

Listening

By Art Dudley, January 2003

Even poor people fly. You see them getting on and off planes with their NASCAR hats and their poor friends and their poor relatives waving to them at the gate. Flying is what everybody does nowadays, but it used to be just for the rich. It's hard to remember a time when the phrase *jet set* was charged with something other than irony.

Then again, even rich people have cheap, junky hi-fis — that, or no hi-fis at all. I've met some very well-to-do people and visited homes where the rarity and grandeur and sheer costliness of the furnishings have left me breathless — and the best "music system" I've seen in the vast majority of those settings was a Bose Wave Radio.

What happened?

When I was in high school, my friends and I liked to look at *Playboy* — not just for the obvious reasons, but because it gave us a glimpse of what we considered the good life. The Playboy Man wore a turtleneck under his double-breasted blazer, drove a British Leyland car, smoked the right cigarettes, drank the right liqueurs — and had a great hi-fi. The latter always included an open-reel tape deck, and the speakers were usually of the New England bookshelf variety, invariably sited among *real books*. The system was used primarily to play jazz and classical music, although Edith Piaf or early Bob Dylan might've qualified, too.

No one wears turtlenecks with blazers anymore. No one drinks Galliano or that horrid cherry liqueur from Scandinavia anymore. And no one has a good hi-fi just because they think it's essential to their way of living anymore. In 30 years, hi-fi has gone from being an accepted, even encouraged lifestyle choice to a fringe hobby. Hi-fi has been marginalized — today, you'll find more people to talk to at wedding receptions and parties and the barber shop if your hobby is paintball, cigars, bow-hunting, baseball cards, body piercing, or breeding anoles.

The point has been made that, as a hobby or a lifestyle, hi-fi has simply been undersold. I used to believe that, but I'm not so sure anymore. I think the answer is more complex, and a portion of it has to do with the fact that certain other things in life — computer games, video recorders, and recreational vehicles, to name just three — have been and continue to be *oversold*.

Another part of the answer has to do with our choices as consumers. If you want to travel from one part of the US to another, your alternatives to flying are the train and the bus — which is to say, your alternatives are "slow" and "slow and ghastly," respectively. If you want to enjoy recorded music, your alternatives to owning a good hi-fi are the boombox, the cheap home stereo, the cheap car stereo, the expensive car stereo, the personal stereo, the computer, the Bose Wave...

For people with limited traveling time — which is to say, almost all modern people — the alternatives to flying are unacceptable. But for most modern people, the alternatives to owning a good hi-fi are perfectly acceptable. In fact, they're fine and dandy.

Of course, money has a lot to do with it. Not only has the cost of air travel *not* kept up with inflation over the past 30 years, it's gone in the other direction. In 1970, even off-season, you couldn't fly from Portland, Oregon to London, England for less than \$1000. Today you can do it for half that — in slim, trim 2002 dollars.

In those same 30 years, hi-fi prices haven't done *too* badly. When I sold stereos in the early 1970s, the average system price was about \$600: \$200 for a receiver, \$200-plus for a pair of speakers, \$150 or so for a turntable, and a little extra for a cartridge. You'd have a hard time convincing most people to spend even that much on a music system today. Every one of the (mostly retired, mostly upper-middle-class, mostly male) people I've met who own a Bose Wave as their primary home music source describe the purchase as a major expense. They even brag a little when they say it.

And what have they got to brag about? Based on cumulative yearly inflation rates in the US, themselves based on the consumer price index, the system that cost \$500 in 1970 *ought* to cost \$1300 or so today. And that's being kind, seeing as how, in the past 30 years, the prices of other consumables — houses and automobiles, to name two — have increased at much higher rates.

Can you imagine convincing half of your co-workers to spend \$1300 on a music system today? How about just *one* of your co-workers? Nope? I didn't think so. That's probably because they're satisfied with what they have.

Yes, we have no Maseratis

I'm thinking about all this during a recent visit to my local automobile superstore, as I wait for Janet's Subaru Forester to be serviced. Once again, I'm wasting Valuable Time sauntering around the showroom, opening and closing the doors of cars I could never afford, wiggling my eyebrows at the prices in a manner calculated to suggest that my opinions on the subject hold some significance, which even I know they don't. Here's a Maserati Spyder Corso (I live in Saratoga Springs, remember), total sticker

Remark: Click [here](#) to directly jump to this article's section about [The DDT - II Special](#) phono cartridge.

In the first section of this article, Art Dudley, Stereophile's new Editor at Large, laments the fact that there are no Maseratis of the hi-fi world that could capture the unbridled affections of the audiophile junky, let alone the wannabes, but then again, a great phono cartridge goes a long way toward conveying that "musical sound" through its very simplicity — Art feels the van den Hul DDT - II Special fits the bill. —**A.J. van den Hul B.V.**

price \$100,150. This irrationally pretty thing is finished in vibrant blue with a rust-red leather interior, a color scheme not unlike that of the Eastern Bluebird. The heated interior is an \$1100 option, and another \$3000 or so of the final price is accounted for by the gas-guzzler tax this 11mpg beauty commands. I catch a glimpse through slotted wheels of brake calipers painted bright red, an option that alone adds more than \$400 to the price.

Do I need this car? Of course I do.

Well, probably not. My '93 Saab still runs alright, notwithstanding 127,000 miles on the odometer that weren't there 10 years ago and some rust at the bottoms of the doors. I tend not to drive it out of town — that's for the Subaru Forester, which is having its crankcase overfilled with motor oil as I write this. Given the driving that I do, which is limited mostly to preschool and the post office, my car is sufficient. I suppose.

Here's a different question: Even though I don't need a Maserati Spyder Corso, would owning it improve the quality of my life?

Certainly. I would get more enjoyment out of driving, thus I would raise the quality not only of my own life but also of those friends and neighbors whom I would take on their errands, daily if not hourly. I would be inspired to travel farther, adding breadth and color to my impoverished worldview. I might also be safer (new airbags, etc.), and there's a chance I'd make some new friends. In short, I would have a better time. Anyone can see that.

Now here's the big question: Where are the Maseratis of hi-fi? Where are the products whose performance and craftsmanship can be appreciated by virtually anyone? Where are the products that are so staggeringly well-designed and well-built that to say "I need it" seems almost reasonable?

Hmmmm... My own very short list would include the Linn Sondek CD12 CD player, the Audio Note Ongaku amplifier, and maybe one or two other things. But what characterizes those sorts of products — and the reason I like them and covet them — is that they play music better than the things I already have. Musical ability is different from deep bass or holographic imaging or the other sorts of things that can impress almost anyone just a few seconds into the first song. Music is easy to miss for the listener who thinks his job is to concentrate on the sound.

That Maserati goes faster, handles better, stops more efficiently, looks nicer, and in general does a superior job of attracting young women as compared with more affordable automobiles — and it does all that to a degree that is not subtle or difficult to appreciate. You don't have to think, and, just as important, you don't have to work at *not* thinking: You just drive and wave and smile at the people in the next lane.

This is why, when it comes to home audio, people are satisfied with what they have. Most people think it would be hard to go back to their Ford Escorts and Honda Accords after driving something like that Maserati Spyder Corso — and I'm sure they're right. But most people don't feel the same way about the difference between a world-class hi-fi and a Sony Walkman, and that's the problem. In a world where overtly bad *sound* has mostly been banished, selling hi-fi is tough, because what we're down to now is selling *music* — and no one seems to know how.

No bad cartridges!

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter how many Maseratis I have, because as far as hi-fi is concerned, I'm more interested in things that are a little lower on the price ladder — not because I'm altruistic (although I am), but because 17 years of writing about audio have left me believing that most ultra-expensive turntables, amps, speakers, and even cables are junk. Even the ones that sound good are usually incapable of doing what I expect from a hi-fi: emit a string of notes and beats convincing enough that I can mistake it for music.

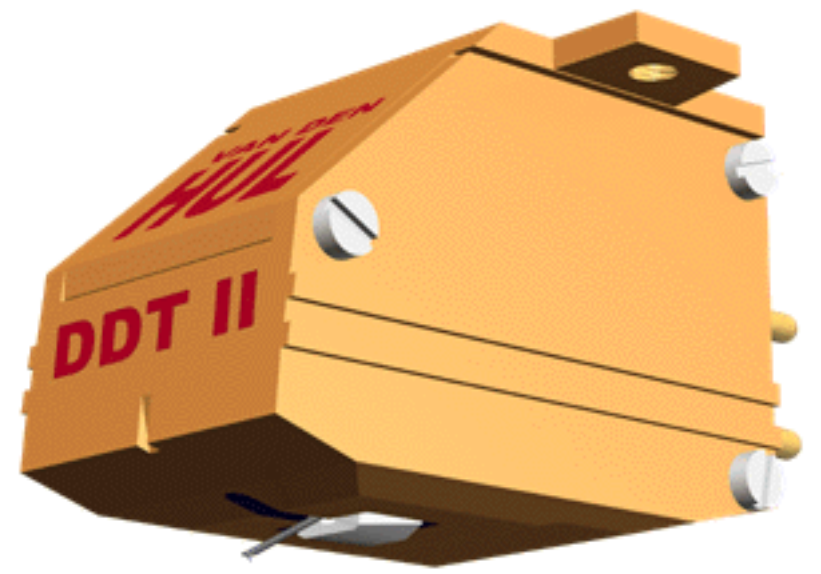
Notice that I left phono cartridges off that list. Although they all sound a little different from one another, I like most of the cartridges I hear these days, even the very expensive ones.

Why are there no truly awful ultra-high-end phono cartridges, while there are scads of unlistenable megabuck amps? Because a cartridge, by its nature, *must* be made small and simple: The poor thing has to fit at the end of a tonearm, and it can't weigh much more than 10gm — meaning there's no room for designer parts or a laser-etched faceplate or electrical connectors that were intended for a nuclear-powered MIG-welder. Thus, in the constrained world of phono-pickup design, money can either go toward something worthwhile (silver wire, radical stylus tip, hand-tuning, etc.) or toward nothing at all. Forgive my cynicism, but I'd rather see \$9000 of a \$10,000 product go straight into its designer's pocket: There, at least, it can do no harm to the product itself.

In 1975, I spent \$45 bucks on a phono cartridge for my entry-level Thorens turntable. It was an Audio-Technica AT-something. It was purple, and it had a Shibata stylus profile, which impressed me. Using the financial model described above, something of similar quality should cost in the neighborhood of \$117 today. But notwithstanding my Lollardy views, there aren't any \$117 phono cartridges out there that would satisfy me. I've come to think of almost any phono cartridge that sells for less than \$1000 as "affordable" — this from the owner of a rusty Saab with a Greenpeace sticker. God help me.

Today, the \$900 van den Hul DDT-II Special is my idea of a great affordable phono cartridge (footnote 1).

First, let's get the model designation out of the way: If it were up to me, I would never name a phono cartridge after an insecticide, let alone one that has been banned in all civilized nations, even the US, for being more or less an everythingcide. Then again, I wouldn't have included "Gritty" in my company name if I sold record cleaners, or the word "broken" in the name of my high-end amplifier company — so perhaps my opinion on the subject carries less weight than I think.



As it turns out, DDT stands for "depth, detail, and timbre"; "II" signifies a revision or refinement; and "Special" means it's, well, special. I've never heard a DDT-I, but I'm here to tell you that the DDT-II is special indeed, and a damn good buy to boot.

This is a medium-output (0.65 mV) moving-coil cartridge with silver coils, a boron cantilever, and, of course, the famous van den Hul line-contact stylus profile. The threaded body makes for easy, nutless installation (Naim Aro owners will be pleased to know that the vdH's stylus-to-mounting-hole distance is correct for that arm), and the medium-to-medium/high compliance suggests compatibility with a variety of good tonearms. Its maker, Dutch audio-writer-turned-engineer A. J. van den Hul, says a load impedance ranging between 100 ohms and 47k ohms is okay, 200 ohms being optimal. I use a step-up transformer for phono gain, which changes the game somewhat and results in those numbers being less than directly applicable. In any event, I heard no shortcomings that I would relate to problems of electrical damping or other issues *du load*.

I heard no real shortcomings at all. The DDT-II is bettered only inasmuch as certain more expensive cartridges can be counted on to provide *more music* — but that was it. The vdH is richly but realistically textured and colorful, and its stylus is supremely quiet in the groove, even more so than the last vdH cartridge I heard, some four years ago.

The DDT-II is also a very modern-sounding cartridge. There was a time when I might have followed that with "for better and for worse," but lately, and notwithstanding my abiding fondness for the sounds of some old things, modern cartridges mostly just sound better to me. The old Supex 900 Super is a great cartridge, with its warm, textured midrange and enormous bass. But, like most moving-coil cartridges of its time, it also has a treble peak that imbues vocal sibilants and hi-hat cymbals with unnatural tizz — and which stands out from the rest of the range like a sore thumb. Modern MCs, like the vdH DDT-II Special, have much less of a peak, and their overall sound is so open and explicit and clear that top-end peaks, if any, seem less obtrusive.

The vdH surprised me by being wonderfully dynamic. I used to think that the only way to make my records sound dramatic and involving was to use a good old-fashioned low-compliance cartridge in a big, massive tonearm: High-compliance cartridges, I thought, were capable of sounding supple and pretty, but not much else. I now realize that that point of view is similar to that of motoring enthusiasts who think that only a front-engine/rear-wheel-drive car can exhibit the kind of neutral and/or predictable handling that makes for fun driving. Both are opinions that might have had some legitimacy 20 or even 10 years ago, but we've since come further than that. The van den Hul DDT-II Special is like a really good Audi: I can't imagine the person it wouldn't please.

It even makes as much bass as my Supex, albeit with a great deal more in the way of control. On Leonard Cohen's "Who By Fire," for instance (from the lighthearted collection *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*), the beautifully recorded electric bass has superb attack, followed by a rich sustain and realistic die-away. This is no wimpy cartridge, even if it *does* track really well!

Yesterday, I used the vdH to listen to: Elgar's *In the South*, with Barenboim and the LPO (horrid recording, surprisingly good performance); Elgar's Symphony 1, with Barbirolli and the Philharmonia; Elgar's Symphony 2, with Barbirolli and the Hallé; part of Elgar's Symphony 2 with Boult and the LPO; Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, with Schwarzkopf, Szell, and the Berlin RSO; and Purcell's *Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary*, with John Eliot Gardiner. (It's been raining here — can you tell?) They all sounded so moving and memorable that I'm going to keep the van den Hul DDT-II Special in my system for one more day and play every one of them again this afternoon. I can think of no higher praise for a phono cartridge, especially an "affordable" one such as this.

Footnote 1: Manufactured by A.J. van den Hul B.V., Holland ; Serial number of unit reviewed: 11826.

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