

van den Hul Colibri phono cartridge

from: **Analog Corner**

by: Michael Fremer

Audio cynics charge that there are no new circuits under the sun, just old ones repackaged and overpriced. I tested that theory when the Audio Research Reference Two preamp (currently under review) arrived with a noisy FET. Of course the unit had been burned-in and tested before shipping, but these things happen — and it's not fair to blame the company. AR outsources parts — like FETs — and sometimes they fail.

So while my Ayre K-1 (which has gone through some bad resistors, of all things) was out being updated and the Ref was back being fixed, I borrowed a friend's Audio Research SP11. The two-box design from the 1980s was considered a "groundbreaker." Brief and to the point: It is nowhere as good as the Reference Two — or, for that matter, the Ayre.

Cartridges, like loudspeakers, would seem to be immune to recycling charges: exotic materials, computer modeling and computer-controlled machining techniques not available to designers just a generation ago have radically altered the playing field.

Yet here, too, fashion and whimsy play a role. During the '60s and '70s high-compliance cartridges and low-mass tonearms (Grace 707, Infinity Black Widow) were in vogue, for obvious reasons: Track accurately with less downforce and you get better sound, lower distortion, and less record wear. Back in the '60s, Shure's V-15 series of moving-magnet cartridges tracked at 0.75-1.0gm, with outputs measured in whole millivolts. "Progress" has given us low-compliance, ultra-low-output moving-coil cartridges requiring medium to high-mass arms and up to 2 or 3gm to track effectively. Who would have thought that would happen? Not Shure, Pickering, Stanton, *et al!*

The last decade has seen cartridge outputs decrease to minuscule levels and tracking forces go as high as 3gm. Folks pay \$7500 and \$10,000 for that privilege with the Clearaudio Insider and Insider Reference — and all with whom I spoke think they're getting their money's worth.

Cartridge envelopes are being pushed even as the word "analog" has become a pejorative (as in that commercial, "Dad, you're so analog"). The Transfiguration Temper Supreme's output is rated at a minuscule 0.2mV (3.54cm/s, 1 kHz — the JVC test standard), while the Lyra Clavis da Capo's is 0.3mV and the Parnassus D.C.t's is up to 0.35mV. These are low-output designs requiring "heavy lifting" from the associated electronics, but all of them offer spectacular performance.

Van den Hul's newest design the Colibri, reduces mass to an amazing 3gm and output to an ultra-tiny 0.175mV (5cm/s) — which means, by the JVC standard, its output is actually 20% lower, or around 0.13mV or 130µV! The high-compliance design tracks at between 1.25 and 1.45gm, with the lower weight preferred if your arm can do it. Speaking of which, the Colibri needs a low-mass arm in the 6-10gm range. That leaves out some of today's best, and unfortunately renders marginal most of the rest.

Remark: The Colibri is currently available in a number of versions with different output and system weight. Latter also enables the use of heavier tonearms. For more details about all available versions please refer to our product information about The COLIBRI. —**A.J. van den Hul B.V.**

A cactus needle would probably sound great attached to the Rockport turntable, so I also auditioned the lightweight, high-performance, \$6000 Colibri on the Immedia/Simon Yorke arm/'table combination, where it performed equally well, though of course the results were not quite as impressive as with the Rockport 'table. The only modern arm I can think of that's optimized for such a lightweight, high-compliance cartridge is the Mörch, which I didn't have on hand.¹ But based on how the Immedia handled the Colibri, I'd say the Graham would be equally viable. Another big hurdle would be the preamp gain. The Audio Research Reference was up to the task, offering sufficient low-noise gain to present quiet passages against an ink-black background.

1: J-10 hears Judy Spothem of La Luce/SpJ fame is getting fabulous sound out of a Colibri, special arm weights to suit.

It's *scary* mounting such a vulnerable design. Stylus guard? Yeah, right. Attached to what? There's almost nothing to it: just a tube containing the cantilever/stylus assembly, coil/former, and ring magnet structure. That last is very small, hence the ultra-low output. The patented 1S stylus assembly with boron cantilever is also used in vdH's Grasshopper, Black Beauty and Frog cartridges, though a somewhat higher-grade diamond is used here. The 2µm by 85µm radius stylus is shaped like a "garden spade," according to the American importer. Its tall profile, coupled with the high compliance, is said to offer superb tracking.

If you don't lock this baby in, forget it. Proper VTA is critical to getting top-end sweetness, and even then, "sweet" would be an overstatement for this cartridge's finest performance. "Sweet" and "lush" are not the Colibri's fortés. Speed and detail are — top to bottom. In garden spades! The Colibri isn't the Cadillac of cartridges; it's the Lamborghini.

Shed the weight, cast off the resonating body, and you end up with a cartridge with incredible resolution and superb



transient performance. My friend Frank Doris once wrote of counting the rivets on a cymbal, and with this cartridge I know what he means. It's a drum kit's best friend, able to distinguish and communicate the tonal and textural character of cymbals better than any other cartridge I've heard, and equally adept at conveying their metallic solidity. Mere "speed" can't do that. And it does so without adding brightness or sheen.

The Colibri is equally adept on the bottom, offering impressive, overhang-free extension, explosive bass transients and dynamics, and superb control and solidity. Walloping kick drums, weighty toms, snappy snares, chiming, ringing splash cymbals, "cushy" rides — the Colibri delivers a drum kit any rock or jazz fan will melt hearing. As I write this I'm listening to Steely Dan's "Kid Charlemagne," from *Royal Scam*, and the profusion of colors from the drum kit alone is amazing.

The Colibri delivers the transient goods without spotlighting, and without adding grain or sibilant edge. In fact, vocal sibilants — *t*, *s* and *f* — are downright delicate and refined. Upper-octave clarity, definition, and detail are delivered with smooth assurance. The cartridge's handling of the *guiro* (a ribbed gourd rubbed with a stick) on David Bowie's "The Man Who Sold the World" regularly dropped jaws when I played it for friends who thought they knew the track. And the Colibri's portrayal of the mixed-in-the-background drum kit was equally amazing and impressive.

Plucked and strummed transients like guitar strings were also well served by the Colibri. Its performance on the 45rpm 12" of Pete Townshend and Ronnie Lane's string-drenched masterpiece "Street in the City" was positively awe-inspiring. PS Audio's Paul McGowan was down delivering a power plant 300. I played that track for him and the audio veteran was visibly moved, remarking that the midrange was really "happening."

While the Colibri exhibited a host of strengths, the other area in which it truly excelled was soundstaging. The extra detail it brought forth was placed in three-dimensional space in an impressively orderly fashion. When you hear an event you didn't know was there, placed so clearly and so startlingly defined in space, you just have to sit there and shake your head. A few days with the Colibri and I had a headache from all the shaking. Its total freedom from congestion, even when a host of events occurred in the same narrow upper-frequency band, was mighty impressive.

I could go on about the Colibri's spectacular performance, but you get the picture. It's fast and detailed without being edgy and bright. It can sound aggressive and a bit tizzy right at the top if you don't have the VTA and VTF precisely dialed in, but even then it will never sound coarse or harsh in overall character. And most important, it does not emphasize or spotlight record noise.

First-rate dynamics, a neutral, open midband, superb top and bottom extension and control, and seat-of-the-pants drive and focus help make the Colibri an amazing performer. For \$6000, it damn well better be! After reading about Frogs and Grasshoppers for years, the Colibri is the first "top-shelf" van den Hul I've had in my system. Now I know why guys like J-10 have been raving.

But remember, it's not for lovers of warm and lush. And to shine, it requires a low-mass arm (though one of moderate to medium mass will work), careful attention to setup, and a high-gain, low noise phono section. And because it uses a shorter cantilever than some earlier van den Huls, it's a low-rider with very tight record clearance.

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