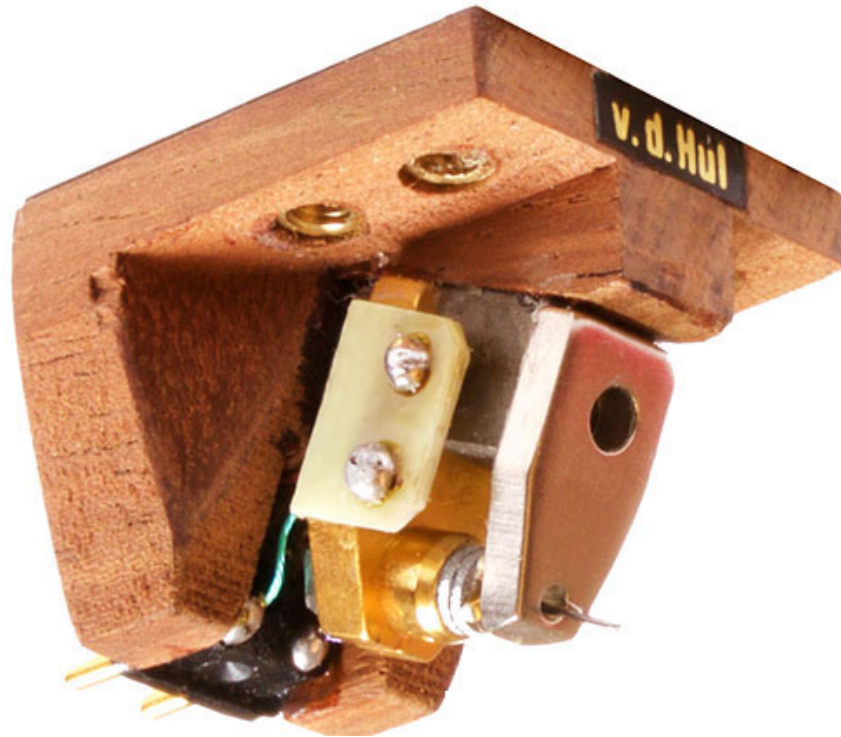


Review of VDH The Crimson Stradivarius by Tom Lyle, March 2017 on :

Enjoy the Music.com[®]

Van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius MC Phono Cartridge
A truly fantastic high-precision phono cartridge.



Perhaps it's a bit of love / hate thing? I have a love/hate relationship with phono cartridges. I assume I'm not the only audiophile who feels this way. As an audiophile, I love phono cartridges. The beautiful phono cartridge is an electro-mechanical device that converts the vibrational energy that it picks up from its stylus into an electrical signal – and this is where it all begins for lovers of vinyl playback. This signal is then amplified by our phono preamps, either external or built-in to a receiver, preamp, or integrated amp, and then sent to the power amplifier.

It is then converted, seemingly by magic, into music by our speakers. Sure, we all know that there are as many ways to store music. I have nothing against the digital methods that have come into being about 40 years ago, and quickly became not only audiophiles, but the general public's storage method of choice. But using a phono cartridge to extract the signal from our precious records has a special place in the hearts of many audiophiles, and you can count me as one of those analog playback loving audiophiles.

Then there is the hate. Phono cartridges can be very expensive. Sure, most of the components that comprise a high-end system are expensive.

In theory, a high-end component can last a lifetime in one's system. Not a phono cartridge. The phono cartridge has a fragile stylus and cantilever, and even if a cartridge is shown an appreciable amount of tender loving care, the stylus, and then eventually the cantilever will wear out. And then what?

It's back to the proverbial drawing board. Many phono cartridge manufacturers make a deal with their customers and give them a discount on a new phono cartridge to replace their worn or broken one. But still, we're talking about a cartridge that costs upwards of lots-of-money, so even a discounted replacement cartridge still cost lots-of-money. Some companies say that they can "re-tip" one's phono cartridge, that is, replace the cantilever and stylus with a new assembly. Regardless of what a cartridge manufacturer says, many just toss the worn or broken one in the scrap pile or if they can, salvage it for parts, and a brand-new unit is sent to the customer. But there are a few cartridge manufacturers that do re-tip the cartridge. The manufacturer that is featured in this review is one of them.

Some cartridge manufacturers that re-tip cartridges charge upwards of lots-of-money to re-tip a broken or otherwise worn out phono cartridge. Van den Hul is *not* one of them. I've used Van den Hul's re-tipping service when I was a repeat customer of the Lyra brand of fine phono cartridges. Yes, Van den Hul will re-tip cartridges of other makers than his own. I love Van den Hul. And by association, this is another reason why I love phono cartridges.

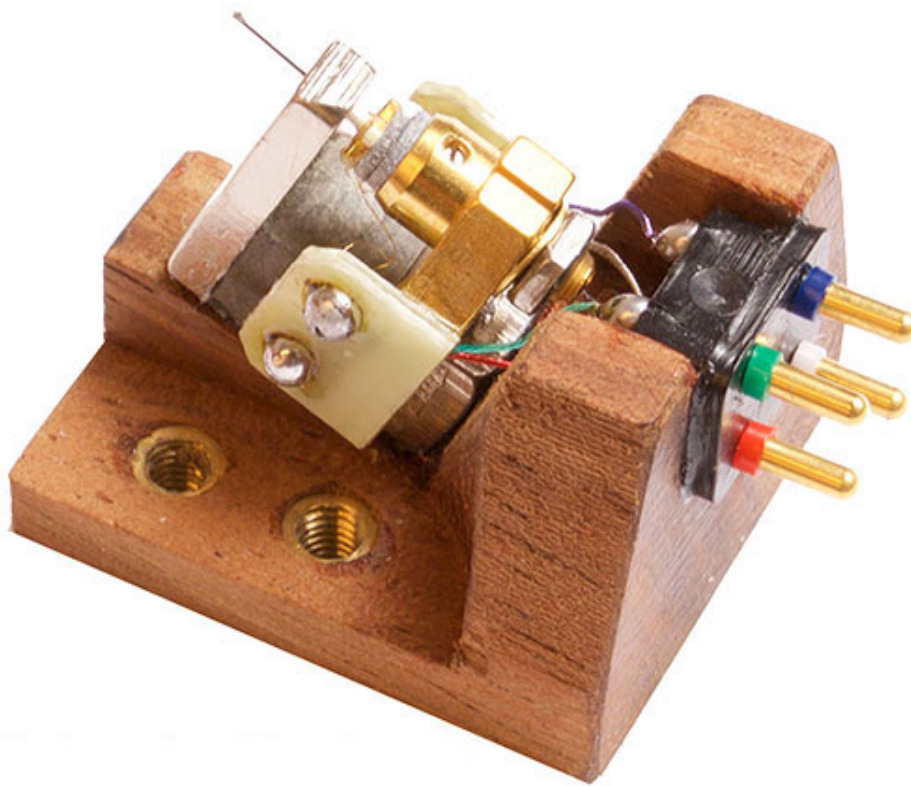
However, love is not easy. The fact is, cartridges do wear out, and styli and cantilevers do get broken, and so these cartridges must be replaced or re-tipped. I've used the circumstance of cartridges needing to be occasionally replaced as one of my excuses to upgrade. Currently, this upgrading has brought me to use cartridges in the five to ten-thousand-dollar range. With the Van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius cartridge costing \$4995, that places it at the very bottom of the price range I've been using for the last few years.

With Van den Hul charging only around \$500 to rebuild the cartridge if the unfortunate happens and it breaks, or the stylus and/or cantilever simply wear out after a few years, this makes buying a Van den Hul very appealing – if one only considers the financial aspect of the purchase. Of course, this is all for naught if the Van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius doesn't measure up sound-quality wise. But it does. Big time.

Special

The hand-built Van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius is made with a cross-grained carved Koa wood body, then coated with a "special" Stradivarius Formula lacquer that is the same formula as the one that was used on Stradivarius violins, hence the name of the cartridge. A. J. Van den Hul calls it his crossbreed between his Canary and The Condor cartridges.

The Stradivarius has an output of .9mV, which is quite a high output for a moving coil cartridge that is in the low-output category. It is wound with 24-Karat gold coils, and uses a Samarium-Cobalt magnet. Van den Hul claims that its channel separation is excellent (he's measured it at greater than 36/30dB), and has "superb" tracking ability. He also said that the reason he designed, and then built, and now markets the Stradivarius is because he received many requests to develop a cartridge for a lower price than his Colibri model. He goes on to say that his Crimson line, which includes the Stradivarius, is "probably one of the cartridges with the best value for the money available". As I mentioned, it is completely hand-built by A. J. Van den Hul, and then if requested he'll perform a free 200-hour service checkup for original owners of the cartridge.



Impressive

Yes, it is nice that the Crimson Stradivarius has a Koa wood body, a congenial output of .9mV, and other specs that are quite impressive. Also persuasive is its price. Although it might seem like quite a bit of money to the uninitiated, it is hardly out-of-line when compared to others in its class, even when judged solely on its specifications. But its most important specification is how it sounds. The Stradivarius sounds, in a word, marvelous. Of course it will take more than one word to describe the sound of the Van den Hul Stradivarius phono cartridge. In my listening tests, one of the first things that I noticed is how quiet this cartridge is.

I'm not referring to its tracking ability (though its tracking ability is very, very good) but how quiet it is when there is no signal passing through it – when the cartridge, mounted on my Tri-Planar 6 tonearm, which is mounted on the arm-board of a Basis Debut V turntable, is still nestled on the tonearm rest.

Over the years, I've heard many rather expensive cartridges that produced all sorts of noises when idle – hiss, hum, crackles, etc. Yet in the reviews of these cartridges this noise is rarely mentioned. 60 cycle hum is the usual culprit. Perhaps it is rarely mentioned because this noise is at a very low level. But I've heard it, and it *is* there, and even very low level noise is enough to contribute to the overall sound of a phono cartridge. I've also discovered that the noise coming from these cartridges is very system dependent. But in *my* system, that is, when it is connected to either a Pass Labs XP-15 phono preamp, or the *über*-expensive Dan D'Agostino phono preamplifier (review coming soon) the Van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius was silent when idle.

There were instances when I had the volume control of the preamplifier or the **Dan D'Agostino MLife** integrated amp unjustifiably high, yet through the speakers came no sound. Zero.Zilch.Nix.Nyet.Nada. Zip. Zippo. OK, if I pressed my ears to the grille of one of the speakers I could hear a very slight hiss, no doubt since there were plenty of other components in the review system that could contribute to producing noise through the Sound Lab DynaStat hybrid electrostats, and later in the review period, the Sound Lab Majestic 545 full-range electrostatic speakers (review to come). Powering the speakers is the Pass Laboratories 350 Watt per channel X350.5 power amp, which puts out quite a bit of juice, and the **Mark Levinson No. 523 preamplifier** which has a high enough output that one would think that it contributed at least a little to the hiss. When I had the vacuum tube powered **McIntosh C2600 preamplifier** in the system there was a tad more noise, but not enough to be able to hear it from my listening position, that's for sure. My first impression of the Van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius' was a lasting one.

Fun

When it came to start playing records, that's when the fun began! Well, almost. First, I had to set-up this cartridge. Thankfully, the set-up and alignment of the Stradivarius was uneventful. The cartridge's cantilever is extended well past the front of the cartridge's body, so this makes alignment much easier than, say, the other cartridge I had on hand during this review, the Gold Note Tuscany. It has a cantilever that is very close to the center of the underside of the cartridge's body, which makes set-up much more challenging since it is blocked from view. The cantilever of the Stradivarius, on the other hand, is very easy to see when setting overhang, etc.

But, and this is important, it is much easier to accidentally brush against the cantilever and send it and stylus soaring into the great beyond. Once I was satisfied with the alignment of the Stradivarius, the arduous task of breaking-in the cartridge began.

Breaking-in the Stradivarius, or any phono cartridge for that matter, is not much fun. Many know of a component that was, and probably still is, manufactured to burn in phono cartridges. I've never used one, but it was described to me as a small box that has inputs for one's tonearm cables, which put out a strong signal to speed up a phono cartridge's burn-in time. Although there are likely others that own and use one, I've only heard of one audio equipment reviewer that uses one of these devices. If I remember right, the price of this burn-in device is expensive enough to keep it from being popular with consumers. Though I wish it became popular with phono cartridge manufacturers so they could ship to their customers (and me) pre-burned in phono cartridges! But, let's be realistic about this 1st World problem for a moment and consider that playing records to burn in a phono cartridge is not that bad, really, at least one gets to enjoy music while performing the task.

What I'm getting at (finally) is that the sound quality of some phono cartridges changes dramatically during the first 100 hours or so of play, and the Van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius is definitely one of them. I was *not* impressed with the sound of this cartridge when I first started spinning records. I spent quite a bit of time making sure that its less than stellar sound wasn't the fault of misalignment, or some other set up parameter that was making the sound of the cartridge practically unlistenable. I won't go into the details of what I was hearing, as it is likely that the sound quality (or lack thereof) is system dependent, and might even be sample-to-sample dependent. But what is important is that the sound of the un-broken in Stradivarius is *nothing* like the sound of a broken-in Stradivarius. One must be patient, enjoy the music on one's records the best one can during the break-in period, with thoughts of analog rewards yet to come.

The sound of the Van den Hul Stradivarius is quite impressive, not only for its price, but for a high-end cartridge, period. Its sound is, in a word (or a few words) extremely solid sounding, with a firm grip on the grooves that it is tracing and can transduce these into a solid musical signal. Each and every note, sound, instrument, vocal inflection, musical nuance, strike, pluck, strum, or breath was transmitted to my speakers with a sound that made me think that I was hearing a cartridge that can be compared to the best phono cartridges I've ever heard at any price. I think it is crucial to mention that I have owned and have heard quite a few models of Van den Hul cartridges of the past.

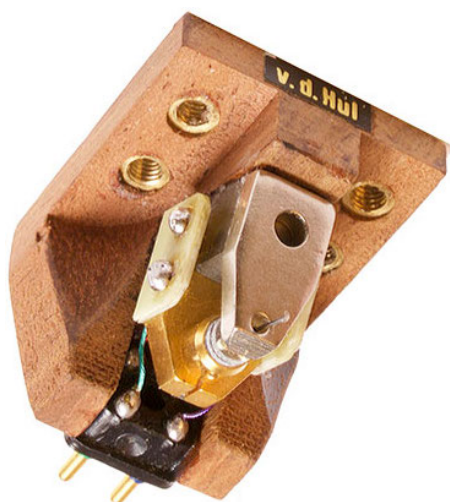
Although I was quite impressed with all of them, from inexpensive models to their more ambitious offerings, it was tough to ignore the fact that these cartridges had a "Van den Hul sound", in other words, they had a character that was unique to Van den Hul cartridges that, even though it added only a slight bit of character, at least for me, was easy to identify.

This sound wasn't an unmusical one, but it was as if there was a patina added to the otherwise very transparent nature of these cartridges. This "Van den Hul sound" is not present in the Crimson Stradivarius. What remains is everything that I like about Van den Hul cartridges in the first place, and more. The Crimson Stradivarius is more than a cut above the Van de Hul cartridges of yore. I'm not sure what A.J. Van den Hul had up his sleeve when he designed and built this cartridge, and why he hadn't discovered it before. Or if it hadn't been discovered and my opinion of his older models are only mine and mine alone. Nevertheless, the Crimson Stradivarius is a killer model, and makes my records sound like the music that was pressed onto the vinyl. Nothing more, and nothing less.

Another trait of the Stradivarius is that it is impartial to the genre of music that it reproduces. I played many different styles of music, from string quartets to power orchestral music, a cappella to heavy metal, small ensemble jazz on Blue Note to the Count Basie Orchestra, and included everything in between and above and beyond these genres and sub-genres. The bottom line was that this cartridge did one thing and one thing only – transcribe what it sensed in the grooves of the vinyl and transmit the signal to the interconnect that led to the phono preamplifier's inputs. It seemed to do this without any editorializing, either additive or subtractive. And with a high enough output to drive just about any phono preamplifier on the planet it is a cartridge that cannot be disqualified because of its output specifications. That is, unless one insists on using more gain to boost the signal of one's cartridge, and invite all the extraneous sonic nasties that come with having to boost the volume more than one needs to. The Stradivarius' silence while at idle, combined with its silence in the grooves because of its superior tracking ability means that one will hear the music above all else. I think I spun at least 400 LPs and 45s during the Van den Hul's stay, and not one of them was a mismatch for the Stradivarius' sonic character. In fact, this thought didn't even enter my mind as I was listening to the music.

An album that I played more than a few times during the audition period was the EMI pressing of Jacqueline Du Pre playing Elgar's *Cello Concerto* with the London Symphony Orchestra. I must have spun this record a thousand times since I acquired it many, many moons ago. Let's forget for a moment the beautiful performance of this concerto played by the idiosyncratic cellist, and focus on the reproduced sound of the soloist and orchestra. The Crimson Stradivarius cartridge was able to dig into the grooves of the LP and somehow *know* what it was hearing. It was a jaw-dropping experience hearing Du Pre's cello in front of the orchestra, as my system was able to create what I can only describe as a sonic hologram between my speakers. This record is hardly one that is demonstration quality, yet what was coming forth from my speakers sounded scary real. Du Pre's cello had an almost vocal quality, singing in an expressive, velvety tone. I could follow every inflection of her expressive bowing, as this phono cartridge allowed me hear the slightest variation in pressure she applied to the strings.

But it was more than that, because it was as if the Van den Hul Stradivarius was fooling me into being able to "see" her swaying in her seat as she played her instrument. The soundstage that the Crimson Stradivarius projected was extremely lifelike, too, as it was not only deep and wide, but also perfectly scaled. Of course, it helped that this cartridge was connected to the Dan D'Agostino phono stage. In my review, I write that this phono stage is not only the best I've ever had in my system, but have ever heard. Ever. But the phono section couldn't produce this sound if it wasn't fed a good signal to being with. As they say, garbage in, garbage out. But this was the opposite. Elegance and grace in, elegance and grace out. During the climaxes of the piece the right-hand side of the orchestra growled with low-end authority, as the left-hand side of the orchestra was a manifestation of skill and style as the string section soared with precision and seductiveness, as only the mid-1960s string section of the LSO could. And the Stradivarius let me hear every bit of it.



Along with zillions of others, I will always be in love with the Beatles' *Abbey Road* album. From the first time I heard it as a pre-teen when my parents brought it home on an 8-track cartridge, to this day. Throughout my life, the special something (no pun intended) that this album contains can transcend any genre of music that I happened to be "into" during that period in my life. This is especially true with side 2, which can make my eyes well-up during distraction-free listening sessions. My current "best" copy of this LP is a Japanese pressing that was issued in 1976 (Apple Records, Japan EAS-80560). Some say that the original UK pressing sounds better, although this Japanese pressing uses a UK master as identified by the record's matrix stamps (the etched markings in the runout grooves of the record).

It's the best of both worlds, really, as it is a UK master yet pressed by the detail-obsessed Japanese record craftspeople. Plus, the record itself looks very cool, with its extra-wide obi (sash) wrapped around the thick record sleeve, its clear rice-paper inner sleeve protecting the disc, and an insert with a biography in Japanese and lyrics in both Japanese and English.

When spinning a Japanese pressing the first thing most listeners will hear is nothing – as the grooves on these records are notoriously devoid of surface noise. That doesn't mean that a phono cartridge tracking the grooves of one of these records are going to be completely silent if it's not up to the task. The Stradivarius certainly is. As I previously mentioned, the Stradivarius has excellent tracking abilities. Even when I played the innermost tracks on the densest choral records the Stradivarius reproduced the voices in a crystal-clear manner, and if the chorus is accompanied by an orchestra this extremely crowded soundstage cannot confuse the Stradivarius. But I digress.

When I dropped the needle on side 2 of *Abbey Road* with the Stradivarius mounted on my tonearm I was in for a treat. As everyone knows, the George Harrison penned "Here Comes The Sun" starts thing off on this side. I never, ever, heard the ride cymbal on Ringo Starr's kit sound so realistic – realistic sounding plus realistically placed. Sure, percussion sounds are not only the most palpable sounds on many records played through a decent cartridge, but the Stradivarius one-upped just about every other cartridge I've ever heard, and certainly every cartridge I've ever heard anywhere near its asking price. It was as if I could see the air move around the cymbal in Ringo's isolated territory in Abbey Road studios.

The sometimes controversial subject of height information started to roll around in my head, as the cymbal seemed as it was placed in the soundstage just about three to four feet off the floor, while the snare drum was below the cymbal. Like an actual drum kit. But this was in my listening room.
















About 6 feet away from me. With Ringo Starr playing the drums. Again, the Stradivarius was frightening me with its scary real reproduction of the music. When George finishes his guitar solo on "Here Comes The Sun", he switches his guitar sound from a slightly overdriven one to one more clear. He I guess he does this with a foot pedal, as I can hear the click on the toggle switch. Which sounds below his guitar amp -- there's that height information again. I'll stop before someone gets angry with me. But it's these types of details that the Stradivarius never missed, along with that scary real, lifelike reproduction of instruments and voices.

Producer George Martin seems as if he's in love with re-EQ'ing voices, and sometimes Beatles records have voices with an upper-midrange boost and a cut-off lower bass and cut-off upper treble. On *Abbey Road*, this EQ peculiarity isn't that bad, but still, these equalized voices couldn't fool the Stradivarius into think it wasn't reproducing vocals, as it knew these voices were coming from the bodies of human beings. The track "Because" can make many swoon when hearing this a cappella section, even on the lowest-fidelity equipment. Through the Stradivarius I could imagine some listeners losing consciousness. On this spin of the side 2 the vocals sometimes sounded as if I was not hearing them as if they are in the room with me, but sound as if the vocalists are singing into microphones, and I'm hearing it with all the other members of the band and crew in the control room of the studio. As if when hearing a live-mic feed, as it were.

Wow. I've never heard *Abbey Road* sound like this. And when Ringo plays his short drum solo about 30 seconds into "The End", the walls and window frames shook from the bass response of his kick drum and floor-tom, as the very lowest frequencies are reproduced by the Stradivarius with expert precision. Again, it was scary real. And fun.

Devoted

Let's face it, \$5000 is a lot of money no matter how you slice it. Although, there are many audiophiles who are devoted to analog playback that might consider the Van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius cartridge a "mid-priced" cartridge. Many others will call this group of audiophiles who are devoted to analog that consider the Van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius cartridge a "mid-priced" cartridge insane. So be it. One thing that is for sure, though, is that the Crimson Stradivarius is a great phono cartridge, and performs as well or better than many cartridges costing much, much more. Based on the many sonic strengths of the Stradivarius, I consider it a bargain. But that's not the only reason I recommend this cartridge to all that can afford it. I recommend the Van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius because it is a fantastic phono cartridge. Period.

Tonality		
Sub-bass (10Hz - 60Hz)		
Mid-bass (80Hz - 200Hz)		
Midrange (200Hz - 3,000Hz)		
High Frequencies (3,000Hz On Up)		
Attack		
Decay		
Inner Resolution		
Soundscape Width Front		
Soundscape Width Rear		
Soundscape Depth Behind Speakers		
Soundscape Extension Into Room		
Imaging		
Fit And Finish		
Self Noise		
Value For The Money	