

Van den Hul Black Beauty Moving-Coil Cartridge

I've long been of two minds about van den Hul cartridges. Yes, they've always had excellent treble detail and energy and life. They've often set the standard in resolving upper-octave information, and their other sonic characteristics have been good to very good. On the other hand, I haven't wanted to own them. Past generations were slightly lean, slightly "hi-fi"-sounding in their tendency to emphasize upper-octave dynamic energy, and slightly lacking in depth. Indeed, they suffered from a problem I find common in modern moving-coil cartridges: emphasizing that last bit of apparent upper-octave detail, whether or not it is musically natural. Perhaps there's an unconscious race to outdo CD rather than to provide the natural warmth and balance of analog.

Well, times change. The van den Hul Black Beauty is not going to disappoint anyone who loved past van den Huls — it's still a musically exciting and lively cartridge. Dynamics and dynamic contrasts are exceptionally clear, with upper-octave energy, detail, and transparency. But it also offers a new degree of harmonic integrity throughout the frequency range. A smoothing of higher frequency transients and notes gives music less etched but more realistic detail. This comes through quite clearly in classical music. The Accent chambermusic LPs offer the most lifelike recordings I know. I became familiar with many of the groups the label recorded and the venues where they played when I was assigned to NATO. I still have no idea of why the sound is so good, but they consistently come close to the sound of live performances.

The Black Beauty gives the upper octaves on these records the musical realism they deserve. There may be a slight exaggeration of upper-midrange energy, which alters the apparent presence. The cartridge's acoustic perspective moves you a bit closer to the performance than the recording justifies, but in compensation, the upper octaves are musically alive and involving.

High-frequency detail has always been a strength of the best van den Huls. The Black Beauty doesn't try to impress you with its abilities here; it uses its resolving power to involve you in the music, even the most demanding recordings of solo piano, guitar, harpsichord, brass, flute. It brings out the magic in a great soprano voice, without exaggerating sibilants, breathing noises, or the brightness of some modern halls and recording venues.

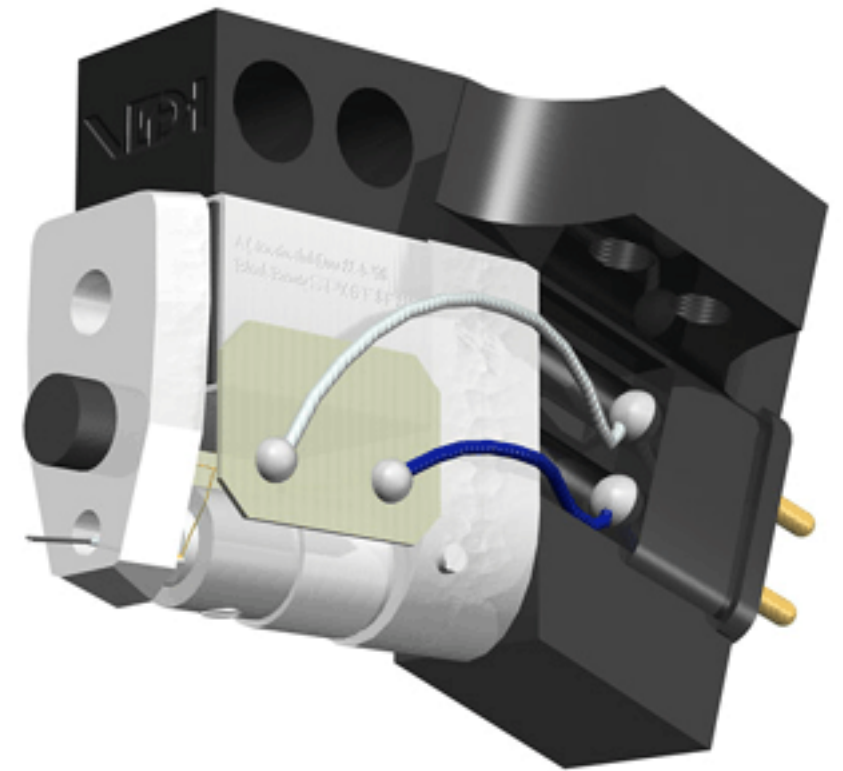
How much of this comes from an improvement in the upper octaves, and how much is a function of the new balance in the midrange and lower octaves and an improvement in depth I don't know. The Black Beauty is not a warm cartridge, like the Koetsus, but it does have a richer middle and lower midrange, and a much better balance of bass energy than the past van den Huls I've auditioned. This new degree of warmth makes the sound more musical and emphasizes the strengths of the best LPs.

If I have a reservation, it is that the deep bass does not quite have the extension and depth of the best competition. At the same time, the Black Beauty is a much better tracker in the bass than most competing moving coils, and as a result, the clarity of its deep bass improves as the level rises. This can be of considerable importance on sonic spectacles, particularly major orchestral works and opera. It does a better job of reproducing high-level bass passages, like the classic Virgil Fox organ recordings on Crystal, Telarc's recording of Saint Saën's *Third Symphony* [Telarc Stereo 10051], or the LP version of *Pomp and Pipes* [Reference Recordings RR-58] with Frederick Fennell and the Dallas Wind Symphony.

The upper bass and lower midrange of woodwinds, guitar, and piano are satisfyingly rich. The male voice has a natural *gravitas*. Try Willie Nelson, *Always on My Mind* [Columbia, 7464-37951-1]. The character of older and warmer halls comes through clearly. The ambient detail also matches the warmth of the hall in live recordings.

The Black Beauty provides the best soundstage and depth I've heard from a van den Hul. The stage is truly three-dimensional — when the recording is. Width is not exaggerated at the expense of depth, and imaging is natural and does not vary with level and dynamics. On the Modern Jazz Quartet's *Blues at Carnegie Hall* [Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-206], image size is not only realistic, but each instrument is clearly separated from those nearby or from singers. On *George Phillip Telemann* [Accent ACC8013] there is still a slight tendency to bring you closer to the performance than the recording justifies, which lends the Black Beauty a slight euphonic character. But being more closely involved in the music is scarcely a fatal sin.

The manufacturer describes the \$4,000 Black Beauty as hand-built, with matched crystal gold coils and 0.50 mV/channel output — a "resolution-improved version of the Grasshopper IV GLA." A Black Beauty can be tailored, via special order, to meet the needs of any system. The Van den Hul website (www.vandenhul.com) can take you through the technical details, and it is well worth reading. My only caveat is that I've spent more than 40 years reading about compliance, stylus shapes, cantilever materials, magnets, bodies, etc, and I've yet to hear any evidence that one approach is better than another. Everything seems to be a matter of how well a cartridge design is executed and the synergy it achieves with a system. Van den Hul has been pushing the technical envelope in cartridge design for years. The Black Beauty is special because it pushes the aesthetic envelope, as well.



All in all, the Black Beauty is a deeply involving, reference-quality cartridge, the best I've heard from van den Hul. Can the company's top-of-the-line Colibri really be better? The analog Sheriff will have to pry the review sample out of my cold dead ears before it returns to Sea Cliff. Well done!

ANTHONY H. CORDESMAN

IMPORTER INFORMATION

(George Stanwick
Stanalog Audio Imports)

→ **Concerns a former USA distributor.** —A.J. van den Hul B.V.

SPECS

Stylus Shape: VDH - 1S

Stylus Radii: 2 x 85 micron

Frequency Range: 5 - 65,000 Hz

Tracking Force: 12 - 14 mN

Static Compliance: 35 micron/mN

Tracking Ability at 15 mN at 315 Hz: 70 micron

Output Voltage at 1 kHz at 5.7 cm/s:

standard versions: 0.50 or 0.65 mV RMS;

medium output version: 1.0 mV RMS;

high output version: 2.0 mV RMS

Channel Unbalance: < 0.5 dB

Channel Separation at 1 kHz/10 kHz:

standard version: > 33 dB / > 28 dB;

medium & high output version: > 32 dB / > 28 dB

Equivalent Stylus Tip Mass: 0.32 milligram

Weight: 8.5 grams

Vertical Tracking Angle: 22 degrees

Recommended Load Impedance:

standard version: > 500 Ohm;

medium & high output version: 47 kOhm

Recommended Arm Mass: 6 - 10 grams

IMPORTER'S RESPONSE

Phono cartridges and loudspeakers are the two transducers in an audio system. Loudspeakers are constrained only by room size and imagination. Cartridges, on the other hand, pose a more significant challenge to the designer due to more severe constraints, specifically the size and geometry of the LP playback system.

Therefore we feel your caveat about cartridge data and claims is fundamentally justified and worth further comment from van den Hul's point of view. We agree that cartridge design [effectiveness] is "a matter of how well a given cartridge is executed and the synergy it achieves in a system." Or, to put your thought more colloquially...the bottom line is what happens when one drags a (diamond) rock through a (vinyl) rut.

Bass performance. Acoustic bass is low in amplitude and frequency. It is amplified bass that is often higher in actual frequency and amplitude and it is also compromised *ipso facto* by its type of amplification and transduction. We applaud your effectively making this distinction regarding the clarity of the Black Beauty's bass vs. other moving coils that can have spectacular overhand alien to the concert experience or peculiar to the designer's muse.

Tracking. You cannily observe the severity of the challenge to reproduce deep bass of both low-frequency and high-level of complexity and amplitude. This area is one where vdH's unique [design approach] becomes especially evident by combing the relatively high compliance and trackability of MMs with the subtlety and frequency extension of MCs in a design of medium

A Few Comments on Set-up

The first Black Beauty I received suffered from "reviewer's curse" and had a slight mechanical problem that caused a strange, intermittent clicking. This is not a warning about the Black Beauty. I have never before had a van den Hul fail when it wasn't a function of my own ham-fistedness, and no quality-control test would have revealed so intermittent a problem. However, *customers should insist on having their dealers properly mount, test, and demonstrate any expensive moving-coil regardless of manufacturer* (buy by mail, and you're on your own). The dealer should have good alignment tools and be competent to check out the stylus and cantilever alignment visually, have test records to check tracking and output, and use them to set up and test the cartridge on your pick-up arm and turntable — in your presence.¹ Every competent mid-fi dealer did this in the glory days of analog; and it should be standard practice today, since many cartridges cost well over \$1,000 and problems tend to be blamed on the customer. But it isn't.

My second sample functioned perfectly. Indeed, it worked much better with a variety of arms than I expected, since the manufacturer recommends light- or medium-mass arms (6-10 grams effective mass). It has high compliance for a moving coil and the cartridge body is exceptionally close to the record surface. Nevertheless, I had no problems with the Lustre, Wheaton Triplanar, or VPI JMW12.5 arms. My experience with the Graham 2.0, SME Series V and 3009, and Rega RB-300 indicates they should work well, too. (Go light on damping fluid in arms that use it.)

Getting the best out of the Black Beauty also requires close attention to set-up. Overhang adjustment is always important, but it has seemed particularly so on van den Huls. Careful azimuth adjustment and experimentation with VTA are needed to get best results. (Try angling the arm so the rear is either exactly parallel with or slightly higher than the front.) If you do your own set-up and your arm does not come with alignment aids, you will need a Dennesen or Wally Tractor to adjust overhang. Use the small level that comes with the cartridge to ensure proper azimuth, or a test record, if you know how to make this measurement. (There is a long, boring debate over whether visual or measured alignment is best. Visual isn't bad, but a dealer who uses a Cartridge Analyzer or test record usually gets slightly better audible results.) Experiment with VTA to get the cleanest harmonics from upper-octave violins or the sweetest sound from sopranos.

Each cartridge comes with a recommended tracking weight, anti-skating adjustment, and load impedance. Trust the recommendations, but none that I found tracking was best with the weight set at the high end of the range (1.4 grams), and that the load really needed to be above 500 ohms. The Black Beauty is a nude cartridge — there is no body or

mass and appropriate resonant frequency.

No other MC on the market is as compliant as vdH, and we offer a challenge to find a better tracker among MCs, particularly with such a low tracking force and the added LP lifespan it can provide. We acknowledge the inherently better tracking of, say, Shure MMs alongside their more limited bandwidth and subtlety. Our observation not only dovetails with your auditioning, but also corroborates our published specifications of high compliance, low tracking force, and modest mass relative to other MCs. VdH designs are fundamentally different from the competition both on the bench and, more importantly, while playing records...

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stylus guard, and you must be careful handling it. It may also be a bit sensitive to static electricity unless the arm is properly grounded to the preamp. (No problem with any of the arms I used once I hooked up the ground wire properly.)

—AHC

1 I have not cited a test record because there are significant differences among them. Many audiophiles expect clean tones during such tests, even at maximum level. This won't occur with moving-coil cartridges. Expect to hear some buzzes or colorations as the tracking level rises. Similarly, don't go ape over precise tracking weight, overhang, azimuth alignment, or VTA. A good dealer will walk you through these aspects of set-up and show you they have been done well. No ultimate precision is possible in azimuth or VTA; most cartridges require a follow-up VTA adjustment, done by ear after several weeks of break-in. You can use The *Hi-Fi News Test Record* [HFN-001] whose three bands of tracking tests and azimuth-alignment test work well. Be aware, however, that surfaces are often mediocre, particularly in the inner grooves. Evidently *Hi-Fi News* isn't quite as demanding of its own products as it is of those from the manufacturers it reviews.

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