

## A needlemaker's world

### Welcome to an audiophile Aladdin's cave

by Jason Kennedy

Cartridge and cable guru AJ van den Hul must be one of the hardest working men in hi-fi. Now in his sixties, AJ runs his cable company during office hours, and builds and repairs cartridges in his spare time. As far as I can tell, he doesn't get much time off for his family... or to listen to his record collection!

"AJ van den Hul's room is so full of vinyl and hi-fi that there's only room for a single chair."

I recently visited his farmhouse in Vaassen, Holland, and discovered a capacious listening room so full of vinyl and hi-fi that there is only enough space for a single listening seat in front of his towering Acapella Violon Cello speakers. The floor of this Aladdin's cave is covered in boxes of jazz and classical LPs, plus the odd turntable or tape recorder, with more classic kit stacked on shelves around the room. Hidden under a silk cloth, I found a Nakamichi Dragon turntable, a legendary beast that literally shifts the platter to iron out pitch variations caused by centre hole eccentricity - they don't build 'em like that any more. AJ had picked this up recently and not yet had time to cram it onto the jam packed area that functions as an equipment support. Here the turntable of choice is a Brinkmann La Grange, finished in white and fitted with a contrasting seventies Technics tonearm with a detachable headshell - essential if you are a cartridge maker, it would seem.

The amplification is all pretty exotic stuff too: a Blue Amp phono stage with balanced inputs and a Jelco Breath valve preamp from Russia. This sits on top of a 'resting' Conrad-Johnson ART preamp, just to give you an idea of how highly he regards it. Power amplification is Van den Hul's own no-longer-in-production 100-watt monoblocks and the cables are his favourite carbon variety with a very fine-sounding new tubular construction interconnect cable being tested prior to production.

The sound in this room is extremely natural and dynamic, thanks to the horn-loaded (ion) tweeter and midrange of the Acapellas. You can hear the fine differences between versions of a single cartridge design with ease. He builds the cartridges in another, smaller room that seems to have as many things in it as the listening room, except that they are all much smaller. His bench is awash with mounting bolts and elastic bands(?), alongside numerous bits and bobs that may or may not have anything to do with moving coil cartridge construction.

Each cartridge that AJ builds can be tailor-made to the customer's tonearm, phono stage and more importantly musical taste. He can vary things like cantilever length to give a more dynamic or more spacious sound, choose from different suspension rubbers to alter compliance for different arms and even use metal or plastic bases to give a sound that suits certain types of music. The biggest variable, however, is the coil wire - choose from copper, silver, gold or even platinum to get a sound that perfectly matches your record collection. Easier still, tell AJ what you listen to (and with) and he'll do it for you. His cartridges may not be cheap - the customisation doesn't really start until you get into the open bodied designs, which start at £2,400 for the Condor - but you'll be hard pressed to find this sort of service with any other needle maker.



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