

The Crimson Stradivarius Cartridge - From the Hands of A.J. van den Hul

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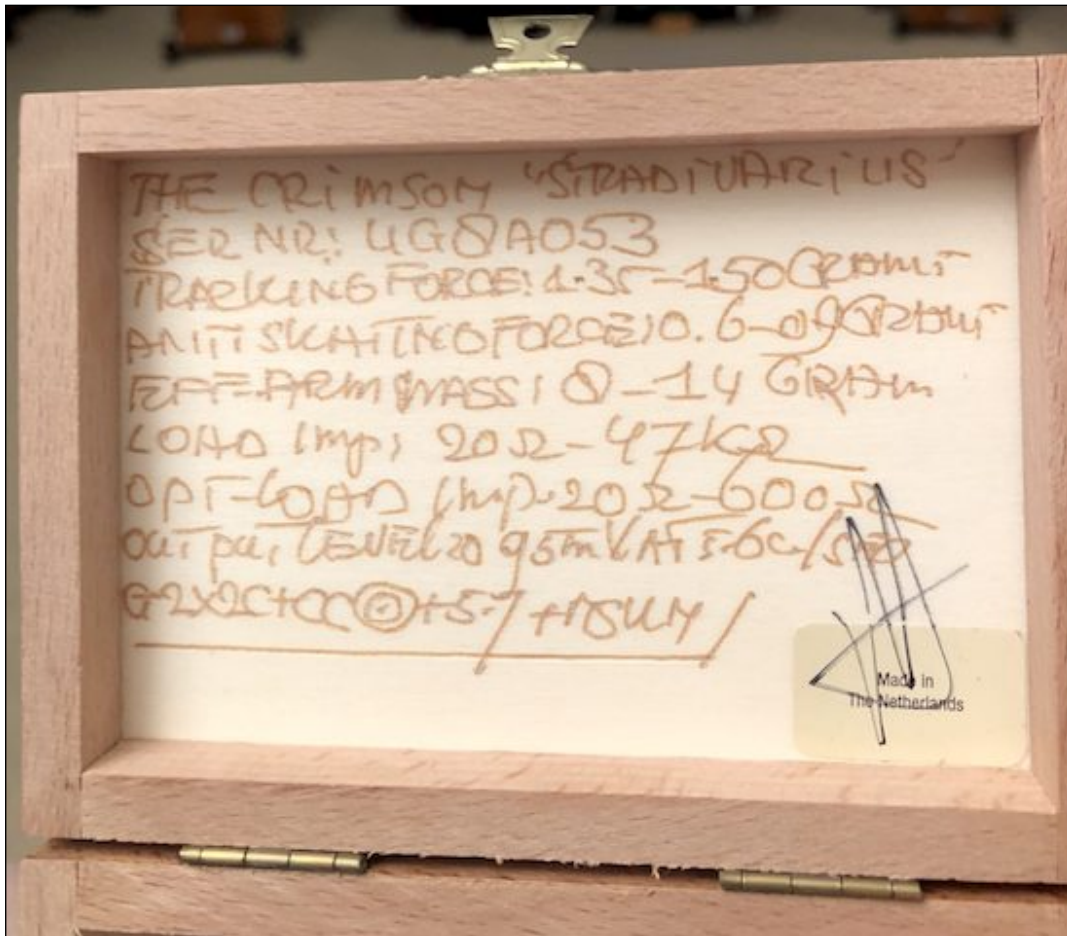


What a treat! To have A. J. van den Hul, the Maestro, personally build a cartridge for review... a cartridge with a treated lacquer finish done three times over many months for proper drying. The lacquer is the precise replica of the lacquer used on the historic Strads, as in violins not cartridges, and flavors the music just so. The provided charming wooden box contains the handwritten specifications, most of which I can read, and provide a window into the musical soul of this renowned Dutch company.

To do this project right, I had the world-famous setup genius, Dan Meinwald, the U.S. Distributor for E.A.R. and Helius, mount the half nude, half wood cartridge in a Helius Omega Tonearm, freshly tweaked by Owen in England. I put 75 hours on the cartridge at 1.55 grams of tracking force, which turned out to be the wrong setting. Damn eyesight and handwritten specs will get you every time!

The Strad wants to be run at 1.5 grams max, and as low as 1.35 grams! I did most of my listening evaluation at 1.45 grams, and it nary mistracked nor failed to blast through transients. I used just a touch of anti-skate. The turntable is the Tim de Paravicini Disc Master magnetic drive table. Cables are the Jorma Origo Interconnects. The Paravicini MC4 Step up Transformer set at 6 transformer ohms provided perfect boost to the E.A.R. 88PB Tube Phono Stage set to MM Input.

Specifications



The Specs written in the box lid are as follows:

- Tracking Force: 1.35-1.5 grams
- Anti-skate: .6-.9 grams
- Impedance: 20 ohms-47k ohms
- Output: .95 mV; 5Hz-60kHz
- Serial Number 4G2AO53
- The Crimson "Stradivarius" (handwritten)
- Gold Coils
- Samarium-Cobalt Magnet

The output must be right there at around one MV (actually .65mV), as it has slam and dramatic power that only comes from truly refined yet medium output cartridges in my experience. This minimizes artificiality and maximizes realism. I am both stunned and satisfied by my first use of a van den Hul cartridge as it never failed to communicate truthfully and quietly with my system. Noise is the number one demon currently in phono and musical reproduction in general. We have passed the point of 90-100dBs of signal-to-noise ratio with our electronics, speakers, and most everything else, thanks to great power conditioning and modern connectivity. The only noise problems left are the cartridge and turntable, and at least we can measure them.

The Bass

I love the depth and contour of the van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius's bass response. Instead of big and blurry, you will hear big, tight, and shaped bass, sounding very tape-like and real. This is a perfectly damped cartridge, containing both poise and power in its presentation. The bass depth and volume pressurize the room in the Greensleeves TBM LP from Impex. The Strad keeps all in control, yet manages to let the Hammond Organ rock your environment. This cartridge is a cool customer, and caused me to search out organ recordings, 1812 Overture LPs, and a pile of Pines of Rome recordings, all of which I played while having great fun hearing the results. All this at a tiptoe through the grooves at 1.45 grams. You will never wear any of your records out in your lifetime.



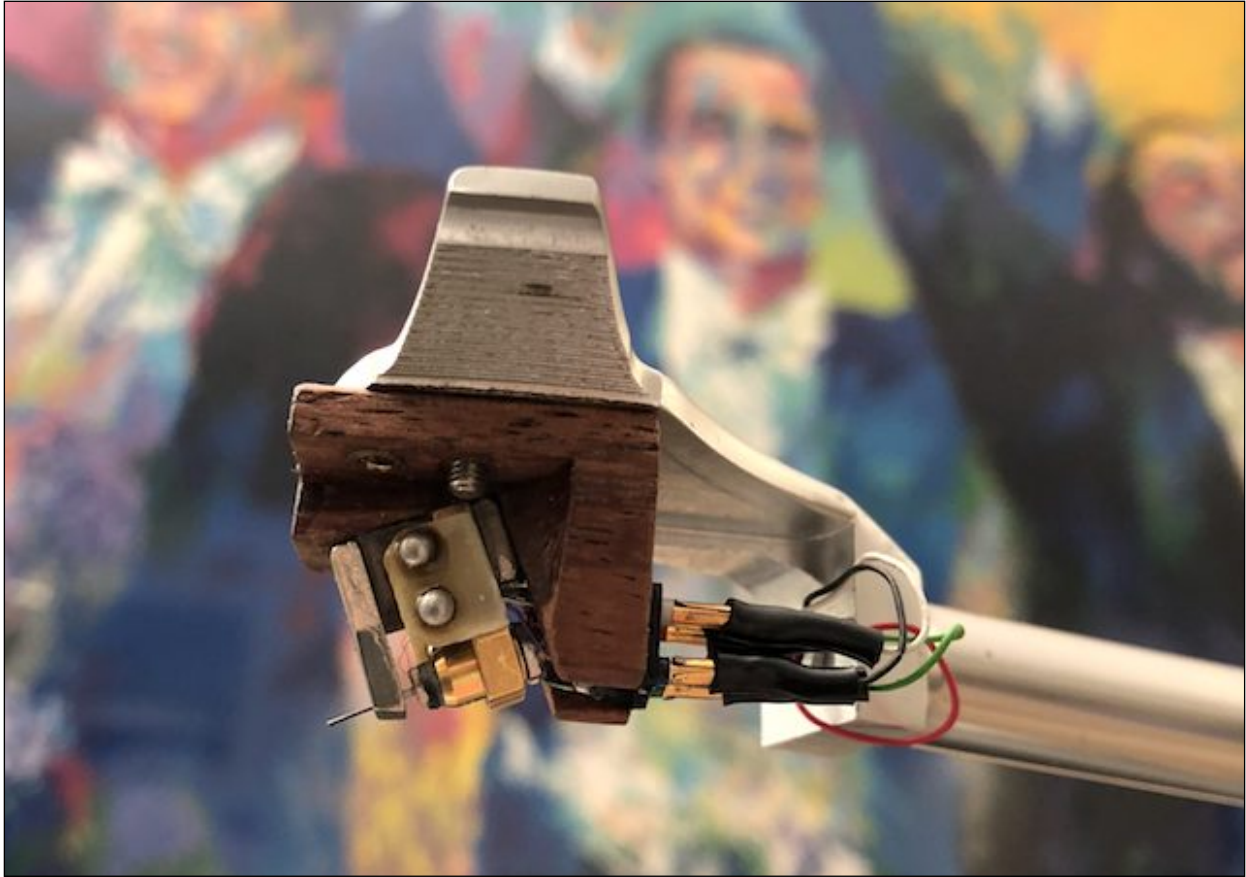
The Mids

The Strad displayed both MC and MM characteristics, the blend of which was very involving. I am a big fan of the smooth, relaxed, highly detailed reproduction of the latest generation of MM and MI on the market. My Epoch from Grado and the Ortofon 2M Black are my go-to cartridges in their respective rigs... their sophisticated performance unravels the complexity of powerfully recorded LPs. The Strad also delivers fine delicate nuances which are warm and taut, a cut above my experience with Dynavector or unmodified Benz cartridges that tend to dry out when pushed. I could say this is the best MC I have heard to date... oh well, I will say that the Strad is the best MC I have heard to date. It has everything going for it, and never ever gets thin and out of control. The stage width and depth are state of the art. The background is jet black.

Vocals are spot on with the Strad, particularly choral recordings. The reissue of the Telarc's Firebird on LP includes a terrific Borodin presentation on the reverse. I know the hall and chorus of the late 70's in Atlanta, and this is really right, neutral, and mellifluous. I can see why there are so many devotees of vdH cartridges. Plus the cartridge match with the Helius Tonearm is magical.

The Highs

I have no quibbles here. The instruments inhabiting this range and their ambient signature are right as rain. I am impressed by the total lack of grain or edge in this MC. With this design, I just cannot imagine spending more and appreciating the differences. The Strad has been characterized by LP aficionados as the sweet spot in the vdH line-up. It is more than that I think!



Summary

The Crimson Stradivarius from van den Hul is a killer transducer that you ought to own if you really want to reach for the brass ring of great LP reproduction. I tried and tried to find something—anything!—to criticize, and have failed miserably. I even like the cool quaint hand-signed box the Strad comes in, with specs hand written all over the inner lid. The Strad is handmade perfection, which is the way all great and expensive cartridges are produced. I wish I could tell you that for half the cost you can get 90% of the performance, but fat chance. To AJ van den Hul and his Crimson Stradivarius I assign the words "masterpiece" and "WOW!"
The Crimson Stradivarius is that superb.