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Hammer and Tongs...

NÖRDOST
THOR IsoTek

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The long awaited Nordost Thor distribution block finally completes their mains loom.

by Roy Gregory

Until now, running the Nordost mains-leads has been something of a compromise. Some compromise I can hear you mutter, but the fact is that a star-earthed mains set-up, running from a single wall socket will always outperform a multiple outlet set-up. That means using some sort of distribution block and up 'til now that's meant using someone else's – in my case, the excellent Russ Andrews Power Block. Now, past experience has demonstrated that mixing and matching mains leads is, if anything, even more problematic than mixing and matching signal wiring, with an even greater impact on overall musical coherence. Screw around here and it's your system's foundations that you're undermining. And just to really put the hundreds and thousands on the icing that adorns the top of this particular cake, Nordost's power-cords are, just like their interconnects and speaker-cables, snootier than most when it comes to keeping strange company.

So, why the Russ Andrews block? Well, it's non-metallic construction and straightforward, star-earthed construction is perfectly in keeping with the straight-wire with turbo charger ethos of the ultra-fast, micro mono-filament mains leads. It's the best option as regards putting as little between the power-cords and the wall socket. It's a combination that works - and works pretty well too, delivering enough of the stellar attributes that characterize the Nordost mains leads to show a clean pair of heels to even the most determined competition.

But no one is more aware of this situation than Nordost. After all, they're losing the sales on all the distribution

blocks that people are using with their mains leads. So here we have their response, and it's something of a surprise. Far from the stripped down, bare-bones hot-rod we were all expecting, the Thor ('cos that's the rather portentous name they've chosen) is a full width chassis, over a foot deep and containing considerable circuitry. This is no empty box or off the shelf six-way block.

So what do you get for your money? (Oh, and they do want your money – around 1600 hard earned pounds worth!) Well, there's an IEC input and an earth post on the rear panel. Then of course, there's the six 13Amp outlets on the top rear face. This rather unusual position allows for the stiffness and wide curves preferred by the Valhalla leads. The cheaper Shiva and Vishnus are nowhere near as problematic (although they are kind of springy) but make no mistake, although Thor is intended as a universal unit, logic dictates that it's built and performs to Valhalla standards. Open the box and that fact is underlined by the use of Valhalla wiring throughout. Inside there's a large circuit board with silver-plated copper tracks, a construction that mirrors the conductors used in the mains leads. All the solder is silver too. The circuit is novel, perhaps best described as a star distribution system. In other words, it's not just star-earthed. Each live and neutral leg also finds its way back to a single point. There's also a sophisticated shunt filter and a proprietary circuit, the workings and effects of which Nordost keep close to their chest. The chassis is a combination of a thick aluminium

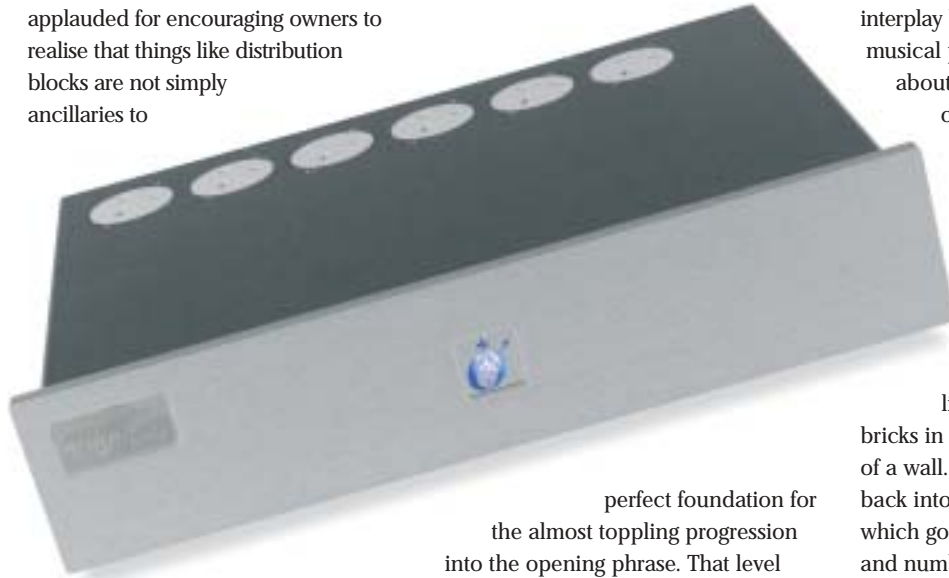
faceplate and heavy stainless-steel casework, making for a non-magnetic structure. But once again, there's more. Each element is strapped back to the earth-star, a situation that makes construction and servicing a nightmare. But it also eliminates eddy currents in the chassis, the best possible sonic situation without compromising the structural integrity of a box that carries raw mains. Such is the attention to detail that not only is the LED that lights the front panel suppressed to prevent interference, but the base plate is M6 threaded to accept Pulsar Points (or, dare I say it, RDC cones or such like).

This is a seriously complete product – surprising considering it's the company's first foray into the field. Well – not quite. Look a little closer at the front panel and you'll see the Isotek logo there too. Nordost were wise enough to combine their cables, thinking and proprietary circuitry with the experience and expertise of an established practitioner of the art. The end result is significantly greater than the sum of the parts.

When it came to assessing the Thor's performance, the first step was to simply install it into the system in place of the Russ Andrews Power Block. Of course, the two units are not exact equivalents: the Russ Andrews block is fed via a 20Amp input and has eight active outputs to the Thor's 13Amp input and six outputs. What's more, the absence of a daisy-chain connection on the Thor means using one of its outputs to power a second unit if you need more than six outlets: Either that or a second wall socket, which is in my experience, to ►

► be avoided. In this respect at least, the Russ Andrews design has an edge. Accommodating a pair of Thors is also far from easy, unless you happen to have two spare shelves in your rack – which I don't.

Having said that, there's no doubt that placing the Thor on a proper support has all the same benefits that accrue from similar care with an amp, and the designers, Isotek, are to be applauded for encouraging owners to realise that things like distribution blocks are not simply ancillaries to



be shoved on the floor behind their rack. But it's one thing getting people to think about it, another to persuade them to part with the money for extra racking. One simple solution to this problem would be a set of spacers, with or without a shared front panel, allowing sufficient space to stack two Thors together and still access the sockets. Otherwise, the laudable intention of making the mains distribution an essential part of the system becomes a potentially expensive ball and chain. US and European versions (with their straight-in plugs) place their sockets on the rear panel in the conventional arrangement. On balance, I'd have opted for rear-mounted socketry on the UK version too, simply for the versatility it delivers.

But, once successfully installed, the Thor's benefits were far from subtle.

Let's use the superb new Speakers Corner 180g pressing of Lou Reed's *Transformer* (RCA LSP-4807) by way of an example. With the Russ Andrews block the album can sound ponderous and heavy. The deep chord that opens 'Perfect Day' sounds homogenous and lifeless with no real shape. With Thor in circuit that chord becomes poised and complex, its hanging harmonics the

perfect foundation for the almost toppling progression into the opening phrase. That level of insight into the inner mechanics of the song is a given once you have the entire Nordost loom in place. Intonation and accenting of vocals, phrasing of words and notes all become far clearer, with improved shape, pacing and placement. Dynamic range is wider, dynamic peaks are scaled with far less strain, so that when Lou climbs into the first chorus there's a real sense of drive and a palpable change in the energy level from the system: it doesn't just sound louder, it IS louder. Likewise the string backing which is better focused and spaced from the voice and piano, with more natural tone and harmonics. The cello entry after the second chorus is unmistakable, a separate instrument with its own, complex identity and vibrational signature.

So what's going on? In technical terms – lord knows. What I can tell you

is the sonic effects that make the musical ones so apparent. What Thor does is lower the noise floor and strip grain and haze out of the soundstage. That's about par for the course. However, what it also does is bring a sense of grounded stability to the sound. Images and notes don't waver, in space, but more importantly, relative to each other; instrumental relationships are far more stable and as a result, so is the interplay between them and their musical parts. What I'm talking about is a fundamental sense of clarity, not in terms of etched detail but in terms of process. You are simply more aware of what is happening within the performance, thus you understand it and its intent that much more clearly. It's a bit

like trying to count the bricks in an out of focus photograph of a wall. The Thor snaps everything back into crystal clear vision, a view which goes beyond just the pattern and number of bricks to the texture of their surfaces, their shade and the contrast with the mortar. It's not hyped or exaggerated, it's simply detailed and coherent enough to be realistic.

It's the security of that foundation coupled to the ultra low noise floor that makes the Thor's dynamic impact so impressive. Dynamic steps are precisely scaled, for level and density, an effect that is startlingly apparent on large-scale orchestral pieces. If you really can't bring yourself to slap opera or a romantic symphony on the turntable then the *Gladiator* soundtrack will do. Suddenly, the way in which Hans Zimmer uses his score to ramp up the tension, one turn at a time, becomes clearly apparent. Far from detracting from the effect, it actually enhances it, making the music even more emotive than normal.

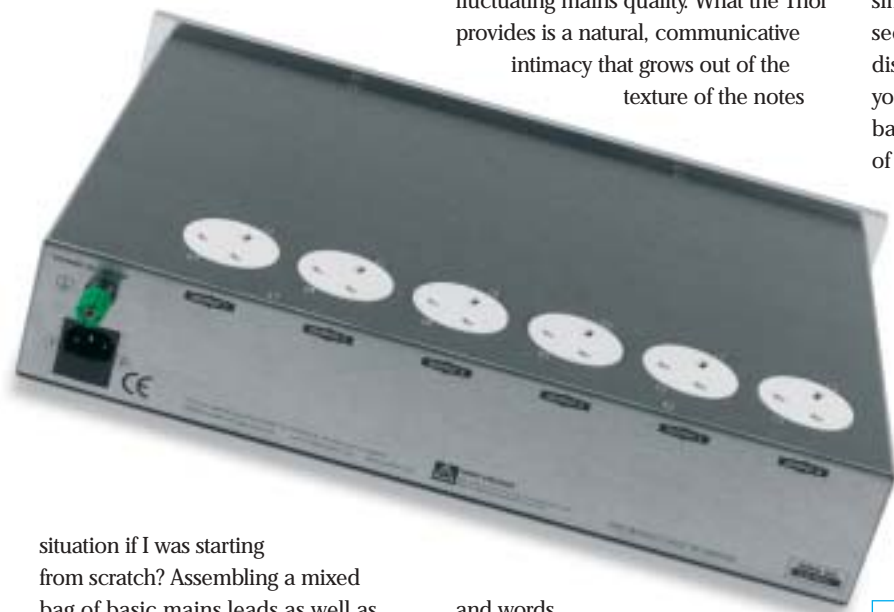
Of course, I'm using the Thor in addition to a full suite of Valhalla mains leads. As the last piece in



► the jigsaw you'd expect it to make some considerable difference, unless of course you subscribe to the law of diminishing returns. Well, that's one law that doesn't apply here, either in practice or in theory. Just because I happen to already have the Valhalla mains leads, the Thor constitutes an apparent after thought. But, I asked myself, what would be the

The lesson here is clear. Whilst the power cords make an impressive and musically valuable contribution on their own, by using the Thor to feed them, you are delivering the optimum foundation for their efforts. The end result is far more valuable in musical terms and robust in environmental ones. Since having the Thors at home I've noticed far less influence from fluctuating mains quality. What the Thor provides is a natural, communicative intimacy that grows out of the texture of the notes

music in the right shape, right place and at the right time, than anything else I've used at home. As such, it's lifted the performance of my system significantly, and even with two in use that makes it an extremely cost effective upgrade in the context of the other equipment. What's so impressive is that it delivers similar (or even greater) benefits with cheaper and simpler systems, where £1600 might seem extravagant for a mains distribution block. That is until you hear what it does. Forget more bass or better dynamics – the sort of things people normally talk about with mains leads. What the Thor does is fundamentally more musical, and musically important, than that. Once you've got used to it in the system, taking it out means no music – it's as simple as that. ➤+



situation if I was starting from scratch? Assembling a mixed bag of basic mains leads as well as Nordost's cheaper Shiva and Vishnu power cords, I rang the changes with a simpler, two-box system consisting of a Rega Jupiter CD player and Mira amp driving Epos speakers.

What quickly became apparent was that far from a luxury, the Thor is actually the most critical element in the mains loom and the part you should really be buying first, along with a lead to feed it. I actually tried comparing the Thor used with a pair of standard mains leads to drive the Jupiter with a single Valhalla. Yes, the Valhalla power cord had dynamic benefits, but overall the Thor delivered greater improvements in terms of natural instrumental tone and that uncanny sense of clarity and musical organisation. Add a Vishnu into the mix, running between the wall-socket and the Thor and things start to get really interesting.

and words themselves. But it also seems to protect and preserve that quality in the face of assault from mains pollution. Once you have that stability and sure footed clarity in place, the power cords add greater dynamic range and precision, tonal colour and musical energy, until the Thor/Valhalla set-up offers an expressive subtlety, rhythmic and dynamic authority that elevates the potential of even quite modest electronics when it comes to sheer musical communication.

The Thor might represent the final piece in the Nordost jigsaw, yet in system terms, it should be considered amongst the first elements. I've said it before but I'll say it again: When you listen to a hi-fi system you're actually listening to the mains. The Thor does a better job of delivering the fundamental building blocks of the

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Mains distribution unit
Input:	1x 13Amp IEC
Outputs:	6x 13Amp UK mains 1x star-earthed binding post
Dimensions (WxHxD):	453 x 100 x 310mm
Finish:	Silver

(Other mains output sockets also available to suit Europe and the USA)

UK Distributor:
Nordost (UK) Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1352 730251
sales@nordostuk.com
Nordost Corporation
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