



CARTRIDGE

Medium-output moving-coil pick-up
 Made by: A.J. van den Hul b.v. Holland
 Supplied by: Flamingo Audio Ltd
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 Price: £3850

AUDIO FILE

Van den Hul The Crimson

Anyone spending thousands on a moving-coil cartridge will expect something with nigh-on transcendental performance. Well, here it is...

Review: **Nick Tate** Lab: **Paul Miller**



One of the joys of our hobby is that there are so many manufacturers out there with wildly differing ways of doing things. And, unlike the auto industry, for instance, there still remains a space in the hi-fi world for good old-fashioned handmade goods which are the product of one man's (often fevered) imagination!

Van den Hul is one such example, its range of moving-coil cartridges hand built by AJ vdH himself at his workbench. His latest pick-up is called The Crimson and comes in a choice of natural light and dark wood finishes as well as a coloured (also wooden bodied) version. And should you have a passion for plastics, there's a polycarbonate option for your pleasure...

Although nudity is currently the trend for modern moving-coils, with generators exposed for all the world to see, The Crimson doesn't quite go all the way and chooses to cover at least a little of its modesty. Still, most internals are visible – and breakable, if you're ham-fisted. The stick-on 'v.d.Hul' label isn't quite what you'd hope for, cosmetically, on a cartridge of this price, and another disappointment is the stock vdH wooden box, which looks like something that would house a small set of tin soldiers back in the 1950s. Some might think this quaint for a £4000 product, others will not.

The Crimson gives a claimed 0.65mV output [see Lab Report], which should be enough for all but the most anaemic of



RIGHT: With DNA from the vdH Canary and Condor, the Crimson features a wooden body with four threaded inserts

MC phono stages, and uses gold coils, a samarium-cobalt magnet and a 'VDH 15' stylus fitted to a boron cantilever. It comes with a free 200hr service check-up (for the original owner), should you want one, and the lead time is three weeks to build. I found it fiddly to install, quickly learning not to torque it into the headshell too tightly, thanks to a propensity of the metal thread cartridge body inserts to detach themselves. (Getting them back in is a faff that will likely prove a low point in your ownership experience.)

Another hurdle is the contemplation of the price of this product and the damage

that one wobble of the hand could cause – best perhaps to tell yourself that you're fitting a £15 Audio-Technica moving magnet!

RED ALL OVER

With it nicely aligned in the headshell, riding the grooves at around 1.5g and fully run in, the trials and tribulations of getting The Crimson fitted soon melted away. Suddenly you're transported to a world which simply isn't obvious from the somewhat Heath Robinson packaging, and which turns out to be one of the most exquisite auditory experiences this side of live music itself.

One of the things that never fails to amaze me about the best high-end MCs is that they're so good, yet so different [see boxout]. They take you into their own distinctive world and seduce you into thinking that somehow their version of reality is the *only* one. And so it was with this van den Hul – within seconds of the needle touching down I was enraptured.

The Crimson pulls off the apparently impossible trick of being saccharine-sweet, yet as sharp and fast as razor blades flying through the air. It's really quite disconcerting, as experience teaches us to expect one or the other, but not both – yet this vdH MC offers dizzying speed,

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

The fascinating thing about high-end moving-coils is that two prime examples can be so good yet so *different*. Take, for instance, Linn's new £2960 Kandid MC [HFN Sept '13]: it sounds superb, as does the vdH, but they're night and day in their respective characters. The Crimson has a vast soundstage, and a sort of 'super-natural' approach to making music. Everything is larger than life – yet dreamier, sweeter and silkier too. The Linn by comparison, is altogether more measured: instead of being up in the gods of the concert hall, it's in the stalls getting down and dirty with the visceral power of the proceedings. Less showy and exuberant, the Linn focuses on the basic building-blocks of the music rather than projecting the overall pomp and grandiosity of the music. All of this means that if you're in the market for a serious MC, you should audition both!

LAB REPORT

VAN DEN HUL THE CRIMSON

This is no fussy low output moving coil, for the generator ensconced within vdH's softwood body is capable of delivering a full 0.8mV into a standard 100ohm load. While this is nearly 2dB higher than specification, the channel balance is rather poorer at 1.1dB – audible in some systems and higher than the <0.3dB suggested in its literature. VdH also suggests The Crimson is best suited to medium/high mass tonearms (10-16g) and the 14cu vertical/21cu lateral compliance certainly supports this. Tracking at the recommended 1.6g downforce, hardly excessive for a relatively 'stiff' moving-coil, is very good indeed. The Crimson very nearly surmounted the maximum 80µm groove modulation with distortion at 0.5% at +15dB (300Hz, re. 5cm/sec) before just 'letting go' at 1.5% THD through the full +18dB track.

The VDH 1S diamond is beautifully polished and mounted free of excess adhesive, although the VTA is rather high at 28 degrees with the armtube parallel to the record surface. This may, in part, contribute to the slightly 'hot' presence and upper treble response of The Crimson [see Graph 1, below] which will bring some added pizzazz to its sound. Importantly, there's excellent symmetry between the lateral and vertical responses which augurs well for a broad, deep and coherent stereo soundstage. There's a similar symmetry in its lateral/vertical distortion [see Graph 2] which peaks at ~7% (many MCs are in double figures) but sits <1% from 20Hz-3.5kHz (-8dB, re. 5cm/sec). Readers may view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for vdH's The Crimson MC pick-up by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM

RIGHT: The 'gold' coils are visible here mounted in the field of a samarium-cobalt magnet. The fine, line contact stylus is specified as having a 3x85µm VDH 1S profile



lightning attack transients and effortless dynamics, while it's also tonally a real smoothie. At the same time, it artfully avoids turning into one of those 'forensic' sounding pick-ups: The Crimson doesn't lay out the recording on a grid for you, with everything in its right place for your calm, considered perusal. Rather, it assaults you with the most exuberant, emotionally arresting of listening experiences. It's almost 'Alice In Wonderland' in its ability to wake everything up that's in the groove and make it sing in the most luxurious and beguiling way.

Put on the most modest of recordings, in hi-fi terms, such as Burt Bacharach's 'Reach Out For Me' [A&M AMLS908], and The Crimson goes wild. The soundstage is vast – almost too big – and elements in the mix such as percussion fire out at you with dizzying speed. The lead clarinet assumes a creaminess that's simply not there with lesser pick-ups; pianos sparkle with harmonics, cymbals glisten, congas beat with a menacing pulse – and the music sounds magical.

Change the record, if you can steal yourself, and The Crimson does the same trick all over again. Classic rock in the shape of Be Bop Deluxe's *Modern Music* [Harvest SHSP 4058], which is a roller-coaster of power and passion even with the worst of cartridges, is suddenly ablaze. Bill Nelson's voice towers between the speakers – again gossamer-smooth yet direct like he's right in front of you – while Simon Fox's firecracker drum work awes you with its punch and speed. Everything syncopates so beautifully, and the cartridge has you entranced. The soundstage is so

huge, yet it feels as if you can hear all four studio walls.

REAL CHARACTER

But it's classical music where it shines most, showing a blissfully natural flow to Stravinsky conducting his *Rite of Spring* [Columbia MS 6319]. All the while this cartridge's innate speed and dynamics are brought to bear on the recording and the result is startling. Instrumental timbre is sublime: strings drip with harmonics yet never screech; brass rasps but doesn't grate; cellos bow darkly and menacingly. The Crimson seems able to peel off layer after layer of 'wrapping', and get right to

the music, yet it all sounds so easy and organic.

My only criticism is that some may find it just a little too 'larger than life', and yearn for something more taciturn. It could be called 'a character cartridge', and some won't like such licentiousness! ☺

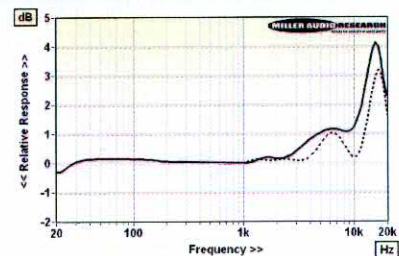
'Everything syncopates so beautifully, it has you entranced'

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

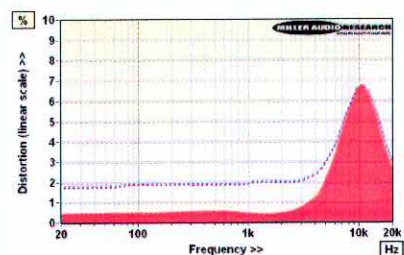
One of the best MCs I have heard, van den Hul's The Crimson offers a uniquely beguiling combination of speed and sweetness. It is a dazzling performer no matter what music you play, but isn't a cartridge for 'deconstructing' records, rather it celebrates them and makes you want more. For all this, you can forgive it the price, fiddly setup and packaging – such foibles are fast forgotten when the needle hits the groove!

Sound Quality: 86%

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ABOVE: Frequency response curves (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, solid) versus vertical (L-R, dashed)



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, solid) and vertical (L-R, dashed) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harmonics) vs. frequency from 20Hz-20kHz (-8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving coil / 8.7g
Recommended tracking force	1.4-1.6mN (1.6mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	825µV / 1.1dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	14cu / 21cu
Vertical tracking angle	28 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	75µm / 80µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.80-9.5% / 0.49-6.8%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-1.1 to +4.1dB / -0.6 to +5.2dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	35dB / 18dB