

Nordost Heimdall 2 and Blue Heaven headphone cables

by Chris Martens

Nordost needs no introduction in the high-end audio world, but now the Massachusetts-based company is offering two ranges of specialised headphone signal cables. The top offering is the Heimdall 2 headphone cable (or headphone cable system), while at a somewhat lower price/performance point is the firm's Blue Heaven headphone cable.

Nordost kindly arranged for us to receive review sets of the Heimdall 2 and Blue Heaven headphone cables, both fitted with appropriate headphone terminations (2.5mm mono mini-plugs) for use with the HiFiMAN Edition X v2 and HE1000 v2 headphones recently reviewed in *Hi-Fi+* issue 143. Our reasoning was that these HiFiMAN models, whose standard signal cables are already very good, would make ideal test platforms for Nordost's upgrade cables.

The Blue Heaven headphone cables feature a seven-strand Litz configuration where each strand consists of four 34AWG 7/42 conductors formed from 99.9999% pure solid core OFC (that is, oxygen-free copper). Each conductor is treated to the firm's signature Micro Mono-Filament technology—a process that, Nordost suggests, involves wrapping each conductor with a strand of FEP material before the finished strand is encased in an extruded FEP insulator (FEP means 'Fluorinated Ethylene Polypropylene'). To increase cable strength and control unwanted resonance, an Aramid "strength member" is also added. The amplifier ends of all Blue Heaven cables are terminated with a gold-plated 3.5mm stereo mini-plug fitted with a threaded, 6.35mm

stereo phono adapter, meaning the cables will work with most any amp offering traditional single-ended outputs. The cables can be ordered with a wide variety of headphone terminations to fit most popular headphones. Blue Heaven headphone cables come in 1.25m and 2m lengths and feature distinctive, translucent blue outer jackets.

Like the Blue Heaven cables, the Heimdall 2 headphone cables feature a seven-strand Litz configuration. Two key differences, however, are that the Heimdall 2 headphone cable uses heavier gauge 32AWG 7/40 conductors and ones that are formed from an even purer (99.99999% pure) grade of oxygen free copper. Likewise, the Heimdall 2 cables use Nordost's Micro Mono-Filament technology, with the company emphasising that the cables employ "mechanically tuned lengths, which reduce internal microphony and high-frequency impedance resonance." The Heimdall 2 cables sport attractive translucent red outer jackets.

As I suggested above, Nordost's Heimdall 2 headphone offering is a multi-part cable system that consists of a 2m-long main cable (terminated with a 4-pin male XLR connector on the amplifier end), plus two shorter adapter cables. One adapter cable is terminated with a 6.35mm stereo phono plug while the other is terminated with a 3.5mm stereo mini plug. In practice, this means the Heimdall 2 headphone cable system will work with virtually any single-ended or balanced output headphone amplifier on the market.

Like the Blue Heaven headphone cables, the Heimdall 2 headphone cables can be ordered with a very wide variety of headphone terminations to accommodate virtually any high-end headphone available today. However, the termination options offered for Blue Heaven are not as extensive as those for Heimdall 2, so it pays to consult Nordost's online table of termination options to make sure the connectors you require are available.

I quickly discovered the defining characteristics of the Blue Heaven headphone cables are an open and airy-sounding midrange presentation with plenty of transient 'snap' and definition coupled with detailed and extended highs. The Blue Heaven's bass is solid and taut with both good transient speed and pitch definition, but there is no added bass 'lift', weight, or warmth (meaning these probably are not cables you would choose in order to 'warm up' the sound of your headphones). Happily, though, the HiFiMAN Edition X v2 has thoroughly adequate low-end weight and warmth of its own. What the Edition X v2 headphones do need, however, turns out to be exactly the qualities the Blue Heaven cables have on offer: namely, an added touch of midrange transparency and definition, coupled with heightened high frequency detail and extension. As a result, when you put a set of Blue Heaven cables



► on the Edition X v2 headphones, their sound pulls noticeably closer to that of the very revealing flagship HE1000 v2.

The track 'Nocturne' from Medeski, Martin, and Wood's *Combustication* [Blue Note, 16/44.1] neatly illustrates the beneficial effects of the Blue Heaven cable on the Edition X v2 headphones. The track opens with the funky, baritone voice of Chris Wood's electric bass accompanied by eerie and at times heavily processed synth washes and

other sounds from John Medeski's keyboards. The Blue Heaven cables enhance the definition of Wood's bass notes while making the off-kilter textures (and the sometimes deliberately inverted envelopes) of Medeski's keyboard notes stand out in sharp relief. But once Wood and Medeski establish a fundamental and funky groove, Billy Martin joins the proceedings with a series of deliciously syncopated percussion notes sounded on peculiar-sounding cymbals, gongs, and other less common metallic instruments. With a little help from the Blue Heavens, the strangely beautiful clanks, boings, pings, and shimmering high harmonics of Martin's percussion contributions take on lives of their own, not only managing to sound like real percussion instruments in play, but also clearly conveying a sense for the reverberant acoustics of the ►

“Blue Heaven and Heimdall 2 have taken up residence on my HiFiMAN Edition X v2 and HE1000 v2 headphones respectively.”

▶ recording space. The net effect is that the entire presentation sounds more vivid, sharply focused, and clearly defined, yet without becoming edgy or overwrought.

Frankly, the Heimdall 2 cables had a tough act to follow, because the Blue Heaven/Edition X v2 combination was so beguiling. But in stepping up to the HiFiMAN HE1000 v2, the Heimdall 2 cables yielded several worthwhile sonic improvements, including more tautly defined but no less impactful bass, an across-the-board and evenly balanced increase in resolution, and a really impressive quality of top-to-bottom harmonic integrity. By ‘harmonic integrity’ I mean that the upper partials and harmonics of notes sounded pleasingly and satisfyingly consistent with the underlying fundamentals that produced them—a quality not all headphone cables can properly reproduce. The Heimdall 2 cables didn’t bowl me over with big, dramatic sonic changes, but they yielded a number of smaller (yet collectively important) incremental improvements that gave the already superb HE1000 v2 an undeniably more suave and sophisticated sound.

You can hear this newly unleashed sophistication on ‘The Mermaid’ from jazz vocalist Norma Winstone, reed specialist Klaus Gesing, and pianist Glauco Venier’s *Distances* [ECM, 16/44.1]. The track opens with the eerie sound of Venier’s piano, played as if it were a prepared piano, replete with various percussive taps on the frame and soundboard of the instrument and even moments where the strings are strummed autoharp-style. The Heimdall 2s make those opening moments simply riveting, because they reveal the multiplicity of harmonic signatures of which the piano is capable. Later, Winstone enters with her breathy yet also rich alto (contralto?) voice setting the song in motion. Again, the Heimdall 2 let the listener hear the smooth integration of the body of the voice with its own higher harmonics, creating an almost palpable sense of the singer performing before her microphone. Final, Gesing brings his reed instruments to the party and the Heimdall 2s help transmit both the sounds of the vibrating reed in the mouthpiece, but of the resonant column of air that is actuated within the instrument. The key, here, is that the Heimdall 2s deftly impart touches of heightened vividness, textural richness, and—above all—a sense of harmonic completeness, to everything they touch.

Nordost’s Blue Heaven and Heimdall 2 headphone cables are comparatively expensive, but that is to be expected when you are talking about elevating the performance of headphones that came with very good cables in the first place. All I can tell you is that the Blue Heaven and Heimdall 2 cable have taken up residence on my HiFiMAN Edition X v2 and HE1000 v2 headphones respectively, and both headphones sound all the better for it. Try these cables with your favourite headphones and see if you don’t get similar results. Highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Nordost Blue Heaven headphone cable

Cable construction: Seven-strand Litz-type configuration, with each strand consisting of four 34AWG 7/42 conductors formed from 99.9999% pure OFC. The cable features proprietary Micro Mono-Filament technology and uses FEP dielectrics.

Headphone Connectors: Various

Amplifier side: Gold-plated 3.5mm stereo mini plug fitted with screw-on, gold-plated 6.35mm stereo headphone plug

Available lengths: 1.25m or 2m lengths.

Pricing: £334.99

Nordost Heimdall 2 headphone cable system

Cable construction: Seven-strand Litz-type configuration, with each strand consisting of four 32AWG 7/40 conductors formed from 99.99999% pure OFC. The cable features proprietary Micro Mono-Filament technology and uses FEP dielectrics. Interior materials feature “mechanically tuned lengths” to minimise microphony and resonance problems. One main cable is supplied along with two ancillary adapter cables.

Headphone Connectors: Various

Amplifier side, main cable: 4-pin male XLR connector. Gold-plated 3.5mm and 6.35mm adaptors supplied

Available lengths: 2m, main cable

Pricing: £649.99

Manufacturer Information: Nordost

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