

# Seven questions to A.J. van den Hul

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## Question 1: *Could you briefly introduce yourself to our readers?*

I am a subject collector but at this moment this does not tell you a lot. Therefore some extra explanations first:

Born in 1937 just before the second world war, which my father was strongly involved with, I grew up with a lot of electronic parts where no-one gave me an explanation about.

My father was a collector of tubes and equipment, so there was enough to see and to do, and also to damage.

When the war was over my father returned from a German prison camp, but he was so ill that there was no possibility for him to tell me about all that was stored on our attic. He died in the beginning of 1948, and I was left alone with what, for that time, for certain was a fine collection of parts: The first valves made and also the first receivers ever built with those valves; Big capacitors and, certainly for today's standards, big tuning and coupling coils; And of course humming power supplies.

A lot of things I took apart. At present this seems to be a very big pity..... It had its value though, even at that time. The positive side is that I got the feeling. And that is the same as a disease you never get away from anymore.

As a high school student I had my own pocket receiver and also my own medium-wave transmitter to broadcast the solutions for the schoolwork after school time with music played on my own built turntable.

At that time I had just 78 rpm. records. All kinds of jazz and classical music mingled in the same program. Discjockeys still had to be invented at that time.....

Also at the school sport games, amplification was in my hands:

You learn a lot in a short time about acoustics in the open field; 600 Ohm lines and microphones, hum and "in the open air" reproduction.

After having finished high school I visited the Technical University Delft and studied electronics and physics.

Specialisation: measuring techniques.

That was just what had failed me when I was the young boy with all the old equipment.

Then, not being happy with all the technology in my life, I took a first job as a physics teacher on a high school, and later on a technical high school. Why?

A return to sources is what happens in everyone's life.

When a job is not done well in someone's life, one makes a return and does it again trying to do better; A marriage, bringing up children, friendships, a company; There are many examples.

This teaching job took me 13 years before I realised that I was trying to repair the mental problems with teaching I had when I was young. When I realised this, my job came vacant and I started a new life; Real life this time.

During the years I was teaching, my interest in audio was so intense that I became a journalist.

Teaching students learns you to explain difficult items with simple words. That is the same with journalism.

Writing articles very often involves visits around the world. And that is a very interesting experience; Other colours, people, landscapes, cultural expressions, art, music, hotels, foods, smells and wild forests.

You discover that life is much more than just technology. This is something that also makes music more interesting.

By being far away from your own roots of life, it is possible to understand the human behaviour better, humans attitudes and aims. This also builds more respect for other races and other ways of social living. Suddenly music also appears to be part of the way how humans express their feelings.

We in the west are for certain object collectors, the more objects we have, the more happy we are. Having a lot of objects means we are successful.

But in other cultural systems, like I saw in the far-east, you observe that a successful life is more socially orientated. Not the number of objects, but the number of social relations counts there; The number of subjects to talk about; The feeling to belong to a family or a stable social system.

Facts completely ignored in our European society with its capitalistic approach of life.

With these facts our mathematical way of thinking, like we read figures from a measuring instrument, can be forgotten; A lot of unknown facts related to family or parents already deceased become much more important.

So dear readers, I am a subject collector now.

Having stated this at the beginning of this article it did not mean much to you. Now it is clear after some hundred lines of

typing.

### **Question 2: *Why have you chosen to enter the hi-fi industry?***

Partly for historical reasons as explained, and also it was my hobby.

But as soon as a hobby gets a profession, you have to look for another hobby.

hi-fi is a good combination of emotional experience and technology. The emotional experience in this case is music as a direct approach to the human mind. Music is a language understood by many more people than those reachable by plain language. Normal languages are constrained to territories. The music is able to pass the borders and reaches the whole world.

Bach is not just appreciated by German speaking people because German was Bach's language.

For certain his strict style of composing tells something about the attitude of the composer, about the people of his time, and in some way about the attitude of the actual inhabitants in the same territory. But music means much more.

It also means spacious experience, something we certainly need in this overcrowded world.

Music is the language that ignores political systems, cultural styles or language borders.

It combines the good things in the human mind.

In music we express our deepest feelings. In making music, people are more honest than in many other jobs. We show our real attitude.

To share this, I have chosen for the hi-fi industry. Not for the industry itself. But for the emotions being able to be supported by the hi-fi; A medium which language is the music.

### **Question 3: *Which composer or player do you like most?***

As said before, Mr. Johan Sebastian Bach is one of my most favourite composers. It is his (seemingly) mathematical style but in the mean time very harmonious composing that attracts me.

For another reason Mozart is also a composer that I stop my work for.

Mahler, because of his very complex and in the same time beautiful orchestrations. The unexpected and therefore most attractive sounds he knows to create.

Also Russian composers like Shostacovich, Prokofiev and Mussorgsky are creators of what I like: personality.

From the Italian composers I do appreciate Scarlatti and Vivaldi very much. Both have the elegance and ability to express feelings by rhythm and tonal balance.

And of course Mr. Verdi.

My favourite players are Mr. Glenn Gould and Mr. Horowitz. But they are soloists. Solo music performance is much more an art than playing in a big orchestra.

The Russian violin player Gideon Kremer is also one of my favourite musicians.

Especially the violin can express very well what you feel and think. The feeling representing the emotional part of life and the thinking representing the rational part.

Both should be in balance. Often people get mad because one of the two is the master of the other.

### **Question 4: *What are the relations between technique and emotion or, if you prefer, between technical measurements and listening tests during the design of products?***

At this moment I am listening to the 23 sonatas of Scarlatti performed by Anthony di Bonaventura. A real festival music and love for the profession.

Technique is not only something technical, it is also the art of the profession [The master in handling his program material (Glenn Gould or Mr. Horowitz)] and the way you are able to understand the music and enjoy it.

But technique is also the real technical part of the job; The electronics in the amplifier and the mechanical properties of a loudspeaker e.g..

When the technique is not done well, the attempt to enjoy the emotional qualities is getting more difficult. So the better the technician did his job, the easier the emotional involvement. But there is only an emotional relation when you have built up one. People without emotion can not enjoy music to its deepest values.

When you have never cried in your life before your father died, you are not able to cry when he has just passed away.

It is the same when you make a holiday trip to another country, speaking the language makes it much more fun to go there and to do things. There is an exchange of values.

So it is not just the technique.

Like it is to be on a desert island with a small portable radio. Technology is poor but the music is great. Why?

Left alone and back again to the roots of life, makes you as the listener more sensitive to the message of the music of Scarlatti, even where the distortion is high and the frequency response is very limited.

Technical measurements are necessary to improve the sonic quality. Like an architect uses his instruments on the construction site to measure the real figures of distance and size.

Afterwards no one asks about distances and everyone enjoys the construction and the colours or colour combinations.

But still the architect has to give the RAL colour numbers to the painter before the result is there.

**Question 5: *When designing a product, which are your priorities and what place has the manual aspect in building your cartridges?***

A product that is designed here is worth to live with myself.

My own emotional evaluation is my standard. And it works out that this is also the case for many other music lovers. This is not a happy coincidence, but the result of many years intensive listening, training of the ears, going to concerts, studying music and finding what is a good quality.

Setting yourself standards. Knowing what technology can do with equipment and reproduction.

It also involves communication with other people.

Setting standards in the relations. Let others know what you feel and think (emotion and objectivity).

Just in setting the balance between the two, it produces the harmony that gives you the enjoyment of both: emotion and technology.

Building cartridges is design work with a few items is a small object. It asks more skill to balance between the two different worlds. Therefore I like this the most.

The struggle with properties and qualities on one side (the technology) and the sonic (emotional) result on the other side.

**Question 6: *What are the differences between big companies, like Japanese giants and small or medium companies like yours, or speaking from our readers position, which are the advantages in buying your products?***

This is a complex question that doesn't have a simple answer.

Big companies have the possibility to buy knowledge or people with knowledge. Also, they have collected a lot of knowledge by experience and experiments.

But what I observe with big companies is that the profit figures always are very important. With them, overtime always costs extra and the personal involvement of the workers is always restricted to 5 PM.

That is different with smaller companies. Like typing this story for your magazine. A director of a big company does not show his emotions so easily when he puts something on paper himself; It is controlled by the public relations department, or the image builder in the company. Generally the director is too occupied with his function's obligations.

Does this director really know everything about his company? Does he perform the final testing of products himself? Is he able to overlook the symbiosis of technology and emotional values? Does he ever produce something himself in the late evening hours and listens to it half the night because he likes his new products so much?

I am about sure that the answer on all these questions is a strong: No.

It is the same difference you will find between the products of a big food company and those of that little restaurant around the corner; It is there that you go when you like to celebrate something; You don't have a big family ceremony after 25 years of marriage or when your new baby has born with just canned food...

But there is one problem for the small manufacturer:

The big companies move away from the simple things in the direction of controlled technology. It means that their technical advancement and possibilities are growing bigger and bigger. This for certain when the big industries set new standards together.

But for small companies there are always side corners where creativity and skill can be combined to produce excellent products.

Products available on each corner of the street having a cosmetic look designed to satisfy everyone (since the quantities sold must meet certain goals) are not really favoured by those with a special taste.

Let me do the job for this limited group; The big-mass-market can be supported by the big-mass companies indifferently whether they are situated in Japan or Europe.

Small production series don't pay for the costs in big companies; The overhead is too big; Too many directors and PR managers.

In small companies such cost consuming functions don't exist.

Compared to the small ones, the big companies are also quality aware; their balance between quality and quantity however is different. The small companies more directed towards high quality at quantities.

Like big companies we (van den Hul B.V.) however do have export to a large number of countries (currently 57); And even very big companies buy my products.

Being the owner and only designer in my company, the number of skills I have to combine are many. As long as you are able to do that, the results are favoured by all consumers;

This is much like the case with the cook in the small restaurant around the corner...

**Question 7: *To close our brief meeting, do you have a special advice to give to our readers in order to choose the right hi-fi system?***

It is more important to first choose the right hi-fi dealer. The right system automatically follows later.

A proper hi-fi dealer demonstrates in a normal living situation and not an artificial studio. He is a regular concert visitor and knows about composers, about masterworks of art and about emotion. He demonstrates sound material involving

small groups of musicians rather than big impressive orchestras. Both CD and vinyl records must be used. His loudspeakers should not look like a massive sound-wall but, regarding the demonstration you as a client come for, are selected on your request and are put on good stands. Don't go on a Saturday to make your choice. Make an appointment and let your dealer know in advance what you want. Listen to his advise; When for several reasons you have chosen him as your dealer, trust the man; He is the expert and you like to learn from him. Don't forget to listen for spacious reproduction. The concert hall and the stage with the concert piano must be there again. Listen for the depth in the music, not just for left or right. With good sound reproduction the sound should come from around the loudspeaker; The loudspeaker must disappear completely; Just the music should be there. Anything more is everything too much; After all, you visit the dealer to receive advice on a good hi-fi set which is able to correctly reproduce all that has been done in the recording. Your dealer should know the good recordings from the "effect disks". The best evidence of good reproduction is when you get goose bumps when you listen to the Verdi or Mascanji chorus, the big chorus in the Mattheus passion from Bach or just a solo piece played on hobo in the same Mattheus.

***I like to wish you many happy hours in your life together with good music.***

**Signed: A.J. van den Hul**

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