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Nordost Heimdall Interconnect Cables

A Foretaste of Very High Fidelity

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Everyone has their own ideas about the role and possible (or imagined?) significance of cables (interconnects, speaker, etc.) in a sound system. Nordost Heimdalls -- the focus of this article -- have qualities (and a purchase price) that leave no one without an opinion... Cause enough to spark a debate that is rekindled at every turn.

Logical Questioning

Have you ever wondered what your classical music advisor at Archambault or elsewhere, enjoys listening to? You don't actually think those guys, who have an almost limitless access to all the latest music -- classics among classics -- and often formal musical training as well, listen to **Il Divo**, **Paul Potts** and other universally acclaimed performers, they sell by the shopping cart full when they're at home do you? Come on!

I frequently have very enlightening conversations with some of them and I can write without reservation that Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs* and *Songs with Orchestra*, performed by American soprano **Jessye Norman**, make several advisors' hearts leap in the fraternal society. Of course, one does not listen to these pieces as one would Pachelbel's *Canon* or Albinoni's *Adagio*, but one's receptiveness to this music will be rewarded by a bliss that is hard to define and by a sense that, obviously, vocal music will never be listened to in quite the same way again.

I leave the definitive judgement to **Georges Nicholson**, our esteemed and knowledgeable colleague. However, after hearing **Norman's** voice in the songs, you might find yourself in a state of indescribable beatitude, wondering incredulously: *How this is possible, this flow of power and breath, of subtlety and reserve, this perfect technique at the service of a work itself transcending? Does something greater or more spectacular exist?* Listen to *Morgen*, for example, and you will have a taste of what heaven might feel like. I'm not exaggerating. It's that good!

(Just as superlatively phenomenal and undeservedly unappreciated, also with **Jessye Norman**, is **Alban Berg's** *Leider* with the **London Symphony Orchestra** under the direction of **Pierre Boulez** on **Sony Classical**).

Another question that, as an audiophile or a music lover you have probably already asked yourself, concerns the real or imagined importance of connector technology or cables in a sound system: *Do they really improve the sound quality? Should I spend my hard-earned dollars on cables or are they nothing but snake oil and deception; a way for manufacturers to fill their pockets by emptying those of poor fastidious and unsuspecting audiophiles looking for the ideal sound and system?*

This is a question that is most certainly discussed ad infinitum, and that regularly rekindles debates on Internet forums and elsewhere. Everyone has an opinion on the subject. Both camps, i.e. the advocates on one side and the nay-sayers on the other, have good arguments they ferociously defend. Between the two stand the undecided and all the others, e.g. those who've spent a small fortune on quality electronics and speakers, who would really like to spend whatever money is left over, if any, on something else and who certainly do not see themselves investing \$500, \$1000 or more on a pair of interconnects suggested by an advisor they're not really sure is an expert or a charlatan. What a dilemma...

The Mandate

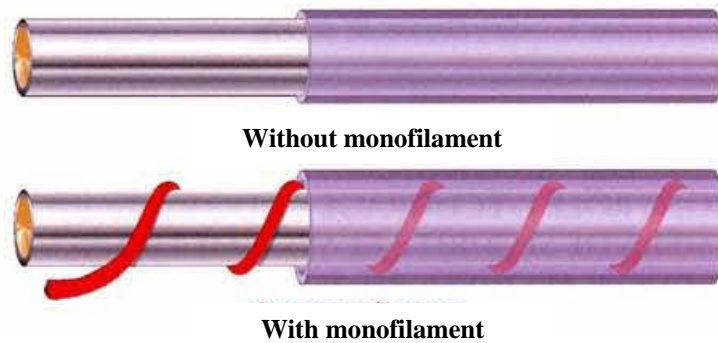
So today, I'll address this issue, i.e. **Jessye Norman**, Richard Strauss and cables -- interconnect cables to be exact. And I'll tell you from the outset that the interconnects of which I will be speaking, **Nordost's Heimdalls**, possess the quality required to fuel the stormiest debates: their price is located in the range where we generally tend to consider this type of expenditure as madness. **Nordost**, their manufacturer, praises their qualities, maintaining that the technology used stems directly from that availed of by the famous and outrageously priced *Valhalla* cables that are widely used in the reference systems of the most well-known specialized columnist.

Nordost's Objectives

When they established Nordost in 1992, brothers **Vincent** and **Jeffrey Garino** and **Joe Reynolds** had the ambition of producing the highest quality high-speed cables, that should above all be as neutral and transparent as possible. The **Nordost** "sound" had to be an *absence* of sound and a clean signature, if one can define the absence of coloration traces in this way. Incidentally, *Odin*, the new reference cables priced in the same range as a new Japanese compact, that have been fuelling the scandalized reactions of several Internet users since their launch, are a **Nordost** creation.

The Cables Selected for Serious Listening

The *Heimdalls* belong to the new *Norse* family that also includes the *Baldurs* and the *Freys*. The technology used in the *Heimdalls* stems directly from the one used in the *Valhallas*; no doubt that explains why so many specialized reviewers have noted the striking resemblance between the sonorities of both cables. It has often been said that *Heimdalls* are the poor man's *Valhallas*. Of course, there is poor and poor and one cannot be really poor to afford the *Heimdalls* and even less so to afford the transparent and high-performance sound system that allows one to fully appreciate them. You see what I mean. Where the *Valhallas* are made of eight oxygen-free copper conductors around which a layer of pure silver is extruded, the *Heimdalls* use four 26-gauge conductors, each individually wrapped in a Teflon monofilament in a configuration called helicoidal. They are available in a selection of XLR terminations for balanced circuits or **WBT Nexgen** RCA plugs.



Heimdall is a Norse Mythology character about whom it is said, “*his senses are so developed that he can hear the grass or the wool on a sheep's back grow and see to the end of the world*” (**Wikipedia**). Thus, very acute, and if **Nordost** was inspired by that story to christen its new cable, the perceptive reader (or listener) will probably suppose that the acuity of the mythical God’s senses will no doubt be translated into the cables in the shape of resolution and capacity to extract and perceive microdetails. We will see.



Nordost did not skimp on the quality of the XLR connectors; it uses Neutrik brand terminations made in Switzerland – currently the best on the market.

The *Heimdalls* have been a part of my sound system for some time. I use two pairs: one going from the digital source to the preamplifier, the other from the preamplifier to the power amplifier. I use the balanced circuits of these units.

I’ll tell you from the outset, that before choosing the *Heimdalls* for my system, I tried several cables from different manufacturers selling at varied price points. Listening extensively and systematically with each set of cables finally dispelled any doubts I could have had concerning the importance of cable quality in a good system. In some cases, the differences were obvious to the point of being spectacular: the respective signatures, for example, of the *Heimdalls* and the cables by **Bis Audio** from Québec (lent to me by a Québec City retailer). Based on what I’ve heard, I dare to write that the disparity between cables of different characters can be just as significant and remarkable as the dissimilarity between two electronics, as provocative as this declaration may seem.

Listening Experience

Listening to Strauss’s *Lieder* with the *Heimdalls* was a truly extraordinary experience. Of course, the quality of the piece and its interpretation weighed heavily, but the contribution of the *Heimdalls* played a very important role in the quality of the listening pleasure.

What is striking *a priori* with the *Heimdalls* is the (relative) absence of coloration, their transparency, and their neutrality. For some, musicality equals warm and round sonorities, a very rich midband, slightly showy lower mids and a minute attenuation of the treble range. Certain units or cables offer that signature, which is essentially the result of a more or less voluntary and clever coloration that can effectively be very pleasant. If that is your cup of tea, forget the *Heimdalls*, since their signature goes in the completely opposite direction. The *Heimdalls* have the clarity of spring water and the luminosity of equatorial sunshine.

If, however, you prefer openness and the lifting of a veil or certain opacity at the profit of light, the *Heimdalls* could be for you. Nothing escapes the luminous transparency and space expansion the *Heimdalls* bring. All of a sudden, the sublime beauty of **Norman**'s soprano voice and accompanying cords have an immediate character, tangible and perfectly natural, that can almost be touched. I'm referring here to absolute unadulterated clarity and refinement, to the pure and simple disappearance of coloration traces and residue. The *Heimdall* cables are capable of very great resolution or, if you prefer, they are able to extract and place in evidence the microdetails that could otherwise easily be obscured.

However, the *Heimdalls*' translucent purity is not cold or sterile, and the richness of the textures, atmospheres, and tones, in *Morgen* and *Beim Schlafengeben*, for example, is integrally preserved. In a nutshell, the sound is not excessively trimmed down and the strings as well as Norman's superhuman voice keep their magnificent and natural body and organic quality.

Nordost Heimdall Interconnect Cables (cont'd)

It has often been said that it is better to use **Nordost** connectics systematically, i.e. not combining **Nordost** cables with those of other manufacturers. In this respect, I must say that marrying **Nordost** cables with **Kimber** speaker cables did not generate very happy results in my sound system, producing a slightly aggressing and tiring treble after a while. However, replacing the Kimber cables with **Acoustic Zen Satori** cables worked wonders. (I have not heard *Heimdall* speaker cables.)

Now, if the *Heimdalls* possess the ability to shine their light on beauty and offer it to the ear in such a captivating fashion, they do not embellish what is ugly and it will remain unappealing without pardon. Highly imperfect recordings with harsh sounding sonorities or strident or metallic treble, for example, will not be more pleasant or satisfying if *Heimdalls* are introduced into the equation. The *Heimdalls* tell it like it is, no more no less. They are like immaculately clear glass windows that instantly reveal the full picture of the weather outside. In this, their character reminds me of my **Bryston** amplification that offers an almost irrevocable transparency on the entire range of the spectrum, and this, for better and for worse. The *Heimdalls* are even sufficiently transparent to highlight certain flaws in the upstream system.

Conclusion

Am I telling you that you should invest \$500, \$1000 or even more money on cables? Certainly not, unless you possess or are considering buying a quality system and you're ready pay the price to get the most out of it.

Cables are parts of the optimizing accessories. Their importance is relative and should be determined by the budget, the goals pursued, and the other system components. In absolute terms, the "Best" cable does not exist and the happy association of a cable with certain components can turn out to be less interesting with others. Generally speaking, the better the sound system and the greater the resolution, the easier it is to distinguish and appreciate the differences good cables make. It would be of no use to invest \$2000 on cables of any kind if the remainder of the system is hardly worth more, and is not equal to the task.

However, it is important to keep in mind that an audio system can be much improved by being well integrated to its environment (positioning the speakers, dealing with the more or less interesting particularities of a room, etc.). A sound system will never reach its full potential if components like cables are not integrated into the equation. This optimization is essential if one wishes to get the most out of the dollars invested.

I'd be happy even if reading this article served only to convince you not to underestimate the importance of well-adapted cables in the optimization process of your audio system. Cables like the *Heimdalls* are fairly expensive, but their impact on a quality sound system is such that one can wonder what it could cost in electronics or speaker upgrades to reach the same results. The *Heimdalls* are not for every system or every purse. Nonetheless, I think listening to the *Heimdalls* with an appropriate system can be addictive, because of the impact they have on truth, authenticity and reality. It would be hard to be satisfied with less after having heard them.

For those possessing a system with the potential to justify such an expenditure and who are looking for neutral and revealing cables with very little coloration, **Nordost Heimdalls** represent a wholly justifiable and extremely rewarding expense. Thus, listening to **Strauss' Lieder** (or to those of **Alban Berg**) will become a deeply moving experience that will remind you of the reason some people love music and unwaveringly want it to be faithfully reproduced.

General Information

Model: Heimdall interconnect cables

Price: \$739.99 (1 m, XLR or RCA)

Manufacturer: Nordost

Distributor: Konnectson Canada Inc., tel. (905) 372-3548, www.konnectson.com

Associated equipment

Compact disc player: Simaudio Moon SuperNova

Preamplifier: BP-26 with Bryston MPS-2 separate power supply

Power amplifier: Bryston 4B-SST

Speaker cables: Acoustic Zen Satori

Power cables: Straight Wire and Transparent Cable

Mediagraphy

Richard Strauss, Vier Letzte Lieder, Phillips, 411 052-2

Alban Berg, Early Songs – Altenberg Songs – Youthful Songs, Sony Classical, SK 66 826