

Review of van den Hul The Crimson
XGW Stradivarius' cartridge
by Marc Phillips, 09/2022, on :

Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius



Last year I reviewed the Van den Hul **The Grail** phono stage, and I gave it a firm recommendation. If you've read that review, you'll know that I hoped to spend some seat time with one of the **legendary cartridges** from AJ van den Hul, something I've never done until right now. John McGurk of **AudioShield** could obviously read between the lines. Before I knew it, John had shipped out the Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius phono cartridge. It's been here for a long time now, apologies to John.

I do feel like I'm leaving out several narrative details, as if I'm telling a joke and I keep starting over because I'm messing it up. In the middle of all these two reviews, I was able to meet John McGurk in person, both at **AXPONA 2022** and in **Munich** just a few weeks later. What I've learned about John is that he has great taste in gear—which is very important in the world of high-end audio. At those two shows I spent some time with John, along with **Credo** of Switzerland's **Michael Kraske**, and I listened to almost the same system each time.

I didn't care about taking another listen, other than the fact that the third-level atrium at the MOC in Munich will now be known to me as The Great German Sauna. Man, it was hot up in there. I stayed, though, sweat running down the sides of my head, and I could have bowed out earlier than I did but I loved the sound of that system—**EMM Labs**, **VPI**, Credo and, of course, Van den Hul. The VDH cartridges, by the way, are currently distributed in the US by VPI. As I sat there, listening, I knew that I had the Van Den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius moving-coil cartridge waiting for me back in cool, misty and overcast Portland. It did take some effort to get The Grail, the Crimson and a worthy turntable in my listening room at the same time, but I'm so glad it all happened. This is a different analog sound than I'm used to, and that's not a bad thing at all.



Inside the Van den Hul Crimson

The Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius (\$5,495) has a much more elaborate model designation than, say, a Frog or a Grasshopper or a Condor. But all them fancy words have deliberate meanings.

Crimson denotes the name of this cartridge line, which is a step below the flagship Colibri series. (If it helps to clarify, there is a Van den Hul Colibri XGW Stradivarius, and it costs more than twice the Crimson.) X means cross coils, G means gold and W means the cartridge has a wooden body made from koa. (The Crimson XGP has a polycarbonate body, and the new XGA version has a titanium and amber body.) The Stradivarius designation is perhaps the most intriguing. If your Van den Hul cart is a Strad, that means the body was coated in a 400-year-old shellac recipe used to make Stradivarius violins. That coating, not surprisingly, is superb at controlling resonances in the cartridge body.

Among the MC cartridges I've used over the last decade, the Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius has one of the most generous outputs at 0.65mV. That's almost MOMC territory, right? My reference cartridge, the **ZYX Ultimate Airy X**, has an output of 0.25, and sometimes that's a challenge while testing multiple phono stages. But the Crimson always seemed to have plenty of gumption no matter which phono pre I used. Obviously, there was never a moment where I worried about gain.

Finally, the Crimson XGW uses gold coils (that's the G in XGW) and a Samarium cobalt magnet. The stylus type is a line-contact VDH 1S. The cantilever is boron.

Most importantly, every Crimson cartridge is hand-built by AJ van den Hul. With both the Colibri and Crimson lines, you get a free 200-hour check up from the man himself as long as you're the original owner. If you don't think that cultivates pride of ownership, then you might be in the wrong hobby.



Van den Hul Crimson XGW Set-Up

I'll tell you right now, the Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius is not a beginner's cartridge. Take one look and you might figure out why.

Yeah, it's that cantilever. It seems incredibly long for a cantilever, just sticking way out there, ready to absorb some real damage from clumsy fools like me. It's daunting when you open up the wooden box for the Crimson and that cantilever and stylus is leaping out at you like it's a prop from an old 3-D movie from the '50s. Even crazier—there is no stylus guard. Plus, I was mounting the Van den Hul Crimson on the **Pear Audio Blue** Kid Howard turntable with the Cornet 2 tonearm, and there is no stylus lift on the headshell, nor a tonearm clamp that keeps everything locked down in your absence. Throughout the set-up process, I kept thinking that the cantilever was so vulnerable and I'd wind up writing someone a big check.

Turns out, it was fairly easy to mount the Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius without a mishap. That wooden base is easy to grip and the mounting screws catch quickly. But I took my time with the mounting and alignment process. I suggest you do the same.

The Pear Audio/Van den Hul Crimson combo was plugged into three different phono stages, including the Van den Hul The Grail, obviously, which was sent by John McGurk for a second round. The Grail, of course, is remarkable for its automatic cartridge loading circuitry. In addition, I also used the **Lab12 Melto2** and my own reference Pureaudio Vinyl. Each one of these phono preamplifiers has its own distinct character—The Grail is very detailed, fast and accurate, the pure class A Vinyl sounds sweet and extended in the highs and the Lab12 sounds warm and seductive. The Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius worked well with each one, bringing a slightly different skill set to each pairing.

One thing I was concerned about was the recommended tracking force. A majority of the MC cartridges I use float around the 2g mark, so once I see a cartridge that wants 2.5g or even more I start to think about stylus wear. When I see a cartridge with significant less than a 2g tracking force, I start to think about stylus wear as well. I found two different sets of recommended tracking force numbers for the Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius—one said 1.35 to 1.5g, and the other said 1.4 to 1.6g. I wound up settling at around 1.65g—a little more than recommended, but if I tried to dial it down toward the lower end of the range the stylus would get a little jumpy with more dynamic pressings.

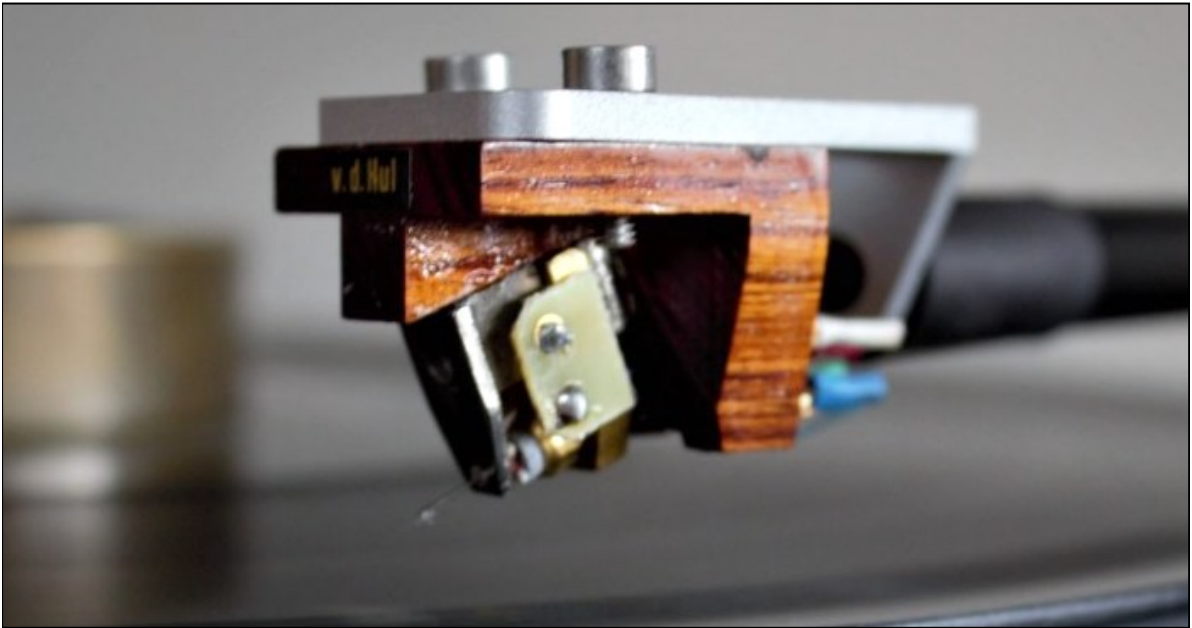


The VDH Sound

When I originally reviewed The Grail, I started thinking about some of the sonic difference from Japanese cartridges, which I tend to favor, and European cartridges, which are more about extracting every last detail from the groove. In fact, the whole idea of listening to the Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius was to see if these cartridges would further this idea about a distinctly European sound, or somehow ameliorate the results.

When it came down to listening, however, I couldn't really think in those terms. The Van den Hul Crimson XGW was an exceedingly neutral sounding cartridge with or without The Grail, and yet it had a welcome sweetness high, high, high in the treble. I was reminded of hi-rez digital files with amazing upsampling rates, and how that sense of detail never quite jumps in front of the musical content. As time wore on, I had the continuing impression that more detail means more music. When I mean more music, of course, I'm usually talking about that human factor, those aural cues that confirm a human being is behind these notes and not some type of machine.

Most of the time I thought of the sound of the Crimson XGW as naked, revealing, and stripped-down to the musical essentials. But that sweetness is what convinced me of the XGW's worth, at least to me, and why I would choose something from another part of the world more known for charisma and mystique. I like the magic, I like being seduced by music, but a large part of what attracts me to music is the proximity of the performer and the sense that we are somehow exchanging energy between us.



Listening with the Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius

Once the family had been reunited in one place—the Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius and The Grail, mounted on the Pear Audio Blue Kid Howard turntable and Cornet2 tonearm—I had more than an impression of synergy. I felt like I had a more complete picture of what the Van den Hul sound was. My first round with The Grail, which spent a lot of time with the **Brinkmann Taurus** turntable and a **Koetsu Urushi Black** cartridge, revealed a more neutral and detailed sound than my preferred Japanese cartridges (ZYX Ultimate Airy X and Bloom 3 and, absolutely, that Koetsu). With the Crimson in the mix, there was more purpose to the tonality, a firmer idea of the ultimate sonic objective.

I first experienced this sense of “completeness” through a cursory play of the MFSL LP pressing of Dead Can Dance’s *Into the Labyrinth*, which has spent a lot of time on the Kid Howard’s platter while I completed the set-up. Usually I pull this LP out for the Yulunga Test, and while the VDH package excelled in every dimension in terms of texture and decay and muted power, its strengths were truly revealed during “The Ubiquitous Mr. Cosgrove.”

If you know this song, it makes a big impression when Brendan Perry’s voice first slides in. It’s a big sound, recorded in a big church, and it’s what the recording engineers call “very wet.” On lesser playback gear, there’s a big space between Perry’s voice and the mostly synthesizer-based music that can force the dynamics to sound slightly out of control, like someone in the booth should have turned a knob. With the Van den Hul/Pear Audio Blue rig, the sound existed more on a level playing field, that every sound had a pure and natural relationship with all of the other sounds being reproduced at the same time. Yes, the Crimson’s thorough and even manner made this track almost sound live.



Other VDH Goodies

John McGurk also sent me a couple of products to try out with the Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius and The Grail—the Van den Hul D-501 Hybrid tonearm cable interconnects (\$249/pr USD) and a little bottle of The Solution, VDH's contact cleaning fluid (\$52, but the tiny bottle is said to last a long time). The D-501s use OFC The Solution does more than clean dirty contacts—it also lubricates to provide more contact between surfaces. As someone who's starting to see definite wear and tear on some of my workhorse cables, I can appreciate this feature.

I used both products with all of the other Van den Hul products in place—the D-501 added a little more detail and a little more transparency over other cables I had on hand, something I found remarkable for a \$249 pair of cables. I also found the D-501s to clean up transients and lower the noise floor. The Solution, however, quickly proved its usefulness in my system. I've always used contact cleaners on my RCA jacks and I've always been able to extract a satisfyingly filthy Q-Tip that convinced me it was a worthwhile product. At the same time, I haven't used a contact cleaner in quite a while. It might be laziness, but it might also have something to do with having new equipment rotating in and out of the system so I never think that the RCA jacks might actually be dirty.

I wound up using The Solution on two of my older reference pieces, my **Unison Research** CDE CD player and my Pureaudio Vinyl phono preamplifier. I've owned each of these for over a decade, and they often sit on the floor, waiting their turn, more than often than they should. The Solution uses a small brush that you apply directly to the point of contact, so it's difficult to see the grunge on the tip of the brush, but I did apply some to a standard Q-Tip and yes, the cotton on the end was pretty darned black. I even tried the same test on The Grail—which is relatively new—and I was still able to tarnish that Q-Tip.



Conclusions

I might just be at one of those high-end audio crossroads where I have to re-evaluate what I actually want from my hi-fi. The Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius, along with The Grail, has presented a conundrum: do I still want a warm, colored sound even if I'm starting to insist on detail as well? The answer, of course, is that the best high-end audio gear offers both, at the same time. For me, that's become a new goal in my journey. But the Crimson XGW is the first analog product that makes me consider some else, something potentially troubling to an old vinyl lover like me. It's those sweet, extended highs that first reeled me in when I fell for hi-res digital streaming. When I first heard those high frequencies, such as the first time I really took a plunge into DSD, I heard something in the treble that was new to me, something that made me say—for probably the hundredth time in the last decade—that if digital sounded like this in the '80s, I might have sold off my turntable and records a long time ago.

Now, as I move up the analog chain, I'm starting to hear that same exhilarating sense of extension, of openness, of far away horizons, from vinyl. I heard it consistently when I had the Brinkmann Taurus, along with the Koetsu Urushi Black cartridge and Koetsu Stepup Transformer. Does that mean I'm hearing a new truth, and that analog and digital are arriving at the same destination from different directions? It's possible.

What is important is that the Van den Hul Crimson XGW cartridge gets me to the right side of neutrality, where I can peek over the fence at perfection and see how bored everyone is, while standing firmly on the ground that might be soaked with magic. Highly recommended.

