

Review of VDH The Colibri XGW MS & The Grail SE by Constantine Soo, 10/2021 on :



*Van den Hul  
The Colibri XGW Master Signature moving  
coil cartridge &  
The Grail SE phono preamp*

After reviewing the \$16,500 Top Wing Suzaku Red Sparrow coreless straight-flux cartridge, I auditioned several other high-end cartridges, including two \$10,000+ designs that exhibited unremarkable characteristics even when compared to the \$4,000 Soundsmith Paua II. All in all, all negated recommendation. The only exception thus far is the Dutch cartridge specialist Van den Hul's The Colibri XGW Master Signature, which arrived with the company's very own, \$18,600 The Grail SE phono stage in tow. Clearly, VdH was not going to leave everything to chance and much rather place its faith in its own phono stage.



Aesthetically, The Colibri wasn't encased in exotic materials in the field of advanced engineering like the Top Wing, nor did it flaunt gemstone of a body. Instead, The Colibri possessed an open body with exposed cantilever. It can be very easily argued that we would have to pay thousands more if the factory had to wrap the innards of the cartridge in some unique enclosures. In his response to my inquiring about The Colibri XGW Master Signature, company founder A. J. van den Hul explained the following:

*“The Colibri Master Signature is the culmination of 45 years of cartridge experience combined with the right materials. The X shaped modulator gives a better channel separation causing a deeper image of the performance by reducing the common (mostly about equal) crosstalk levels. This common crosstalk level shows up as a virtual extra center channel between the two loudspeakers. Not recorded at all but always there. Less is always better. The matched crystal coil wires are improving the performing on low levels and harmonic structure of the replay by avoiding the crystal barriers normally always there thanks specific to the wire manufacturing processes. Any barrier takes a bit of the finesse of the electrical component. A cartridge is a triple combination of mechanical, magnetic and electrical properties. Each needs to be perfect to have a good final result. Reason why I have been working on optimization of all three and the combination in between.”*

The aforementioned coils used by Van den Hul are crystallized gold wire, the only one of its kind that I know of. The Koetsu Jade Platinum that I owned comes in a close second using silverplated copper wires albeit an industry exclusive magnet made of platinum.

The Colibri's specified medium dynamic compliance of 20  $\mu\text{m}$  makes it a very universal cartridge in tonearm compatibility. The review sample was well broken-in and was VPI Industries president Mat Weisfeld's personal unit.

The auditioning of the cartridge began with the \$48,000 Pass Laboratories Xs Phono, together with the Xs Preamp. The Colibri XGW Master Signature was mounted on the \$4,500 AMG 12J2 beauty of a tonearm, on the \$31,000 Clearaudio Master Innovation turntable with the Smart 24V battery power supply.

Some will take to the open skeleton design of the XGW MS; I for one appreciate the high clearance of its long, exposed cantilever that easily clears the Clearaudio Outer Limit record on the company's Master Innovation turntable ring, when so many other cartridges with low body and short cantilever often scrapped the ring, albeit for the first ten seconds of the record. Some readers will prefer a cartridge with a technologically advanced creation like the Top Wing Suzaku, or a more aesthetical endowment in a jewelry of a body design, despite them not being able to clear the record ring at the start of a record entirely.

The Colibri revealed a minute warmth from the lower midrange, upper bass region and all the way up, and its dynamic transient manifested was very powerful and of exhibition class. Vocals benefited. Take Barbra Streisand in her evergreen hit, "The Way We Were," on the regular release of her Greatest Hits, Vol. 2. The VdH caressed her soft intonation in one stance and then took to the stratosphere in the next. The way the VdH handled the signature Streisand mic-busting high-pressure high-notes was the akin to the \$16.5k Top Wing Suzaku and just cannot be ignored. Dense layers of tonal compositions permeated, imparting an unmistakable sense of tonal purity starting from her voice and then spreading outward to the instruments. When she sang "Superman," it took on a new sound seemingly akin to the Super Analog edition of the release. Turning a non-audiophile record into a pseudo powerhouse seemingly, what a cartridge.

The VdH's tonal transparency was comparable to that of the Top Wing, conceding only in instances of powerful staccatos and fortissimos where it didn't step up as eagerly as the TW, which speaks volume of the capabilities of cartridges brought on by advanced technologies, such as the coreless straight-flux of the Top Wing, and here the X shape modulator. And again, The Colibri's handling of transients was among the most dramatic I've experienced. It accentuated almost everything ever so minutely to enhance the tonal colors of instruments and expand the dynamics.

The Colibri XGW MS was not as atmospheric and tonally alluring among \$10+ cartridges, though still eminently syrupy. The way the it pulled out the long horn near the end of "Anakin's Dark Deeds" from the soundtrack to *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* communicated a surreal and cerebral tonal purity, making the experience one of the most chilling and spectacular among cartridges, while demonstrating world-class spatiality, crazy degree of zeal and yet not overly indulgent. The Colibri's expression of the trumpet was as authoritative as that of the Top Wing.

The London Symphony Orchestra consistently provided the most spirited and spontaneous-sounding recordings for the movie franchise, and performances of the same pieces under different orchestras often miss the mark. And The Colibri reflected that.

The ante was upped considerably when The Colibri was coupled with The Grail SE phono stage.

As a cartridge manufacturer is in the best position theoretically to create a perfectly matched phono preamp for its best cartridges, so it becomes a cause for celebration whenever good phono preamps actually emerge from cartridge makers themselves. The Pass Laboratories Xs Phono is the best phono preamplification system I have yet experienced, costing \$48,000 and comes in two large chassis. The Van den Hul The Grail SE is the second costliest I have auditioned, and it from the cartridge maker itself.

While the VdH cartridges are distributed by VPI Industries, distribution of the Van den Hul electronics is handled by John McGurk of [Audioshield Audio Distribution](#). On the flagship model in the company's lineup of phono preamplifiers, John offers the following:

*“The Grail has a different lay-out where the current supplied by the cartridge is taken as the input-signal. With some (proprietary process), we are free from any cartridge-load problem. Changing a cartridge means that automatically the best load is taken. This is always the resistive load and not the capacitive.*

*Only with high impedance coils, the capacitive load starts to be interesting. But with MC cartridges with micro-Henry inductance, the load capacitance starts to be influential far over 100 KHz. Better is to focus on cartridges where such drastic steps are not necessary. What means that the basic resonance frequency of the cartridge should be over 50 KHz.”*

Van den Hul engineer Jurgen Ultee further elaborated in the following:

*“A transformer coupled MC input stage (regardless if it is a transformer from Lundahl, Jensen, Kondo or whatever) does not make an automatic matching to the MC cartridge. About proper loading of a cartridge, Lundahl recommends on their [website](#), and the following [paper](#) from Kandaudio, both show that a proper resistor has to be chosen for correct impedance matching. There is nothing wrong with this method, but it is by no means an automatic function. Despite of this, some manufacturers claim that their MC preamps with input transformers are “auto-tuning” the load impedance.*

*Some companies like e.g. WLM with their Phonata MC preamp used an input transformer as a kind of current sink. This does not deliver a constant resistive value over the frequency range – but this is mandatory to achieve a good frequency response.*

*The Grail uses no transformer but an active input stage, distantly related to a Satri circuit. No additional matching resistor is necessary. Due to the bandwidth limiting behaviour of a transformer we prefer active circuits, that do much less bandwidth limiting and phase distortion. Additionally, the impedance plot is almost fully resistive over the entire audio band. You can't do this with transformers, except some very, very expensive ones like the Kondo. It is definitely really good but at super high costs; in fact a pair of these transformers is more costly than The Grail itself.”*



Comprising one full size main chassis for the electronics and one half size power supply chassis, The Grail SE was easier on placement than the Xs Phono, though imminently heavy at thirty-plus pounds. Specified at 73 dB of maximum gain, The Grail SE's highest output was thus lower than that of the Xs Phono at 76 dB, requiring turning up the output of the Xs Preamp to minus 04.0 most of the time, whereas minus 12.0 would suffice in the case of the Xs Phono.



With The Grail SE, The Colibri XGW Master Signature cartridge presented perhaps the most original VdH sound. The instrument groups in the Angel Direct Metal Master issue of the 1984 Riccardo Muti digital recording of the Tchaikovsky *Swan Lake and Sleeping Beauty* suites was reproduced in perhaps the most spot-on compared to other phono preamps, sounding pronounced, well formed and full of sparkle. The tambourine, in particular, had such beauty of tone and energy it made me marvel at its real, unfettered, matter-of-fact presence.

The Grail SE's background noise was non-existent, akin to that of the Xs Phono. But since The Grail SE lacks adjustable settings for the user, it precluded possibility of a more personalized tonal balance, when I could scale back the resistive loading on the Xs Phono, say from 1K to 320 and get more upper midrange sparkle from The Colibri. My only option was to increase the "Brilliance" of the Sound Lab panels, and dialing it back when using the Esoteric K-01XD SACD player. The process was easy as to render the argument moot.

Over time, the more I listened to it, the more I felt secure in trusting The Grail SE as I would with the Xs Phono. I went through a considerable number of LPs to ascertain my comfort and trust level in the phono stage.





There are moments when The Grail produced arguably one of the most accurate representations of the RIAA curve in records. For instance, “Ave Maria Guarani” from silver screen legendary composer Ennio Morricone’s *The Mission* soundtrack aims to depict a disparate choir the members of which are recently converted villagers, and The Grail isolated the voices masterfully without sounding overly harsh. Some may even say there is a fleeting sweetness from the phono preamp, most conducive towards music enjoyment, resembling results obtained on The Colibri XGW Master Signature cartridge from the higher resistive settings on the Pass Labs Xs Phono. Moments such as these convince me of the status of The Grail as an high-end auto-adjusting phono stage.

The most natural and accurate vinyl sound is probably what The Grail SE is all about, but one of the most impressive feats of the phono stage was when it rendered the bottom-end to upper bass region of 20 Hz to 100 Hz with comparable speed, tightness and definition as the Xs Phono. In fact, it was precisely the range immediately above this region to the lower midrange that the Van den Hul conceded to the Pass Labs, where cellos, trombones, classical piano solos and even electric basses were less defined and clear.

The glory that is the Pass Labs in amplifying the feeble cartridge signal from the hard rock band Asia on its debut album of the eighties was undisputed, providing for a supreme experience. Still, the Van den Hul continued to surpass several other expensive phono preamps in dynamic contrast, extension, separation and most of all, bottom-end force and resolution.

The most stunning change that The Grail SE brought to the sound of The Colibri was the strengthening of the spatiality of venue and the naturalness in mannerism in which it was achieved.

For instance, The Colibri and The Grail SE sounded just right with some Deutsche Grammophon records, sounding not just relaxed and atmospheric with the Karajan *Adagio* LP of the seventies, while also extended and three-dimensional, dynamically expedient and expansive in the conductor's last recording cycle of the Beethoven Symphonies in digital. Both under the same label, the experience demonstrated The Grail SE's ability to not only depict distinct tonal and textural characteristic of the changing recording and mixing techniques, but also spread out activities on stage orderly. Advanced cartridge engineering may not be able to mitigate obsolete recording technologies, but the Van den Hul system consistently pulled the best sound out of the groove.

The aforementioned Barbra Streisand album proved its place in my collection as the VdH system completely tracked every audible nuance and ambience in the most confidential and darn near consciously unnoticeable manner. The cartridge sounded more engaging with the Pass Labs Xs Phono on a conscious level, but the VdH combination presented an indisputable case on the naturalness of the system.

Also true in this instance is that The Grail sounded like a 750 Ohms setting on the Xs Phono that I crave but doesn't really exist as the phono preamp jumps from 500 to 1K with no stopover in between. Still, the common trait of phono stages such as The Grail SE and the Xs Phono is the unmistakable and unforgettable forward momentum and catapulting force.



## **Conclusion**

There were occasions when I would love for The Grail SE to impart a wee bit extra top-end, an indulgence which the \$48,000 Pass Labs Xs Phono accorded with its user-adjusted resistive loading, and I have found Van den Hul's approach and measures in its fastidious designs an equal to the Xs Phono in spatiality at the minimum. The Grail SE was as three-dimensional and ambience savvy as the Xs Phono; but where the Xs Phono accorded the user with flexibility and customized listening preferences, the Grail SE focused instead on unflinching consistency.

In the end, an analog sound system is but an extension of the phono cartridge, and it sets the standard of the system's caliber. We can upgrade the turntable, the tonearm, the cabling or the phono stage but all the demonstration class electronics downstream can achieve is what the cartridge giveth. The Colibri XGW Master Signature is quite peerless at its price range.

In this advanced digital audio age, vinyl playback via The Colibri XGW Master Signature as amplified by the Van den Hul The Grail SE continued to present the most definitive level of performance, propelling analog playback to reign supreme. There are things that complete us as audiophiles. Add the Van den Hul system to the list.