

Van den Hul BLACK BEAUTY SP-X

By Martin Colloms



Van den Hul's long lived 'skeleton' cartridge, the Grasshopper, has evolved over the years to produce several versions, including hand-built models to suit individual customers. In one sense, the Black Beauty SP-X can be regarded as a special version of the Grasshopper. But while they certainly have a lot in common, the SP-X also incorporates many new features.

Both models use an open structure founded on an lightweight base constructed from high tensile polycarbonate resin - clear in the case of the Grasshopper and appropriately enough, self-pigmented gloss black for the SP-X.

The Grasshopper has a 'long build' with a stylus overhang well beyond the standard (for the NAIM ARO I have drilled additional holes to allow rotation of the Grasshopper to reach the correct offset angle). The Black Beauty has two pairs of mounting holes and a shorter build resulting in a near standard stylus overhang. For particular enthusiasts, a headshell can be configured to use all four fixing holes to give greater 'lock' to the arm e.g. the Graham, but this adds additional mass thanks to a second pair of stainless steel socket head bolts. Standard two-hole Black Beauty cartridges are also available.

There is a certain aura of secrecy surrounding the detailed differences between the Grasshopper Black Beauty SP-X and the Grasshopper IV GLA, but the briefing sheet indicates an improved magnetic layout for the former, including construction details and the properties of the magnetic circuit. The IV GLA uses Alnico magnets and a single rear pole-piece while a doubled-up rear plate is evident for the SP-X, and there's some speculation that use has been made of samarium cobalt magnets.

Under the lens, the two cartridges appear to use the same enamelled gold wire but the armature of the SP-X is in a cross shape with the coil windings on the spokes while the IV GLA has a square section plate, with double windings crossing over its surface. Both armatures are of soft iron, with a fine grained magnetic domains for improved low level resolution. The Black Beauty has a shorter cantilever, is still made of fine 0.3mm diameter crystal boron, with a revised composite damper for the Black Beauty, both in geometry and structure.

The top van den Hul line contact stylus is fitted - the VDH-1S - with 'effective' 2x85 micron fine-line tracing radii, grain-orientated and highly polished. A 3,000 hour service life is suggested by vdH. A frequency range of 5Hz to 65kHz is quoted without limits for the cartridge. The range below 20Hz is largely a function of the match to the tone arm while the upper limit will be partly loading and equalisation dependent.

The overall weight is 8.5g, vertical tracking angle is 22 degrees and the load impedance can be from 200 ohms to 47k ohms according to taste. The coil is fairly low impedance at about 21 ohms. With the exposed construction, great care must be taken when installing and using these skeleton cartridges and I advise adding them to your all risks insurance policy just in case! Pricing at present is similar to the Grasshopper IV GLA.

SOUND QUALITY

As this cartridge ran in, I was reminded of the Clearaudio designs though I judged the Black Beauty to be a less 'cool' than the Clearaudio's Insider. The Black Beauty almost bisected the balance region between the Grasshopper and the upper-ranked Clearaudios. In the groove the Black Beauty also had a higher amplitude arm-coupled resonance than a Clearaudio but had similarly low-loss damping making for a touch of nervousness, a tendency to hop when planted on the disc unless extra care is taken.

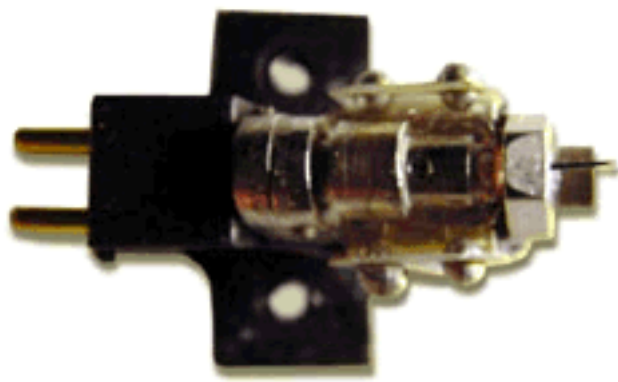
Likewise, moderate footfall had a greater impact on stylus groove contact that it did on either a Grasshopper or the Koetsu, notwithstanding the inherently good stability of the NAIM ARO arm used. This was installed in a LINN LP12 with Lingo and Armageddon power units, an ARC Reference Phono.

Unmistakably the Black Beauty output was 'high end' in the accepted sense of the phrase. Qualifications were near absolute for its sound stage and resolution. Output was high, just a dB or so below the Grasshopper itself, and high enough to drive the lower sensitivity MM input of the Audio Research Reference Phono equaliser which was mainly used for the test.

Relatively uncritical of loading, I settled on 1,000 ohms loading for the Black Beauty. As top quality moving coils go, the Black Beauty is highly refined, most seamless and well integrated from low bass to high treble, very low in audible distortion. At a modest 1.4 to 1.5g downforce, it proved to be a secure tracker and I had no complaints in this department using a wide range of LPs.

Out of the box, the Black Beauty sounded a touch 'raw' in the upper treble, but this was soon ameliorated with use, resolving to a sense of enhanced air and liveliness. Tonally, massed strings showed more 'sheen' and a touch less 'rosin' and 'woody' character, but did not stray to a point where it was felt to be coloured by this touch of character. Sibilants were mildly emphasised but were not felt to be slurred or distorted unless the track was already well worn.





At first sound stage presentation was slightly confusing. The mildly lightened tonal balance suggested that it might sound forward but in fact, the main central image was a little distant, perhaps due to some unexpected combination of tonal balance, low coloration and the subjective direct sound to reverberant ratio. Depth and the recovery of low level ambience was particularly good with this design.

Definition approached that of the Clearaudio Reference, which is a very high standard indeed, a feature maintained throughout the frequency range. Upper range transients were illuminated particularly well and the whole presentation was

considered lively and upbeat.

Unquestionably a very fine sound with its own balance of virtues, I was in the end led back to using the Grasshopper IV GLA in my system. It gave a grander sound, with more subtle expression and a greater sense of dynamic throughout the audible range. It sounded more confident, more stable and actually gave somewhat better rhythm than the Black Beauty but the differences are subtle and for some will be a matter of taste.

CONCLUSION

The Black Beauty version of the grasshopper line is undeniably a very fine performer and ranks with the world's finest, certainly belonging to the select range of van den Hul's audiophile creations. In fact, the Black Beauty SP-X exemplifies A. J.'s ability to redefine the balance of parameters which together define a great moving-coil pick-up cartridge. Its clarity, pure yet open treble, and excellent low level detail resolution stand out in a set of sonic virtues which are essential to the familiar and highly respected Grasshopper standard. But to get the very best of the Black Beauty, I think an arm with still less mass than the ARO would be worthwhile.

While I still marginally prefer the Grasshopper IV GLA I've no hesitation in approving the Black Beauty SP-X which has some special qualities that may relate better to your system and taste.

Martin Colloms

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