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## The Pluto One and van den Hul Grasshopper IV-GLA phono cartridges

THE LOVESICK SWOON: TRUTH IS BEAUTY, BUT...

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**T**ransducers are magical. While tube electronics can fascinate in their exotic and vaguely retro nature, speakers and phono cartridges are, for me, the most intriguing parts of the audio chain. Electronics merely amplify, and cabling merely conducts. The first and last components, for that is what cartridges and speakers are, transmute base vibration into musical gold via processes that still seem as much art and wizardry as science. So of course it was a speaker that brought me to this phono cartridge.

One of the more impressive displays at the January 1997 CES was the Voce Divina room, where the striking Tenore loudspeakers and Basso subwoofers were installed. I struck up a conversation with Dustin Collins and Bryan Ganz, Voce's two principals. The speakers weren't ready for review, but Ganz asked if I wanted to hear a new cartridge he and Collins were planning to distribute — a consolation prize while the speakers were being revised.

The first indication that the Pluto One is something out of the ordinary is apparent when you open the very heavy wooden box in which it is delivered. Inside is a large cylindrical aluminum ingot engraved with the cartridge's name. The top of the cylinder is released by removing a screw set flush into the side of the cylinder. The cartridge is then drawn out, mounted to a bridgelike frame. The cylinder and frame are themselves an imposing and elegant piece of metalworking. Not even the most ham-fisted can damage the cartridge in this carriage.

The cartridge body itself is a large, square piece of solid titanium with the bottom milled out and lined with some type of carbon-fiber damping material. There was a familiar look to the Pluto's innards, easily visible as a result of the open-bottom design. And indeed, the

unit is a van den Hul "engine" in a Pluto-designed and engineered body. From its vertigo-inducing price (\$7,995) and the few specifications in the literature, I surmised correctly that Pluto One is based upon some version of the van den Hul Grasshopper.

Setup is remarkably unfussy, once you balance this 14-gram monster. Keep the bottom of the cartridge parallel to the playing surface (or ever so slightly tipped up at the rear) and all is well. Departures from this general rule rendered no consistent sonic benefits. The recommended tracking force is 1.55–1.65 grams and anti-skating bias of 1 gram worked very well in the SME and Graham arms. (The combination of high compliance, indicated by the relatively low tracking force, and the 14-gram weight, means that the resonant frequency will be very low, even in low-mass arms. This may cause warp/wow problems or even bottoming on warps if you don't have a vacuum turntable, as I do.)

The ultimate question is what level of performance your investment finally nets. I spent the last year with the excellent Clearaudio Gamma-S and Gamma Gold cartridges, so I approached the ultra-exotic Pluto with a fair degree of skepticism. It sounded wonderful fresh out of its cylinder, but went through a period of sounding lean and edgy at the 20- to 40-hour mark. Then, the cartridge settled down, though it continued to improve for another 70 to 80 hours.

The Pluto will track any groove on any playable LP and do so with an unflappable aplomb, say, my old pinwheel label pressing of Elton John's *Tumbleweed Connection* [Uni 73096]. The Pluto was the first cartridge that has tracked Sir Elton's vocal on "Come Down In Time" and remained completely free of hot sibilants trailing back from the center

vivid, dynamic and natural sounding music [system] I have heard to date. ... I knew this level of music playback must be made available in North America ...

The Pluto Audio Reference System includes the Pluto One moving coil cartridge [reviewed here], which is made of titanium, boron, carbon fiber, resin composites, mono-crystal wire and a custom OEM van den Hul tip ... and the Pluto Special tone arm ... the Pluto 11A titanium, battery-powered, belt-driven turntable and the Pluto Reference Platform ... [The remainder of the system consisted of: Cello electronics on a pair of Voce Divina custom carbon-fiber wrapped Tenores, and two Voce Divina custom carbon-fiber wrapped Bassos ... Cabling consisted of Kimber Kable Silver interconnect and Black Pearl speaker cable.

Halfway into the first of three four-hour sessions, I noticed the Basso subwoofers were wired for a monophonic output. I told Mr. Driessen and his engineering team to listen to few pieces of music, and I would change a component in the system, and we would listen for comparison.

We could not believe our ears. The soundstage opened ... we heard the natural acoustics of the instruments and the reverberation of live unamplified music. The images were solid, and the darkness between them was unknown to us before this transformation.

Harmonics of stringed instruments ... lingered in the air and disappeared with the next note. The bass was taut, articulate, forceful and deep. [We experienced the breath, chest and emotion of the singers.]

None of the participants (other than I) had a clue to what had been changed until I reported that the Bassos had been wired incorrectly and I had switched them for stereophonic output. Who would have believed that the Bassos' frequency response of 18 to 60 Hz, -3dB, would influence our perception of the soundstage and frequencies well above the fourth and sixth harmonics of the fundamental bass frequencies? ...

Bryan Ganz, Vice President  
Voce Divina Ltd. Co.

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**Manufacturer (Pluto):** Pluto Audio, Leliestraat 13, 7555 BV Hengelo, The Netherlands, phone/fax 31-74-291-4652 **Importer:** Voce Divina, 580 Roosevelt Street, Midvale, Utah 84047, phone 805 255-1361, fax 805 255-0750 **Designers:** Eddie Driessen, A. J. van den Hul **Serial number:** N/A **Source:** Importer loan **Price:** \$7,995

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**Manufacturer (van den Hul):** van den Hul BV (Netherlands address not available) **Importer:** Stanalog Audio Imports, Box 671, Hegaman, New York 12086 phone/fax 518 843-3070 **Designer:** A. J. van den Hul **Serial number:** CF5G260 **Source:** Importer loan **Price:** \$4,995

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## Thorens TCD 2000 and TDA 2000 digital system

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For years – after I stopped listening to LPs as a primary source – I found myself avoiding recorded classical music. On CDs, the lack of air in the soundstage, the mud in the low midrange to bass, the strident highs, the almost inevitable bulge in the upper midrange, became unbearable. Something in the large-hall experience, particularly on speakers that are not rear-firing, was painfully not right. I listened to the arguments that CD has more dynamic range and better bass reproduction, that its distortions

are different from analogue's – not worse, just different. And yes, I liked studio recordings and small ensembles on CD. Yet when I listened to orchestral music, in particular, something seemed awry, and sometimes I missed LPs and the old Sea Cliff Quad/Quick-silver/Melos system I had given up when I left for California.

Not even very expensive digital systems, with hugely resolving details and silence and clarity, could satisfy my hunger for big orchestral glories. For power music, I was lis-

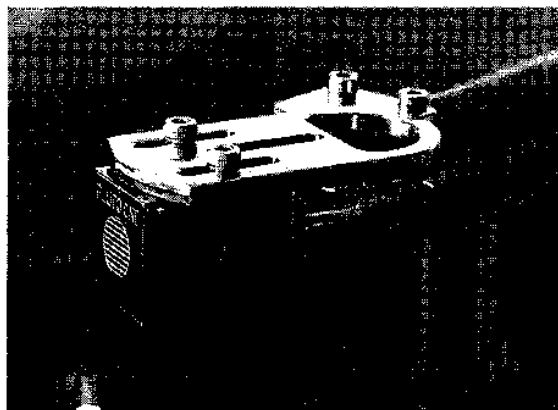
image to the speakers. Even that notorious torture test, the *Scythian Suite* [Classic/Mercury SR90006], is rendered without strain or difficulty. However much of a pig a record may be to track, the Pluto breezes through it with no audible exertion whatsoever.

This cartridge is utterly devoid of the tizzy signature of many moving coils; in comparison it sounds almost rolled off. This impression is immediately dispelled when true high frequencies are present; then its top end seems to go on forever, but the etched quality that usually accompanies such extended response is absent. Graininess is not a part of the Pluto's vocabulary. A frequent criticism of moving coils is that they allow you to count the heads in the orchestra but strip away the spatial and harmonic context in the process of providing this information. I disagree with the application of this generality to moving coils as a class, but the criticism is certainly fair as to particular cartridges. The Pluto is not among the offenders.

The Pluto is also fast, but modest about it. Transients have an impressive snap and a high "jump factor." This speed adds greatly to the intelligibility of singers and the clarity of individual instrumental lines. Head and chest voices of both male and female singers are easy to differentiate, and on any decent recording, the singer's whole body is apparent. On the best recordings, this cartridge brings the singer into the listening room most convincingly.

The Pluto is highly impressive in its ability to resolve vast amounts of detail in a continuous fashion at all volume levels. This allows the listener to hear deeply into a coherent and organized soundscape, where micro-inflections of pitch, dynamics and delicate reverb trails delineate both the presence of humans in the act of making music and the acoustic space they are in.

Soundstaging is chameleonic. Intimate acoustics, such as Rudy Van Gelder's tiny New Joisey recording studio on *The Soulful Moods of Gene Ammons* [Analogue Productions APJ-039] or the smallish-sounding recital hall/studio in which the Quartetto Italiano recorded Beethoven's *Rasumovsky Quartets* [Philips 6998 017], are brought squarely into the listening room. The Pluto is equally adroit in



rendering the best Cinerama-like orchestral recordings, such as the *Royal Ballet Gala Performances* [Classic/RCA LDS-6065], in all of their sensational glory.

Perhaps the jewel in the Pluto's crown is its portrayal of the dynamic spectrum. It can float a triple *pianissimo* effortlessly and its macrodynamics can be overwhelming, as on the *Scythian Suite* or the stunning Classic recut of *La Valse* [Classic/Mercury SR 90313]. My listening notes devoted pages to the quality of this cartridge's dynamic performance.

The astute reader will note that one factor has not yet been addressed: timbral balance. Simply put, the Pluto One is gorgeous; it is, in fact, too gorgeous to be true in every sense of that phrase. The sound is immensely seductive – rich and luscious, with none of the rounded top or the overly soft quality those terms usually imply. Every record, save for the most wretched, sounds consistently lovely, and there's the rub. The Pluto achieves this effect with some subtle yet consistent and unmistakable deviations from neutrality. It is unquestionably voiced on the romantic side of the sonic spectrum.

The mid-bass is just short of plump – old Bruno Walter Columbia six-eyes sound lavish and almost voluptuous, where they should not. From the alto range of the female voice up through the lower treble, there is an overlay of glamour, which lends a rosy aura to the presentation. The Pluto's greatest feat of sleight-of-ear is to blend this posh upper midrange with its extended and neutral top end. The cartridge's treble performance is sufficiently excellent to subjectively, though not observationally, counterbalance and draw attention from the overly luxurious sheen of

## ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

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**Front End (analogue):** SOTA Cosmos turntable; Graham 1.85 pickup arm; SME 309 pickup arm; Pluto One and Clearaudio Gamma-Gold phono cartridges.

**Electronics:** Audio Research PH3 phono preamplifier, LS15 line stage preamplifier and VT100 power amplifier. **Speakers:** Reference 3a Royal Master Control; Artemis Eos Signature; Infinity Modulus subwoofer/crossover. **Interconnects:** Nordost SPM (balanced from line stage to power amp). **Speaker cables:** Nordost SPM shotgun (biwired).

its upper midrange.

It may be difficult to believe that these sonic characteristics are a problem, but in gilding the lily, the Pluto also covers over parts of the truth. The slightly goosed-up midbass allows the really deep bass one finds on certain LPs and powerhouse dance singles, such as the Townhouse-mastered 12-inch of Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Two Tribes" [ZTT 12 ZTAS 3 (UK)], to be diminished and subtly obscured. It also adds a whiff of woolliness to the bass drum detonations on the sensational Classic reissue of the Dorati/LSO *Firebird* [SR 90226], providing more of the post-impact "whoomp" and less of the initial smack of beater on head. The glowing upper midrange winds up masking some of the delicate woodwind interplay in the *Firebird* and occasionally overdamps sibilants, even when they should be present but tamed. When compared with live music, or even the Pluto's more-recently designed cousin, the van den Hul Grasshopper IV-GLA, the Pluto's sexy, soft-focus upper mids result in a more homogeneous, blended sound than is always appropriate. All orchestral recordings take on a hint of the sound of the Vienna Philharmonic in the Musikvereinsaal, even the HP-approved lean-'n'-clean Minnesota Orchestra Ravel box set [QSVBX 5133].

To be honest, I heard none of these colorations (or ignored them in a lovesick swoon) until I had the opportunity to hear the latest Grasshopper. To appropriate a Pearsonism, the effect of the Grasshopper on my perception of the Pluto was that of cold water to the face. In a nutshell, the Grasshopper has all of the Pluto's wonderful qualities –

supreme tracking ability, subtle yet wide-ranging dynamics and speed, but it throws into high relief the Pluto's overtly romantic voicing. Where the Pluto is rosy and glowing, the van den Hul is appreciably more transparent at the back of the soundstage, puts a more convincing rosiny bite into the sound of string sections and allows brass to speak with more power and definition. The Grasshopper's midbass is taut as a drumhead, neither pinched nor excessive, and its bottom octaves both deeper and better defined. It also retails for \$3,000 less.

It seems unfair to criticize the Pluto for being, in effect, too pretty. It has a sound that I, and many who heard it in my system, found bewitching. One is tempted to say of the Pluto One, as was said 15 years ago of the Koetsu cartridges, "If music doesn't sound this way, it should." It is very easy to be seduced by the Pluto, as it was by those Koetsus.

Ultimately the Pluto presents a stern challenge to my journalistic principles. Is it more noble to be unflinchingly truthful than purely beautiful? Mind you, the Pluto is always musical, in the best sense of that oft-abused term, but it is not strictly neutral. If I had megabucks tied up in solid state electronics of the cool-and-dry Krellish ilk, I would welcome the Pluto unreservedly. But on my reference ARC tubes, the Pluto is too much of a good thing.

I would be loath to criticize anyone who determined that the Pluto is his or her dream cartridge, and I could live with it happily for a long while. But the Grasshopper IV is ultimately more thrilling with the best records and truer to the sound of live music. For all of that, the Pluto is an entrancing experiment. It has so many positive qualities that I wish that it spoke a bit more of the truth.

PAUL BOLIN

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## MANUFACTURER'S RESPONSE

Pluto Audio was founded in 1974 by Eddie Driessen of Hengelo, the Netherlands. Mr. Driessen has searched for reference equipment to aid him in researching and developing [fine] analogue products. I visited him in September 1997 and experienced the most