

First-class flyer

van den Hul works cartridge magic by turning a Frog into a Condor

Van den Hul takes an unusual approach to building cartridges. While it offers a range of models, only the more affordable of them are 'off-the-peg' items and all the open-bodied designs can be tailor made to the customer's requirements. A variety of different parameters in the cartridge's construction can be varied so that it will match the end user's tonearm, phono stage and listening tastes. For example, vdH can make high or low compliance suspensions, though the former is preferable because it allows lower tracking weight and thus is more vinyl friendly. A typical tracking force range is 1.35 to 1.5 grams, which is lighter than most moving coils, which run at around two grams.

You can also specify the type of coil wire, which can be had in copper, silver, gold and even platinum. This, combined with variations in the amount of turns on vdH's distinctive cross-shaped coil former, gives differing levels of output to suit specific phono stages. So when you listen to a Condor, you're really listening to a moving target; if you want a cartridge with a more spacious sound or one that delivers serious bottom end grunt, then a Condor can be built that way.

The Condor is the latest in a prestigious range of vulnerable looking, open-bodied designs from vdH that started with the legendary Grasshopper in the eighties. It is a hybrid of two current designs - the £1,200 Frog and the £2,800 Colibri. Like the latter, it has a single samarium cobalt magnet behind the coils, but it uses a Frog generator along with a vdH-I tip on a shorter boron cantilever, the whole moving mass being lower on the Condor. A little red patch of foam-backed velvet damps the cartridge and helps the Condor completely defeat needle talk - a very rare thing indeed.

SOUND QUALITY

We used the Condor XCM in an SME Model 20A turntable with Series V tonearm and plugged its 0.55mV output into a Tom Evans Groove phono stage. Given this Condor's optimum load impedance of 1 kOhm, the Groove's 100 Ohm is not an ideal match, but the result was better than with adjustable phono stages of lesser quality. In fact, the result was superb.

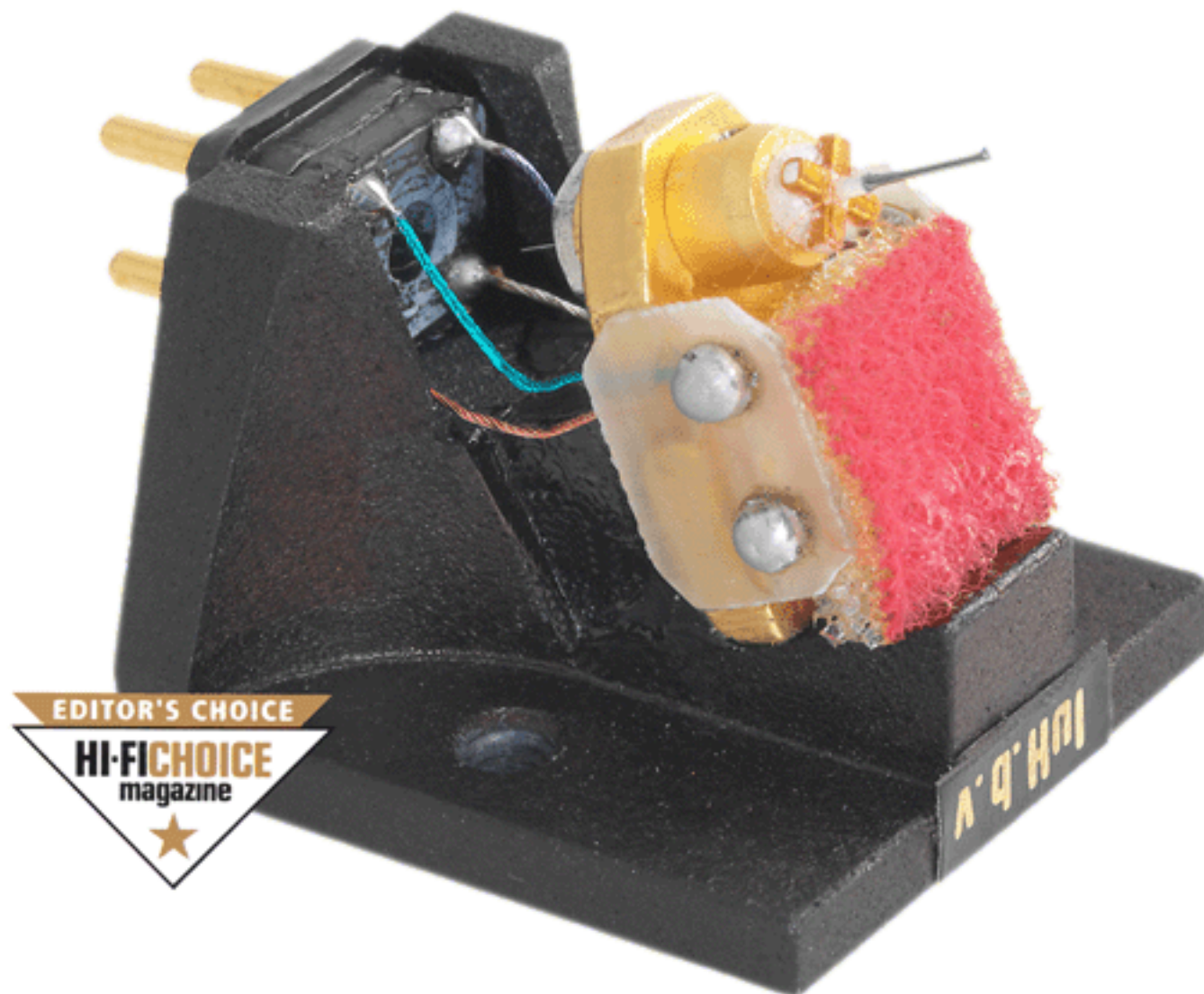
This cartridge produces three-dimensional stereo in a way that very few source components can - the voices and instruments that it extracts from vinyl have a presence and realism that is uncanny. On test, this meant that Tom Waits' gravelly tones on *Shore Leave* had more depth and shape to them, while the drumming had a power and transient attack that made for gripping entertainment. The Condor delivered electric guitar sounds that sliced into the void that was left when Waits himself fell silent, then the percussion joined in with a vivacity that beggared belief.

But *Swordfishtrombones* was not the only slab of vinyl that was invigorated so effectively; the shape of the notes from guitar and bass on Joni Mitchell's *Cotton Avenue* were likewise brought stunningly to life. Through the Condor they had a degree of articulation that is rare, yet without obstructing the great sense of timing. This is not a 'quick' (or for that matter 'slow') cartridge, but rather an evenly-paced one that appears to mirror the music precisely.

Denser material, such as live Mahavishnu Orchestra, benefits from the Condor's very decent underpinning in the bass department, along with its good dynamic contrast and excellent stage width. Factor in the high levels of detail retrieved and the Condor creates a rich sonic picture very effectively.

This XCM version of the Condor presents a good balance of spaciousness and dynamics, but if you'd prefer more of one than another, you can configure it that way. Then there are things like metal or plastic bodies to choose between, with plastic giving a generally softer sound than metal. But whichever flavour you prefer, this is a stunning cartridge that combines much of the Colibri's resolve with the Frog's energy. A potent force indeed for any vinyl fan. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT

sound >> 96%
features >> 92%
build >> 87%
value >> 86%

overall score >> 91%

^ PRO

Outstanding stereo imaging combined with killer dynamics, custom building service, silent mechanicals and no needle talk.

∨ CON

Highly vulnerable coil wires and cantilever. This much choice makes it hard to demonstrate effectively; your cartridge will reflect your taste, not your dealer's.

CONCLUSION

A stunning cartridge with stereo imaging, dynamics and detail resolution to die for. The customisation element means it will be perfect for your system, too. If your vinyl is sounding lacklustre, a prolonged Condor moment is what you need.

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