

Dutch Redux

No, not Van Halen.

The latest cartridge in our on-going survey just happens to be from the Netherlands.

Review by Art Dudley.

Van den Hul MC - 10 Special moving-coil cartridge

I am not the author of *Primary Colors*.

Read my lips: no new taxes.

It is my belief that nicotine is not addictive.

My car and its passengers were taken at gunpoint by an unknown assailant.

We mailed you your check this morning.

My circulation is over 10,000.

Only the finest all-natural ingredients go into our baby foods.

Stripped finds the Rolling Stones at the very peak of their abilities.

The Gulf War was about restoring democracy to all Kuwaitis.

This survey is limited to cartridges priced below \$1000.

There. Now that we've established a bit of perspective, let's carry on with *Listener's* on-going survey of low-output moving-coil cartridges priced at or under, say, \$1200. Yeah, that sounds just about right — let's say \$1200 or less. Nosirree, not going back on our word this time, don't wanna make people think we're pushovers or anything...

And what cartridge did we find in our in-box for this issue? None other than the least expensive moving-coil model by former audio reviewer and all-around hi-fi maven Aalt Jouk van den Hul. Because while others have abandoned the analog vineyards, A.J. van den Hul remains steadfast, trampling out the vintage where the — well, okay, that metaphor doesn't really work here. Let's just say he is to this day making and repairing high-quality phono cartridges at his shop in the Netherlands. And when I spoke to him a couple of months ago, Mr. van den Hul said he intends to continue doing so for at least another twenty years. (And by the way, he and his wife just had a brand new baby boy, named William Johan.)

His entry-level m-c cartridge is the MC10 Special, itself a recent refinement of the long-lived van den Hul MC10. Said refinements have to do with improvements to the permanent magnet and its position *vis-a-vis* the pole pieces. (Older mc10s can be returned for upgrading; contact your local van den Hul dealer for details and pricing.)

In case you've never seen one — and assuming my photos for this issue turn out the same as my photos for the last issue — let me offer a brief description. The MC10 Special is a somewhat longer-than-average cartridge, housed in a metal body that's rigid in a manner suggesting extruded rather than machined parts. Its boron cantilever is quite short; viewing the cartridge from above, neither the cantilever or even the stylus are visible. (This is, I understand, in order to keep mechanical rise times to an absolute minimum, thus maximizing dynamics — but then it also makes adjusting the cartridge with the aid of an alignment protractor an absolute bear.)

Other details: The MC10 Special's stylus profile is, of course, van den Hul's own proprietary design; the metal body has two threaded holes for direct fitting of mounting bolts (i.e., this is a Sans-a-Nut cartridge); the tracking force is specified as a remarkably low 1.5 grams; and the cartridge body is light gold in color. The van den Hul MC10 Special weighs a not-extraordinary 8.2 grams (no need for special counterweights here), and the recommended resistive load is a not-extraordinary 200 Ohms.

And the sound, I want to tell you up front, is utterly and surprisingly great — surprising because I never really expected to find another such superior cartridge in this price range, at least not so soon after the stunning Lyra Lydian (see last issue's installment). Like that green-bodied Lyra — a very different design in so many respects — this is a musically and sonically stunning performer.

Listening to my own favorite Cat Stevens album, 1972's *Catch Bull at Four* (c'mon, don't make fun of me yet — this one is good), I was honestly startled by how well the already-worked-in van den Hul performed. The first line in my listening notes was, pardon the expression, "Holy shit, this is really good!"

Rhythmic aplomb? The very complex hi-hat/snare drum relationship throughout much of the opening song, "Sitting," is portrayed amazingly well. The vdH doesn't miss a single snappy beat. And yet the essential sound of this cartridge is smooth and easy to take — downright liquid in the sense that some audiophiles use the word.

And there's good (great, really) detail retrieval here, too. And as with the Lyra, it's not detail born of treble boost, but rather musical and sonic information that seems to occur easily and naturally from within the sonic scheme of things. Want to know what Alun Davies is really playing on acoustic guitar in this number? Buy an MC10 Special — which, by the way, is as unperturbed by surface defects as any cartridge I've tried.

I listened to the new *Tchaikovsky Fourth* reissue on Classic Records (the great Montreux/BSO recording — see Geoffrey Riggs' review on page 118) and found even more to like. Here I noticed that the MC10 Special produces an unusually wide soundstage (albeit with not quite as much depth as the Lyra). The presentation is a bit more forward at the extreme sides of the stage, comparatively recessed at the middle. (What's "right" and what's not? Impossible to say, by anyone — this is just how it comes across in my listening room.)

String tone on this record is really marvelous with the van den Hul — fulsome and rosy when called for, on a par with

the differently pretty (somewhat drier) Lyra. There's great blat to the brass, here, too. Deep bass performance is solid, the kind that conjures up words like "foundation," and the timpani come across with excellent pitch (e.g., right after the introduction of the first movement's second theme).

And as I discovered listening to the Chailly/RSO Berlin recording of Bruckner's *Seventh* on London, the MC10 Special can play really loud when it has to. (It tracks quite well, too — although I have to say that in the Naim Aro, an arm which dances to its own drummer in more ways than one, I had to goose the downforce up to 1.65 grams for the best results.) The van den Hul rides the climax of the first movement nicely, maintaining good composure throughout — and its solid deep bass gives good underpinnings to the main theme of the adagio (a beaut!) that follows. Even this not-terribly-great-sounding digital LP came off engagingly with the van den Hul.

On this disc, as well, I noticed that the MC10 Special seems to bring the extreme sides of the soundstage a bit forward (but, again, who really cares?) It is also, by the way, a "juicier" (or, if you prefer, "less dry") sounding cartridge than average on this one. The typically Brucknerian kettledrum taps in the scherzo come across with beautiful colour, pitch, and bounce and generous die-away — more so than the comparatively restrained Lyra.

Both cartridges are excellent on this one, and as I see it the choice comes down to a matter of taste between the taunt and pleasantly distant Lyra and the more forward and juicy, but no less musical, van den Hul.

I'm really impressed with this cartridge in virtually every respect — and surprised, because...

Well, okay, I'll come out and say it: The last time I used a van den Hul cartridge in a system I knew well (about ten years ago), I wasn't all that knocked out by it. Oh, it was clean and uncolored, and its sound was pleasantly liquid and easy on the ears. But it was also a little bit boring. In terms of sheer musical involvement, it was outclassed by the Linns, Koetsus, Kisekis, and Fidelity Researches of the day.

Like everyone else, I'm only human. I can't help but bring my prejudices, born of my experiences, to virtually everything I do. But then: I have to remember to forget sometimes (hey, Sally, dig that subtle Elvis reference), and so I tried hard to forget my earlier, less-than-enthusiastic impressions. And, boy, am I ever glad I did.

I really had a lot of fun with this newest of van den Hul's moving-coil cartridges, and I think you should give it very serious consideration if you're shopping in this range. And if nothing else, its existence is proof that audio reviewers are, after all, capable of contributing something of value to society.

See? Honesty really *is* the best policy.

The ratings thus far...

Goldring Elite (Vol.2, No.2)

Quality: ****

Value: ***

Wilson Benesh-Matrix (Vol.2, No.3)

Quality: ****

Value: *-1/2

Lyra Lydian (Vol.2, No.3)

Quality: ****-1/2

Value: ***

van den Hul MC10 Special

Quality: ****-1/2

Value: **-1/2

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