

VAN DEN HUL DDT-II SPECIAL

Music made REAL

There's something intimidating about fondling a phono cartridge worth around 10,000 Rand - especially if it's not yours. One slip of the Allen key, and that delicate cantilever with its precious diamond tip could be history...

But then, I guess that's part of the magic of turntables: in this current era of plug 'n play devices, the hands-on involvement, effort and care required to install a cartridge on a tone arm is refreshing. And it forces you to understand the function of the cartridge so much better.

Under scrutiny here is Van den Hul's so-called entry-level cartridge, the DDT-II Special. Entry-level is meant here only in relative terms, since the investment required to own one of these beauties is considerable by South African standards.

But once you lift the alloy-bodied cartridge out of its wooden box (with the measured technical specifications hand-written in the lid!), you realise that the time and craftsmanship required to manufacture one of these easily vindicates the asking price - and that's before even having heard its sonic capabilities...

The DDT designation is an acronym for depth, detail and timbre - and not a now-banned insecticide! This latest, Special version offers several improvements over the original, including a thicker front pole, and a smaller magnet, both said to boost resolution and output voltage.

The DDT-II Special employs matched crystal silver coils, a boron cantilever and a specially profiled diamond stylus, profiled with a sharp tip to allow it to penetrate the record groove more effectively, and therefore retrieve musical detail often lost by round-tipped styli.

Fears that the profile, dubbed VDH-1 by the company, would lead to damaged records seem to have been unfounded, and rival cartridge makers have since adopted similar stylus shapes. However, it does require very precise cartridge alignment - a process that needs care and time to achieve.

Installing the DDT-II Special, therefore, is an exercise not to be rushed. I used two turntables - my usual Linn Sondek/Ittok/Lingo reference, and a trusty Rega Planar 3 that only gets used very occasionally these days.

The cartridge has threaded mounting holes, which is a huge help and means not having to deal with fiddly little nuts. The alloy cartridge body mates well with the headshell, and as long as you refrain from over-tightening the screws, the resulting assembly is nicely rigid.

Aligning the cartridge was not particularly difficult, but required time and patience - time well spent, I might add, because the sonic capabilities of a cartridge are so easily compromised by poor alignment, in any plane. Plus, of course, the danger of damaging a prized record acts as a further, compelling incentive to get it perfectly right!

For the record, the DDT-II is a medium output moving coil cartridge with a rated output voltage of 0.65 mV RMS at 1 kHz. The cartridge weighs in at 8.2 g, and has a vertical tracking angle of 22 deg. Claimed frequency response is 5 Hz to 50 kHz, while the recommended load impedance is quoted as 200 ohms. Tracking force is between 13.5 and 15 mN.

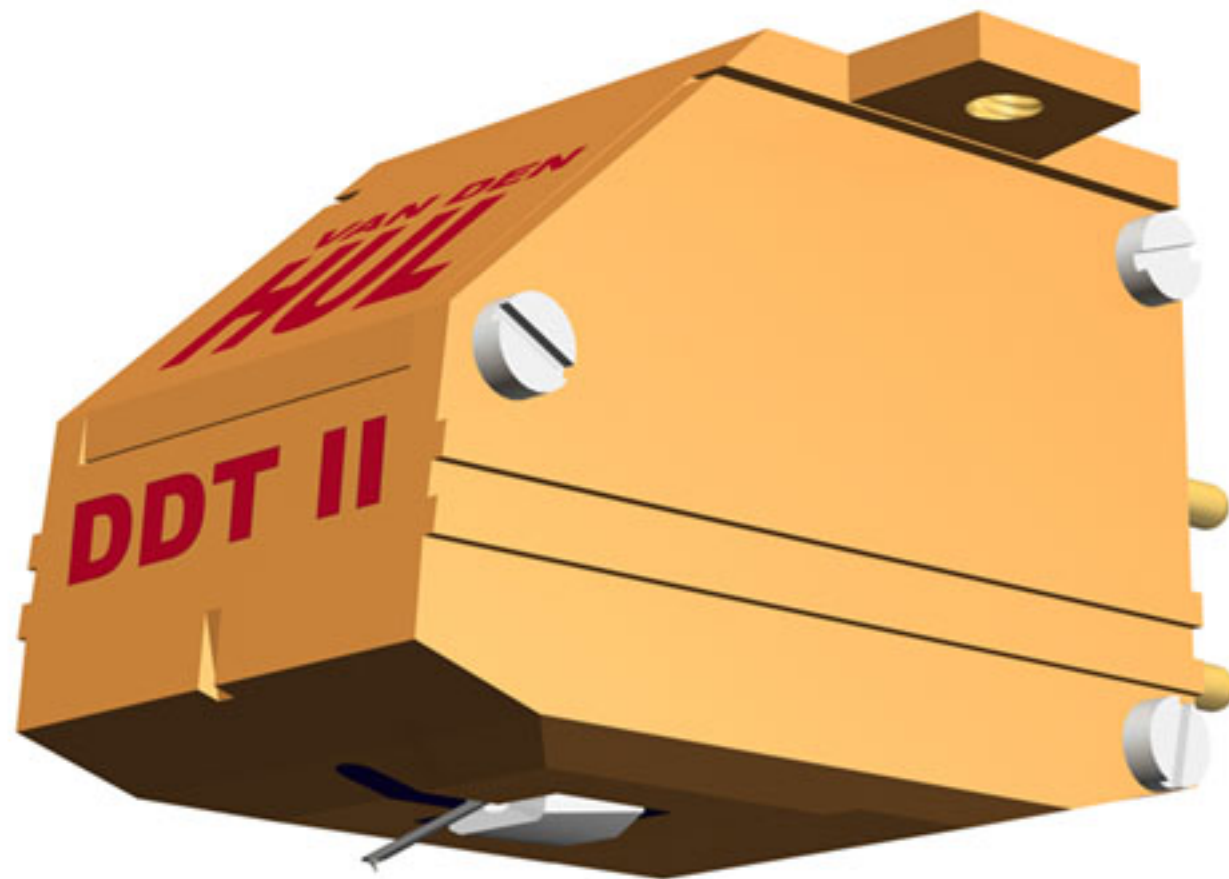
Since I assumed the cartridge was brand new, I allowed for some playing in time, although it has to be said that the DDT-II sounded pretty good out of the box. These first impressions weren't disappointed once I sat down properly for some quality time in the Van den Hul's company.

Of course I'm biased when it comes to vinyl, simply because a good record played back on a decent turntable has a beguiling magic that has less to do with measurable, technical performance and revolves utterly around the ability of the resulting music to emotionally engage the listener.

The Van den Hul DDT-II Special only served to enhance that experience. It sounded lively and agile from the word go, with articulate attention to a rich harvest of detail. The flow of music was natural and dynamic, allowing a strong sense of rapport with the listener, while there was an effortless delivery that engaged and delighted.

Tonally, the cartridge managed to extract an impressively wide spectrum, with good overall balance, but a particularly powerful bass response. This bottom-end performance served as a solid, authoritative and perfectly controlled foundation for the DDT-II's overall delivery.

Rich mids and smooth, finely defined treble made a mockery of any thought that an analogue front-end such as this can't compete with high resolution digital formats in terms of realism and credibility. Nor was there anything ponderous



about the delivery: the Van den Hul always sounded real, exciting and even dramatic.

I loved the staging of this cartridge: it managed to achieve such a holographic sonic image that the usual descriptors - height, depth, width - seem inadequate. Rather, there was a very real sense of tangibility, so that the listener ended up immersed in the music, rather than simply listening to it.

The cartridge performed with equal aplomb on both the Linn and the Rega - but its ability to shine as brightly as it did on a turntable as basic as the Planar 3 is proof of its inherent quality, and its potential compatibility with a variety of arms and record decks.

The Van den Hul DDT-II Special is exactly that: a very special, musically credible and ultimately captivating cartridge that will please all vinyl fans. Musically, it's as at home with Pink Floyd and Queen as it is with Beethoven and Sibelius, while delivering its wares with charm, authority and finesse.

Suddenly, that price tag doesn't look all that daunting anymore...

Deon Schoeman

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VERDICT

A superb, handcrafted cartridge from a company committed to musical honesty. Set-up critical, but effort rewarded with depth, detail and musical magic.

PRICE

10,659 Rand

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