

# van den Hul Condor Gold phono cartridge

from: **Analog Corner**

by: Michael Fremer

The Condor Gold is part of a line of Grasshopper cartridges crossbred from the Frog and Colibri lines. As is A.J. van den Hul's habit, it's available custom-built for the end user's particular needs, within each of four basic models with outputs that range from 0.25 to 0.55mV. Within each model are yet more variations that I won't get into here for fear of putting you to sleep.

I received a Grasshopper Condor Gold XGP-MO. Decrypted, those last five initials stand for Cross (X)-shaped modulator, matched crystal Gold coil wire, Plastic mounting platform, and Medium Output (0.35mV). The Condor is a "nude" design, which means it has less mass and that its various parts resonate less, but the long, exposed cantilever increases the odds of disaster: cleaning persons with Swiffers, keep your distance!

A strong magnet allows the design to jettison the front pole piece, which is why the coils and former are so easily seen. All versions use vdH's 1S stylus, a line-contact design measuring 2 by 85 micrometer. (A.J. van den Hul invented and holds the patent on the line-contact stylus.) More information on the cartridge can

be found on vdH's website, so I'll spare you the excruciating details of how I set up the cartridge and of its interface with my phono preamp. I will tell you that it's a light tracker designed for tonearms of 12-20gm mass, and that its recommended tracking force is 1.35-1.5gm. I liked it best at 1.4gm on Immedia's RPM-2 unipivot tonearm.

Out of the box, the Condor Gold was not at all like the ultra-light, ultra-low-output vdH Colibri, which I reviewed in the August 2000 *Stereophile* (Vol.23 No.8). (The Colibri's output was a minuscule 0.175mV at 5cm/s modulation velocity - or, by the more commonly used standard of the JVC test record, an even tinier 0.1mV! The Condor erased my aural memory of the Colibri's razor-sharp transients with an immediately addictive top-to-bottom smoothness with no sense of loss of transient detail, overall resolution, or spaciousness. In fact, the Condor's ability to re-create a natural acoustic space was, in my experience, second to none. Usually it takes some brightness to generate space, but the 'Hopper Condor did it while remaining almost mellow - a rare feat. Your favorite Carnegie Hall concert recordings will leave you semi-paralyzed with awe, especially if you've actually been to Carnegie.

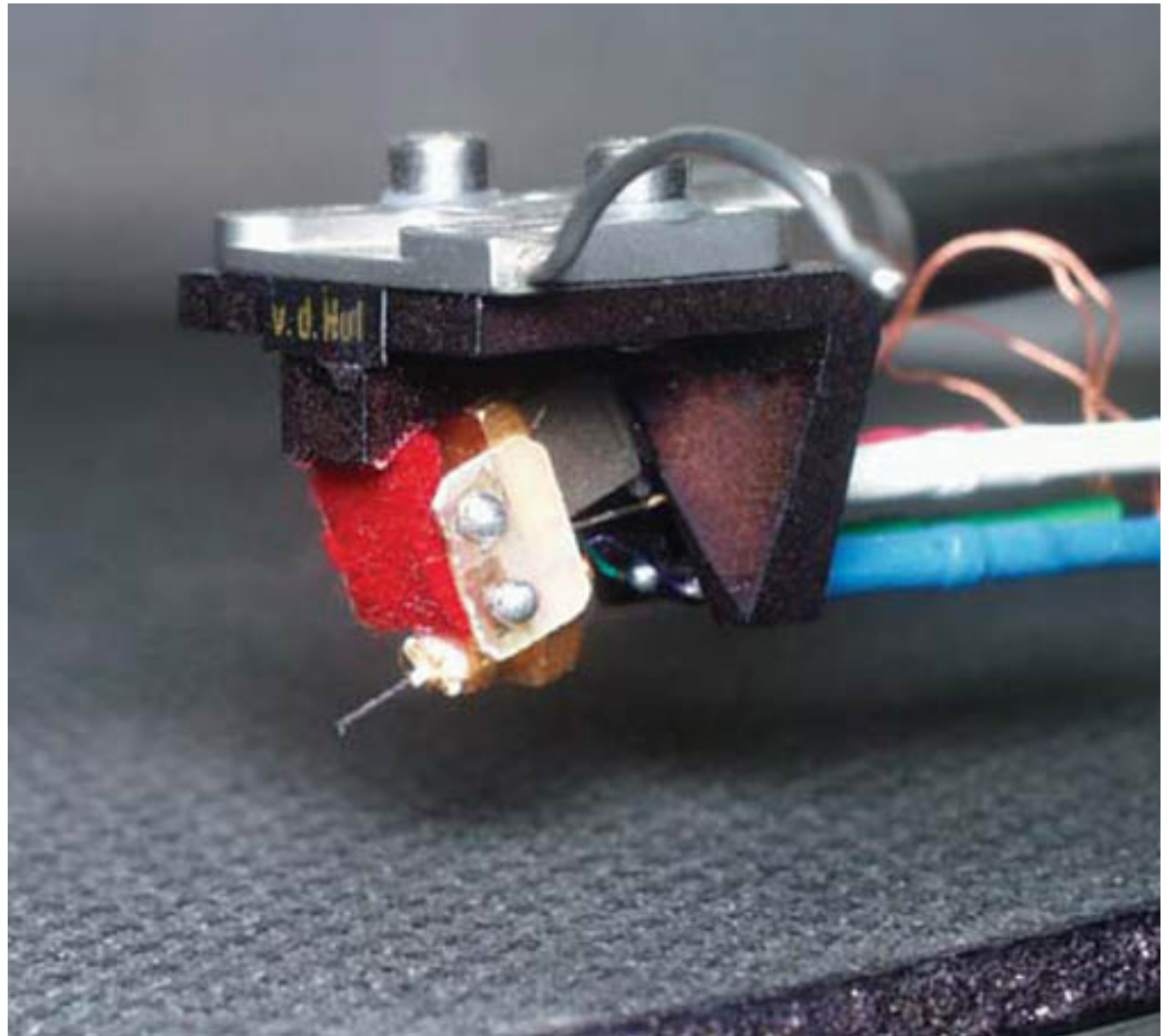
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The Colibri I reviewed was a jawdropper, but hyper-real compared to live music. The Condor's tonal balance was far more natural, striking just the right balance of detail, air, transient snap, and harmonic development. Wood sounded like *wood*. Strings had that special silky yet piercingly focused translucence you hear live. Acoustic bass was lithely, richly delineated, with a nice balance of string and acoustic body.

The Condor's spatial presentation was remarkably three-dimensional, in terms of both image specificity and soundstaging. Individual images were portrayed with satisfying and convincing solidity, weight, and dimensionality, with no hint of artificiality or mechanical aftertaste. The definition of edges was just right: image boundaries were not overdefined, which can lead to "etchiness," nor were they softened and obscured, which often leads to sonic boredom and an inability to clearly "see" the aural picture. If the Condor erred in any direction, it was toward smoothness, but only slightly. That tendency was more than easily compensated for by its superb resolution, ultraquiet backgrounds, and a soothing, calming presentation that was still convincingly realistic.

I pulled out an original RCA Living Stereo LP of Artur Schnabel, Fritz Reiner, and the Chicago Symphony's steroidally dramatic performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto 2 (RCA LSC-2068). I'd had a reality check at Avery Fisher Hall only the night before, and the Condor's recorded presentation was remarkably consistent with what I heard then. "Live" usually sounds far darker and softer than most recorded presentations, even from the center of row 20, where I'm fortunate enough to sit. The Condor offered the "live" kind of honest tonal balance - neither hyper to the point of "bright" nor soft to the point of "overripe."

More important than the sonic particulars was the *feeling* imparted by the recorded presentation with the Condor. The music *felt* like what live acoustic music feels like: a combination of presence and detail, plus a liquid ease that's difficult



van den Hul's new Condor - Photo: Michael Fremer

for recordings to achieve. Still, as A.J. van den Hul says on his website, the XGP-MO version of the Grasshopper Condor Gold is "most suitable for classical music" and, by extension, acoustic jazz and folk, all three of which it delivered with almost hypnotic grace and flow. The Condor's suppression of vinyl surface noise was also notable.

More raucous but extremely well-recorded music, such as the Clash's *London Calling* (UK pressing), revealed the Condor Gold XGP-MO's somewhat polite and gentlemanly nature, but with the loss of some needed grit. No big surprise - it's how A.J. van den Hul called it, *and* I was running the cartridge wide open into 47k ohms, not with the suggested "ideal" loading of 200 ohms. Still, depending on the rest of your system - if it's already soft, this cartridge might take it under the edge - the Condor, as configured, may still be an ideal all-around choice. And if it isn't, vdH can tailor it to your tastes and needs.

I loved the van den Hul Grasshopper Condor Gold XGP-MO for all sorts of music. With my double-tonearm setup and the multiple-input Manley Steelhead phono preamp, I can have a tougher customer ready to rock with the rotation of a dial.

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