

Van den Hul COLIBRI XCM

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The COLIBRI is a phono cartridge entirely hand built by Dutch master Alt Joulk van den Hul. Very expensive, as such representing the summit of the range, but very reliable and musical. The sound performance and the construction philosophy typical to the vdH cartridges have been pushed up to the extreme limits that can be reached; better is hardly possible.



At least once in life, luckily just for a short moment, it can happen that one loses contact with reality. That happens without apparent premonitory signs. And often it is a captivating sort of dream which lets us softly drag along the wave of enthusiasm, or worse, leaves one blinded by passion, by intense burning love for something or someone. I believe that something of the sort has happened to me during the last months, just that they are things attacking the economic side of hi-fi of which I basically consider the price-quality relation to be of high importance. Perhaps for the first time in the history of this audiophile publishing defined with such precise reproduction by using the by now famous 1:5 (SUONO, December 2001) catalyzing things, with me and with the brave editor-in-chief.

Appreciation and critique both however are as always very welcome. Well, a lot of you will have noticed that in the last numbers of the magazine I tested two cartridges of unquestionable intrinsic and musical value, but to say the least are prohibitively priced. In fact both the Audio Tekne MC-6310 and the Scan-Tech Parnassus were exceeding the four thousand Euros, frankly a very high sum of money for an as defenceless and delicate "little creature" as the phono cartridge is. To weak defence of that, the consideration can be put forward that no matter how these state of the art objects are dealt with, it is worth to speak of small but true works of art in limited circulation devoted to an extremely small group of people across the world. In fact these extremely refined cartridges are entirely constructed by hand. Indeed nothing is industrial, so it is as good as certain that such a cartridge has been in the hands of the creator who personally has taken care of the assembly steps, up to the point that, for example, buying an Audio Tekne means to correspond directly with Imai San, while buying a Van den Hul means further having to do with Alt Joulk in person who will be available for any explanation. The high costs are therefore partially justified by the highly specialized craftsman like production that, among other things, often turns to front technology industries for the supply of raw materials which, being obtainable without economic market-scale comfort, leaves those very objects dedicated to the few and passionate individuals. This all to tell you that I am about to introduce a phono cartridge that takes up the absolute peaks of financial commitment needed in order to appropriate: Van den Hul Colibri XCM, sixthousand-two hundred-fifty Euro!

Next we present this rare piece, in the first place stating that the 0.45 mV output version, namely the most simple and universal possible, is discussed here. Honestly said, it would have been better to have tried out the 0.23 mV output version of the COLIBRI (model X series) which is optimal for listening to classical music, or the 0.28 mV output version (model S series) dedicated to jazz music listening (*1), but both of them absolutely need a suitable step up transformer (*2).

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

(*2) Remark: Or a good phono preamp. —**A.J. van den Hul B.V.**

Aesthetically the Colibri in test is slightly different from what can be observed on the Van den Hul internet site (*3) (Models XP and SP with polycarbonate plastic body), this one having the wider body and being in metal (the latter recognizable from the suffix M). It weighs 7.4 (*3) grams against 3.25 (*3) and the heavier weight compared to the plastic bodied model allows to use medium mass arms (8-14 grams)(*3), while, according to A.J. van den Hul, one is to avoid unipivot arms.

(*3) Remark: Since this review dates from September 2002, the (*3) marked statements are inaccurate: The Colibri is currently available in a number of versions with different specifications. For more details about all available versions please refer to our product information about The COLIBRI. —**A.J. van den Hul B.V.**

The cantilever of the Colibri is slightly more horizontal and shorter than those of the Grasshopper Beauty series, while the outer windings of the coils are dangerously near to the surface of the vinyl and coerce adjustment of the rather high VTA - we say at least four millimetres with respect to the arm board, two necessary for a correct adjustment of a vdH. The mounting of the cartridge is facilitated by the body's threaded screw holes. Rather than a body, it would be more right to talk about a frame, seen that the Colibri is "bare" - a nice term to define a cartridge that "visibly" presents all the

mechanism of which it is composed, and in this very much looks like the Grasshopper Beauty on which it is also inspired in sound philosophy. In effect with a certain peace of mind it can be affirmed that the Colibri carries all results, that up till now were represented by the Grasshopper, to the extreme in terms of materials used and constructive and musical philosophy. The tracking force was adjusted to 1.4 grams while the anti-skating force found a right balance obtained by ear at about 0.5 grams - even though the cartridge's medium compliance does not suggest "non-symmetrical" adjustments; In effect making me think deep to find a missed correspondence between tracking and anti-skating force. This parameter, when you have the opportunity, can also be adjusted by ear; it is sufficient to pay attention to the reproduced soundstage. The soundstage should not turn out to be moved excessively to one side, but should develop itself in a balanced manner, stretching all the way along the arc between both loudspeakers.

Be very careful to check the anti-skating setting. By intuition I used the Michell Gyrodec and not the Vyger and this for a good practical reason: I made the wire connections a bit too long, and when connecting them to the Colibri they came in contact with the base of the Vision arm, I therefore preferred to change from record player rather than having the constant trickle of the micro solder joints!

We have listened to a lot of records with all kinds of music, not just audiophile records but also those belonging to the normal market; Well let's now talk about the sound of this cartridge in general terms and not only refer to an individual passage and/or LP.

This mainly has to do with the fact that I think that it is very important to try to explain the musicality, the type of sound expressed, the character of this cartridge. "Character" is the right term because I think that the Colibri is a strongly distinguished cartridge; that is to say leaning forward on some parameters which somehow render it very different from the rest of the cartridges.

The Van den Hul phono cartridges have always distinguished themselves with their analytical abilities which many have felt (or better heard) as being excessively light and tending towards the high frequencies. We sincerely do not want to say that who expresses such a judgement is wrong, but we absolutely do not identify ourselves with those who express extreme opinions, affirming a lack of low frequencies that I have frankly never found in these Dutch cartridges. An only exception in the vdH catalogue is the MC - 10 Special, which character we would like to define as being "sparkling". We find the MC - 10 Special excellent, even if a little different from its other vdH sisters, which offer a considerably more Mediterranean and warm sound.

Returning to the Colibri: It is more appropriate to define its sound as being extremely detailed, able to trace out the sound image with very fresh, fiery and lively tonal colours. During reproduction the contours of the musical subjects are very precise, rendering voices and instruments extremely vivid, even though fairly slender in their vibrant bodies.

The image is extremely wide, clear, very luminous and open to the smallest details, which are reproduced with meticulous precision. Also the dynamics embrace a wide spectrum of frequencies that are represented homogeneously, hence without peaks or dips. The low frequencies are extremely controlled, the mids and highs natural and spontaneous. In response to transients everything is rendered with lashing speed and on sudden musical peaks the signal ascends with fluid agility, illustrating this clairvoyant's extreme resolving capacities.

The timbral aspect is extremely attentive to the male and feminine voices as well as to the instruments, of which any one that is being regarded enjoys all the nuance and precisely outlined harmonics. A single exception might be pointed towards the instruments that operate along the low frequency range (electric basses and contrabasses, organs, low tubas etc.), which, though being easy to follow as spiralling harmonic excursions accompanied by an extreme tonal agility and dynamic control, suffer from a sort of lightness that lessens the sonic impact, placing them in second line regarding to how much I normally listen.

Shortcomings? Besides the price (which is very high), it cannot be said that it is a cartridge with a warm character.

Who looks for warmth in analog must certainly turn elsewhere. Who searches to remain within the dark shades cannot buy the Colibri, which is not able to deliver a heavy fist, though able to give a loud slap instead!

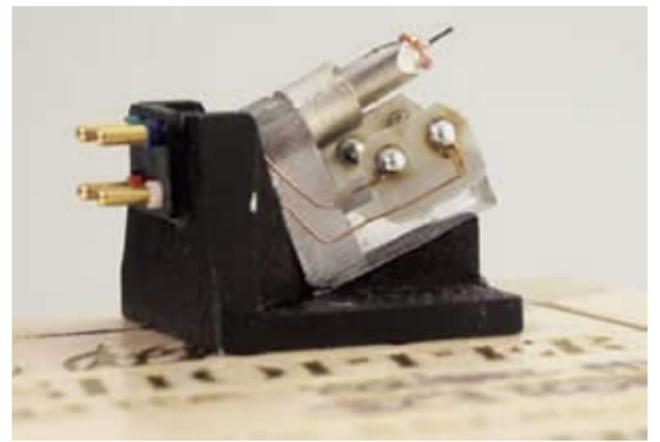
The result however is one that dazes the listener with an absolute musicality, composed of light and precise brushstrokes, of fine attentions, of delicate bass reliefs that are delightful and captivating, bringing forth a light and warmish breath that envelops the entire listening room in an intimate and sweet-scented atmosphere.

In these terms the name "Colibri" is most appropriate: a light and swift bird that with extraordinary agility and unique to its species, is able to stall in air and nourish itself with the pollen of the flowers without ever touching down.

I don't even want to mention the Colibri's lower output models revelation of timbre; In effect it is really a missed occasion and it displeases me a little not to have had a 0.28 or 0.23 mV output model available.

A great cartridge, there's no doubt about that. It is able to raise the pleasure of listening to the highest levels, especially with the convinced supporters and followers of Van den Hul's philosophy.

It is easy to adjust (at least the model under test) and reliable, thanks also to the short boron cantilever. Only be careful not to pull out the very delicate and almost invisible wires during the normally necessary cleaning operations, always strictly avoiding oil based cleaning liquids; Advisable instead are the alcohol based ones that preserve the adhesive of the needle.



Notice the short cantilever made of boron and the microscopic needle. You can also see the little coils that just miss the vinyl. It is necessary to adjust the VTA about 4 millimeters higher than normal.

SPECIFICATIONS:

Tracking weight: 1.35-1.50 grams

Anti-skating: 0.3-0.5 grams

Advised tone arm: effective mass 8-14 grams

Load Impedance: 200 Ohm - 47 kOhm

Output level: 0.45 mV at 5.6 cm/ sec

Manufacturer's remark: Our Colibri type XCM which is reviewed here currently has slightly different specifications; Please refer to our product information about The COLIBRI. —**A.J. van den Hul B.V.**

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