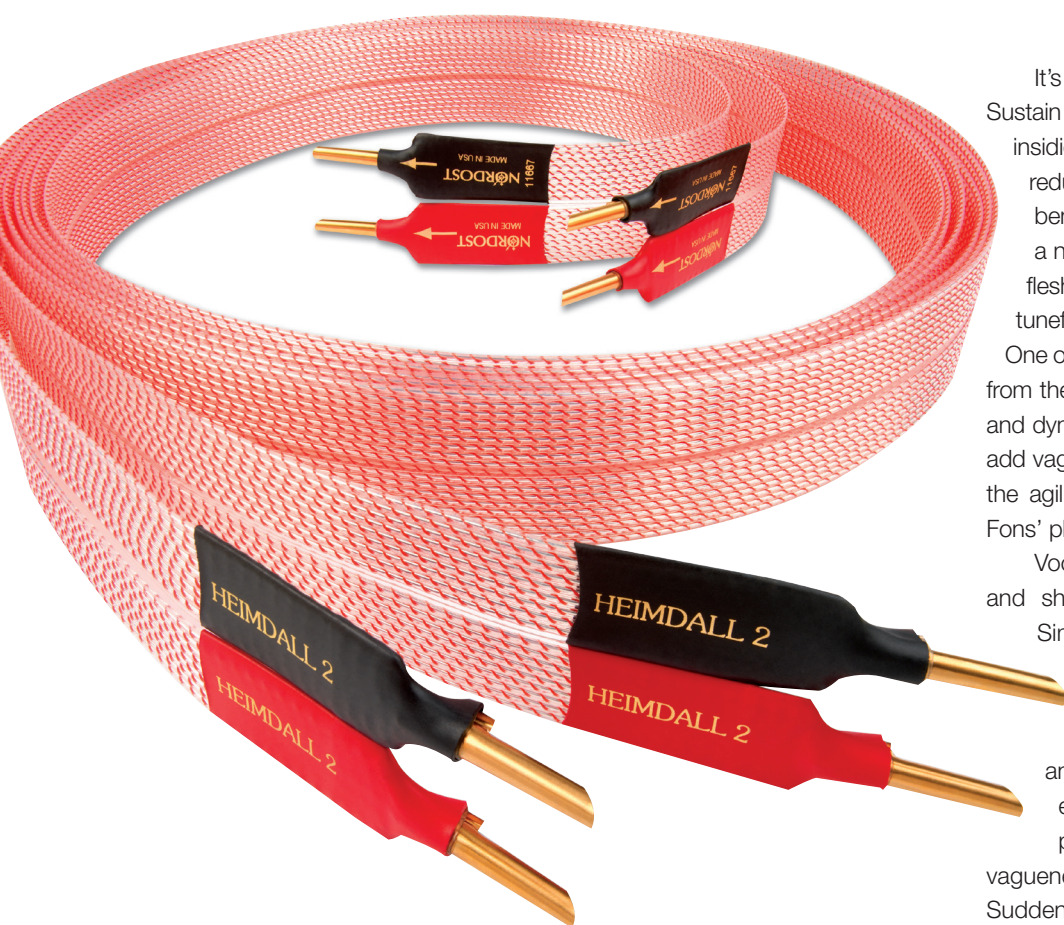
Heimdall 2 is the first port of call in the Norse range, below Frey 2, which is itself below Tyr 2. The most obvious change across the entire range is to the connectors. Gone are the interconnects' WBT NextGen locking plugs, replaced by Nordost's own MoonGlo



push-fit plugs, which I remember from my Valkyrja days. They've been re-engineered, though superficially they look similar to the originals; Nordost say that they comfortably outperform the WBTs, because they've been developed specifically for the attributes that Nordost wants from its connectors.

The loudspeaker cables arrived terminated with spade connectors rather than the optional Z-plugs. The most obvious difference in the loudspeaker cables is that the bi-wire and bi-amped configurations have gone – the Norse 2 series is single-wired. Compared to my old Tyr, the Heimdall 2 loses one strand each on the out and return sides, 18 x 22AWG strands per channel, to the Tyr's 20 (Tyr 2 has 26, in case you were wondering) but, as I was to discover, it's not how much you've got, but what you do with it that counts.

Significantly, the bottom-of-the-range Heimdall 2 does seem to be a considerable improvement over the top-of-the-previous-range Tyr and, like the move from Valkyrja to Tyr, the improvements seem to be in broadening the degree of capability in the areas that were lacking, while preserving the strengths of the outgoing cable. It retains the wide-spectrum clarity, fine-grained texture and freedom from glare and bloom, which in many ways defines the Norse series' house sound, but with notable improvements to timing, and overall time-coherence. These are the areas where previously it was necessary to look to Valhalla and, latterly, Odin for a more unimpeachable performance. Evidently, something has been learned which has found its way further down the food chain. Tellingly, the improvements affect both the interconnects and the loudspeaker cables, and to much the same degree. ▶



It's not just leading edges, though. Sustain and decay is also marred by the insidious haziness of time-smear, so reducing it gives profound knock-on benefits in terms of the entire envelope of a note. Tonal colour is subtly but usefully fleshed out. Deep bass is tauter and more tuneful, but not corpulent: muscle not flab.

One of my favourite test tracks, 'Berimbass' from the Renaud Garcia-Fons trio, has a fast and dynamic double bass solo. Many cables add vagueness, but the Heimdall 2 retains all the agility and speed which makes Garcia-Fons' playing so stirring.

Vocals are also more clearly defined and shaped. An oldie, but goodie, Paul Simon's 'Cool, cool river' from *The Rhythm of the Saints* has more atmosphere and impact, because the bass has more body, texture and shape, and Simon's vocal floats ethereally over the top ironically, perhaps, because some of the vagueness over placement is dispelled. Sudden changes in dynamics, such as the intro of the brass section, achieve their intended effect precisely because they are more sudden. A big bass riff starts with a 'bouff' not a 'whoof'.

Orchestral music benefits greatly from this improved separation of parts, the finale from Saint-Saëns' Third Symphony has a section where a short string motif is passed around the orchestra, and Heimdall 2 makes it easier to follow the violins and violas when the cellos and basses have taken up the lead. It's partly positional, imaging cues are more neatly and precisely defined, but mostly it's a significant reduction in overhang. It is indeed as though the recording was made in a less reverberant acoustic space.

There is no obvious a trade-off, either. Sometimes, cables major on timing, but consign things like colour or texture to the sidelines. I've tended, for example, to think of MIT cables as 'anti-Nordost' for much this reason. This doesn't mean that mixing Nordost and MIT would result in mutual annihilation (though it would probably be an odd thing to do, in any event), but rather that

▶ Tord Gustavsen's music is always deceptively and gracefully simple, yet much of the beauty is in the subtleties and nuance, the exquisite measuring of poise, metre and stress. Take 'Spiral Song' from the album *Restored Returned*. The Heimdall 2 allows you to hear that the drums subtly mirror the piano part, something I'd hitherto not noticed because of a hint of vagueness in the timing of the percussion. When that vagueness is reduced, there comes a point where it is possible to perceive not only that the percussion is keeping time, but also that it is inflected in the same way as the piano part. These improvements to focus, and reduction in smear, also benefit other parts, Kristin Asbjørnsen's remarkable vocal in the same piece gains definition and a better sense of position and placement; the whole piece gains a greater sense of propulsion and forward motion.

What might in other cables be taken for openness, is actually revealed by the Heimdall to have been a looseness and lack of focus. Essentially, an electronic 'reverberation' can be mistaken for acoustic space. Reduce the degree of time-smear in the cable and that reverb diminishes. This can, on a quick and dirty listen, make the Heimdall 2 sound slightly more shut-in, whereas in fact it is the other cable which has overlaid its own 'air' on the proceedings. Reduce the smear and corresponding improvements in attack emerge quite naturally. Stanley Clarke's whipcrack bass sounds more, well, whippy and cracky. The suddenness of a note which makes you blink in surprise, is no longer telegraphed by the smudging of its leading edge, so its effect is even more marked.

I've always thought of MIT's strengths being in the timing and dynamic areas, where Nordost majors on frequency extension and fine textural detail. The Heimdall 2 narrows the gap, on the timing front, and concedes nothing to the outgoing Tyr in terms of those tonal and textural attributes. Indeed these timing benefits, particularly in the lower frequencies, bring further payback in the texture and timbre of low frequencies, precisely because the harmonic structure of the notes is more accurately delineated. Some cables achieve this by subtle constraint in the bass, but it's one of those things you tend not to notice until you've heard something that doesn't do it so much. The Heimdall 2 retains the wideband freedom I expect from Nordost, but manages to give the bass its head, without letting it run amok.

The Heimdall 2 mains leads were also an interesting experience. They do seem to sit somewhere in between the Leif series (eg, Blue Heaven, again), and the Valhalla leads. The Heimdall gives a strong sense of scale and authority, but without adding the sort of mass and inertia which drags a system down. Indeed, compared to Blue Heaven, the Heimdall 2 mains leads do add a degree of propulsion and forward motion. Going back to the Tord Gustavsen track, this is in a fairly straightforward 4/4 time. The Blue Heaven can sound ever so slightly pedestrian, in comparison, almost as though it is being played in 2/2 'march' time. The added sense of impetus brought by the Heimdall brings out the extra little kick from the in-between beats which separate a 2/2 from a 4/4 time signature. Tiny inflections are also better resolved, most obviously in vocals but also noticeable elsewhere. This means performances that are carefully weighted and nuanced can be more affectingly portrayed. Valhalla leads are still a significant step-up, but the Heimdall 2 mains leads do put clear distance between themselves and the less expensive Nordost mains cables.

So, while it's not quite the 'no cable' ideal approached by Valhalla and Odin, Heimdall 2 is snapping much more closely at Valhalla's heels than any of the first-generation Norse cables ever could. +

