



Van den Hul

The Frog MC Phono Cartridge

Smooth and soothing sounds for vinyl lovers.

Review by Steven R. Rochlin
Enjoy the Music.com, September 2007

Over the past five years i have been fortunate enough to avoid the digital wars. Let the other guys deal with DVD-Audio, SACD, HD DVD and Blu-ray as i sit back and enjoy my 8000+ and growing vinyl collection. Almost a year ago my review of the Oracle Delphi MK V turntable with Oracle-SME 345 tonearm proved that vinyl indeed has much to offer music lovers worldwide. While attending the recent Munich High End show, i was chatting with Aalt Jouk van den Hul (A.J.) at some press event for another manufacturer. Have known A.J. for well over a decade, as he attends many shows, and we have sat down and enjoyed some nice conversations about music, audio equipment... whatever.



While we were discussing vinyl at the show i came to realize that in all these years i have never reviewed one of his fine cartridges. A.J. at first seemed a bit reluctant, then shared with me that he personally builds each one. Naturally this takes time from his extremely busy schedule. More prodding, and perhaps some begging on my part, and A.J. agreed. When he asked which cartridge, my reply was whatever he feels like sending and so a few weeks later a Van den Hul The Frog arrived at my doorstep.

Unlike digital players, where changes happen so often you need firmware upgrades between the obligatory bi-yearly equipment upgrades, The Frog has been around for well over a decade! Ask yourself this my friends, "How many of the same model DAC or transport are being sold for a decade?" C'mon, don't be bashful. Speak up and tell me about the decade old DAC in your system. What was that you said, your DAC and/or transport is *really old*, as you bought it three years ago. Uh huh, that's what i thought.

Easy To Please

Over the years i have noted that some cartridges demand more 'care and feeding' in setup than others. This is not to call them high maintenance, though it is to say that during initial setup you can't just plunk it down on a table like a digital disc system and watch your digital discs disappear in some black hole (drawer) and expect music to come out the hindquarters. Analog, rightly, deserves a bit more respect and the good news here is that Van den Hul's The Frog is perhaps one of the easiest of cartridges to achieve great sound right out of the box.

My review sample came from the recent Munich High End Society show and began the basic run in to get everything settled. The Frog asks little, other than a very normal MC load. Due to it being a fairly strong output MC, i toyed around with MM and MC settings, finding that i did not need an MC step-up transformer and even tried running it in MM mode provided there was plenty of gain on the preamplifier side and/or a very sensitive input on the amplifier.

Decided on a tracking force of 1.6 grams, thanks to my Clearaudio Exact digital stylus gauge, and 1.5 of anti-skate. Other than that there were only *very small* changes to VTA and alignment with the changeover from Clearaudio's Stradivari to Van del Hul's The Frog. Without a doubt this was the easiest cartridge change to date, as the Oracle-SME arm was happy to please. Color me a vinyl junkie as during the 2003 High End Society event in Frankfurt i took this photo of Robert Suchy of Clearaudio (left) and A.J. van den Hul (right). These two are perhaps the two most respected European cartridge designers in the world. Color me humbled to be in their presence.



Some Background

A.J. van den Hul B.V. is based in the Netherlands and was founded in 1980. A.J.'s needle design is employed within many cartridges, with literally millions sold to date! As a cartridge designer, A.J. is legendary! Van den Hul also offers various cables and accessories. Over the years he has written many papers and after reading this article you should visit his site, as there is an *immense* amount of information that will benefit both newbies and experts alike.

Am not going to write a technical description, as over the past decade there has been much ink spilled in this regard. The basics being this hand built moving coil cartridge, by A.J. himself, has the coil of their more expensive Grasshopper III and the frontpole and suspension of the Grasshopper IV. Output is a healthy 0.65 mV/channel and expect to use a load impedance of approximately 500 Ohms. The coils within The Frog are matched crystal copper-wire.

Seductive Sounds

As usual, the personality of a cartridge is quickly found out by the genre of music that finds its way on the platter most often. In the case of The Frog it was romantic music. Ye ol' MoFi of Frank Sinatra *Nice 'N' Easy* [MFSL1-086] sounded so seductive that it made me want to cuddle up with the wife and... Eh hem, sorry about that. Various lps by Billie Holiday and the like also saw plenty of play time. From a dead quiet background (thanks Oracle!) came smooth and detailed music with plenty of groovy schwing. While i would not say The Frog is the very last word in detail, it does bring forth approximately 95 percent of the good stuff in a way that was never offending to my ears. Think of it like this, some loudspeakers have tons of detail, yet within an hour you feel like someone put your head in a vice. The Frog effortlessly revealed plenty of detail in a way that embraced my heart and soul.

But could it rock? A resounding yes! As i type this am playing (flame retardant Nomex suit on) Def Leppard's *Pyromania* [Mercury 810 308-1] as my wife treated us to a concert featuring Foreigner, Styx and Def Leppard this past weekend. Ok, so an amplified concert is no way to compare vinyl, and of course this album is in no way audiophile, but it doesn't stink either. Even with this inferior, non-audiophile vinyl pressing there was a hard rocking yet pleasant sound. Maybe this cartridge should be nicknamed 'The Gentleman's Choice'?

Moving to audiophile favorites, the must-have and incredible Cisco Music 180 gram release of Greig's *Music From Peer Gynt* [LSC-2125] will easily show off what a system is capable of! With Suites Nos. 1 and 2, plus Lyric Suite Op.54 for good measure, here we have Arthur Fiedler conducting the Boston Pops Orchestra. This Living Stereo release showed just how good The Frog can sing, from the very quiet and alluring moments to full-on orchestra, it is all there to be enjoyed. With such a great performance it demands a great system, and the Oracle/Frog combination does not disappoint. This record is simply one of those must-have items. Harmonics had a sensational balance without being overly warm. Perhaps a small touch warm, yet never veiled by the proverbial rosy-color glasses.

Everything from the subtle changes as the triangle is struck to the plucking of the stringed instruments, The Frog simply dances and sings along. Section (stringed, brass, etc.) are reproduced with great clarity, while the ebb and flow of dynamic shading are easily discernable. Bass instruments are appropriately full and tight, with the hall sound filling things out not just around and behind my loudspeaker, but well into my listening room.

Soundscape junkies take note, as Van den Hul's The Frog will immerse you in room filling sound. This is perhaps the deepest front soundstage my vinyl rig has reproduced, while width was properly large. This enabled musical instruments/grouping to be placed within their proper location with ease. Expansion into the room was also of reference quality, so lovers of Q-sound Roger Waters *Amused To Death* [Sony Music 468761 0] will be in heaven! Classical music lovers will enjoy hearing various groupings of stringed section come alive from their proper space, with a layer of horn instruments next and eventually the percussion section at the rearmost of the stage. If you use this cartridge and have a soundscape problem you had better look elsewhere in your system.

PRAT lovers take note as The Frog, in combination with the Oracle Delphi MK V turntable with Oracle-SME 345 tonearm, balances perfectly between boogie and playing 'on the fours'. On Analogue Productions' *Art Pepper Meets The Rhythm Section* [APJ010], his saxophone is right there as Philly Joe Joes' drumming sets the back beat. Meanwhile Paul Chambers' bass walks the beat. Of course i have to mention how Red Garland's piano playing dances all around the beat, playing with those ever-important small cues of timing that makes him a legend.

Major gripes? Well, none really. Minor ones would be that the uppermost range could use a touch more extension while inner resolution falls a tiny touch short. Other than that, i'd leave everything else as is and bask in the glory of an ease, smoothness, and excellent harmonic balance. Of course this is why Van den Hul offers upper end cartridges (at higher prices naturally). Yet for a cartridge that began at \$2500 a decade ago and now retails at \$2895, if you do the math of inflation and the continuing downslide of the dollar versus Euro/Pound, the price today in comparison is downright reasonable.

Old? New? Frankly, my dear, I don't give a...

So why would anyone review a cartridge that has been reviewed many times before and now stands at over a decade old? Easy, because newer is not *always* better. Sometimes we audiophiles get so swept away with the promise of new technology that the past is, sadly, forgotten about. A.J. van den Hul's The Frog is perhaps one of the perfect examples of a nearly legendary design still in production today and easily holds its own. While it may not be the very last word for upper end extension and innermost resolution, and there are upper line models to fill that gap, this is one cartridge i could easily live with for many years to come. There is so much right that the very small errors of omission could easily be forgotten about.

Without a doubt this is also one of the least fussy cartridges, so setup is easy while small fine-tuning is rewarded. We must keep in mind we are discussing a cartridge design that is well over a decade old! It saddens me to be critical of this turntable/arm/cartridge setup, as it is so wonderfully enjoyable that it makes me sit back and want to enjoy the music for the next decade... and beyond. And, my friends, that is *precisely* what it is all about.

Enjoy the Music,

Steven R. Rochlin

Specifications

Type: Moving coil phono cartridge

Frequency Range 5Hz to 55kHz

Stylus Shape: VDH - IS

Stylus Radii: 2 x 85 Micron

Tracking Force: 1.2 to 1.6 grams

Static Compliance: 35 Micron / mN

Tracking Ability: at 15 mN at 315 Hz 70 - 80 Micron

Output Voltage: at 1 kHz at 5.7 cm/s eff. 0.65 mV RMS

Channel Unbalance: < 0.3 dB

Channel Separation: at 1 kHz/10 kHz >35 / >30 dB

Equivalent Stylus Tip Mass: 0.32 Milligram

Vertical Tracking Angle: 22 Degrees

Optimum Load Capacitance: non-critical

Recommended Load Impedance: 500 (> 200) Ohm

Recommended Eff. Tone arm Mass: 6 - 10 Gram

Moving Coil Resistance (per channel): 21 Ohm

System Weight: 8.2 Grams

Price: \$2895

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