


Equipment Reviews

van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius Phono Cartridge

Details

Written by Tom Mathew

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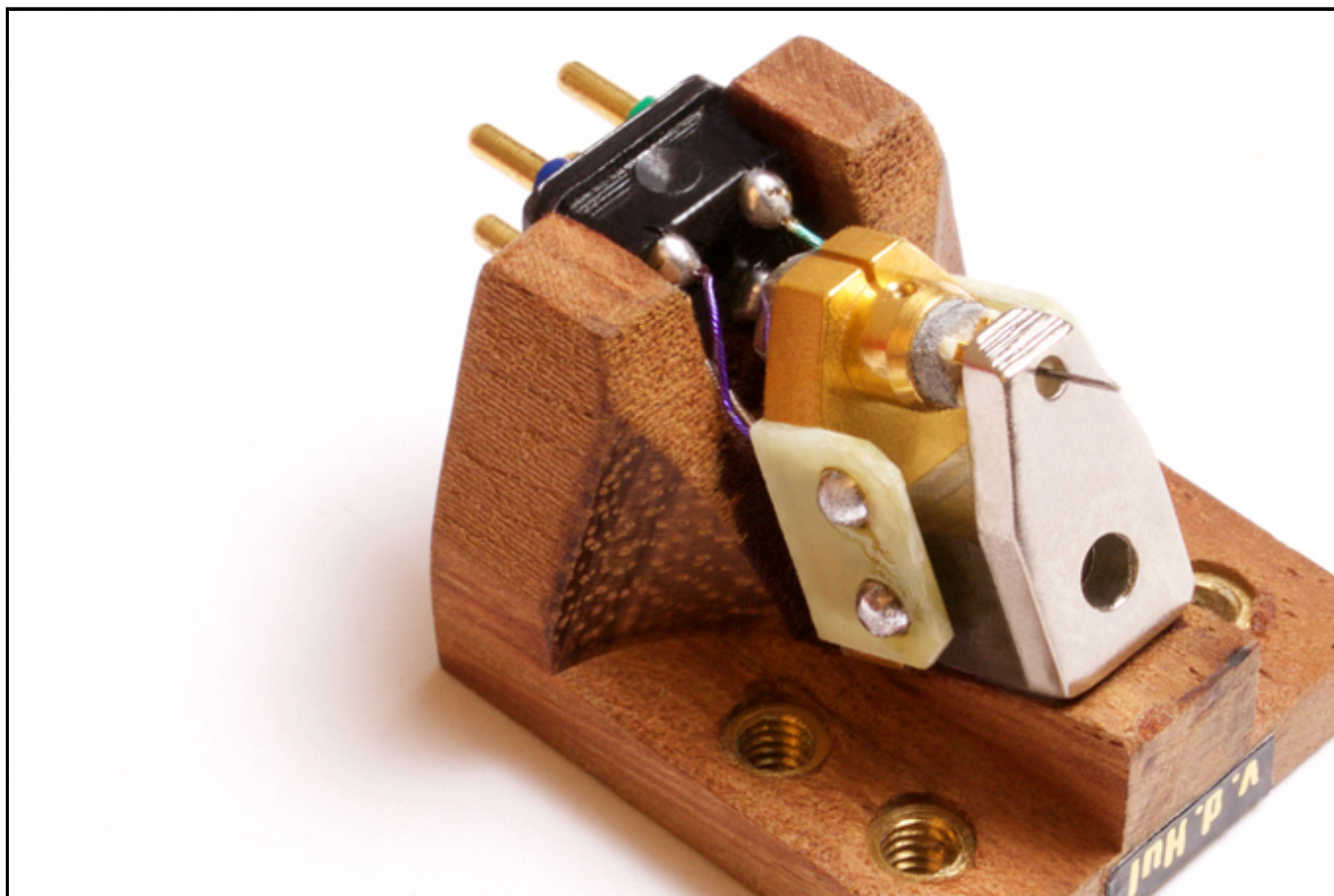
Just before he left for college, my son turned me on to a TV show that's become my new binge-watching passion. Netflix's *Chef's Table* is a visual *and* gustatory feast, and the first episode introduced me to the culinary talents of Massimo Bottura, chef of the three-Michelin-star Osteria Francescana, in Modena, Italy. On the short list of objects in my house that are getting or have gotten better with age are a 1989 bottle of Krug Champagne, my cast-iron frying pan, my wife's red hair, and a bottle of Manodori -- Bottura's meticulously crafted, perfectly aged balsamic vinegar. Drizzled over risotto, shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, arugula, or fresh-picked berries, Manodori's complex, multilayered taste is a perfect example of how well certain things in life can age.



Stereo equipment and brains, however, are things that do *not* typically improve with age -- although my Shindo Laboratory Cortese amplifier is an exception. Most audiophile components have shelf lives shorter than that of the wheels of the Parmigiano-Reggiano that is a staple ingredient at Osteria Francescana, and our cerebral cortexes rarely reach 70 without some degree of cognitive decay. But at a spry 78 years, A.J. van den Hul, a Dutch designer of audio components, delights in disproving this truism. He was gracious enough to answer my questions, including several about the mystery of his apparent continued youthfulness, after Randy Forman of Finest Fidelity, Inc., van den Hul's US distributor, had sent me a sample of AJvdH's latest pièce de resistance: the Crimson Stradivarius phono cartridge (\$4995 USD). You can [read that interview this month \(/index.php/106-uncategorized/685-searching-for-the-extreme-a-j-van-den-hul\)](/index.php/106-uncategorized/685-searching-for-the-extreme-a-j-van-den-hul) on *SoundStage! Ultra*.

Main ingredients

The Crimson Stradivarius is a hand-built, moving-coil phono cartridge with a koa-wood body coated with a special Stradivarius Formula lacquer -- about which A.J. van den Hul was circumspect. The Crimson, a hybrid of his Canary and Condor designs, is available in natural light and dark wood colors, as well as in, well, crimson. A body of polycarbonite is available by special request. Design elements include high-output (0.9mV), 24K-gold coils, a samarium-cobalt magnet, a boron cantilever, and a proprietary van den Hul stylus. The Crimson Stradivarius has a recommended vertical tracking force (VTF) of 1.35-1.5gm and an optimal range of load impedance of 25-250 ohms.



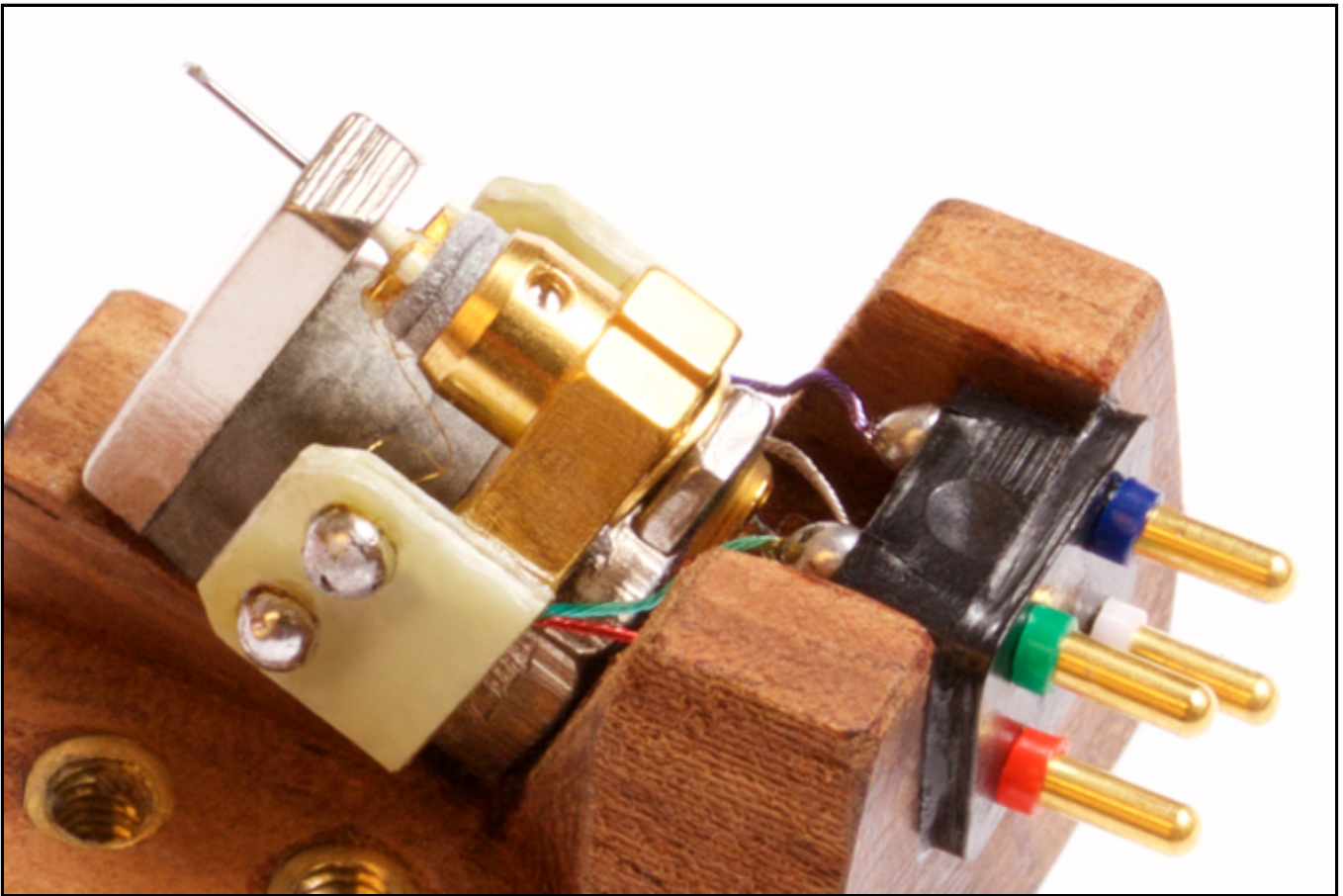
In the kitchen

The primary components used for this tasting were my Luxman L-590AX integrated amplifier, Jamo R909 and Vivid Audio Oval K1 speakers, Skogrand Ravel speaker cables and interconnects, and a Garrard 301 turntable on a Woodsong Audio plinth with AMG 12J2 tonearm. Comparison cartridges were Miyajima Laboratory's Shilabe and Koetsu's Rosewood Signature Platinum. Randy Forman was explicit regarding the two steps required to get the best sound from the Crimson: Give it plenty of time to burn in, and set the loading impedance within the recommended range. So I began my critical listening only after the Crimson had been played for 60 hours, and used the MC input of my Luxman L-590AX integrated amplifier (100 ohms) rather than my separate Luxman phono stage, as the latter's MC load options of 2.5 ohms and 400 ohms were outside the Crimson's recommended range of 25-250 ohms.

A six-course tasting

I began my critical listening with an amuse-bouche: Max Richter's "recomposition" of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, with violinist Daniel Hope, and André de Ridder conducting the Berlin Concert House Chamber Orchestra (LP, Deutsche Grammophon 476 5041). Richter's revisions bring to mind the philosophy of the "deconstructivist" cooking style invented by Ferran Adrià at his world-famous restaurant, El Bulli. Adrià's intent is to transform a well-known dish by modifying its texture, shape, or even its temperature. Successfully reimagined, the essence of the dish will be preserved even if its outward shape and appearance greatly differ from the original's, the goal being to "provoke, surprise and delight the diner." Richter's reinvention of *The Four Seasons* does precisely that -- you recognize the familiar themes even as you're surprised and delighted by their reconstruction.

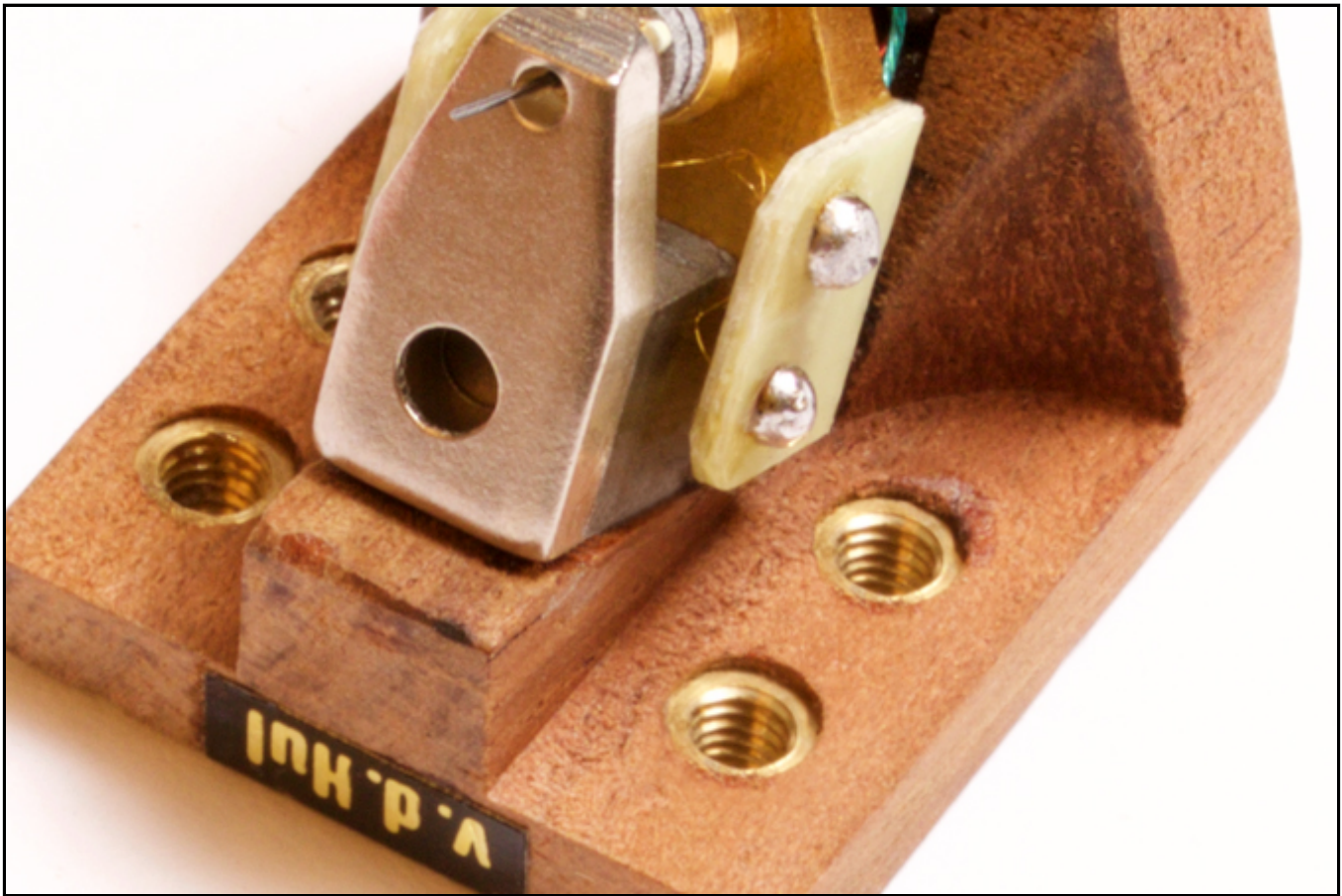
The same could be said for the Crimson Stradivarius's reconstruction of the music stamped into the grooves of my LPs. I was surprised and delighted by the Crimson's rendition of Richter's version of *Spring* (which is played under the opening credits of *Chef's Table*). It immediately showcased several of the Crimson's many strengths: Hope's Guarneri violin had a lovely tone -- rich, dark, opulent, and round. The vdH cartridge conveyed the special characters of Hope's violin tone and playing style with remarkable expressiveness.



So I followed Hope's tone and playing to the works of a more modern Italian composer, Ludovico Einaudi (b. 1955), whose recording *In a Time Lapse* (UK LP, Decca 3735296) I often play in my office and at home, for its psychologically powerful imagery. Einaudi's evocative and dreamlike soundscapes include some truly enchanting passages, and Hope and his violin prominently figure in several. The Crimson's reproduction of this recording was more lifelike than either the Miyajima Shilabe's or the Koetsu Rosewood's, offering sublimely balanced, realistic piano and violin timbres that overlaid inky-"black" backgrounds.

With "Under the Pressure," from The War on Drugs' *Lost in the Dream* (LP, Secretly Canadian SC 310), the Crimson coalesced a vast cacophony of vague, diffuse studio effects into an arrestingly beautiful wall of sound. The juxtaposition of artificial and natural instruments was clearly and cleanly rendered: separation and detail were delivered in exquisite fashion without losing any of the overall gestalt.

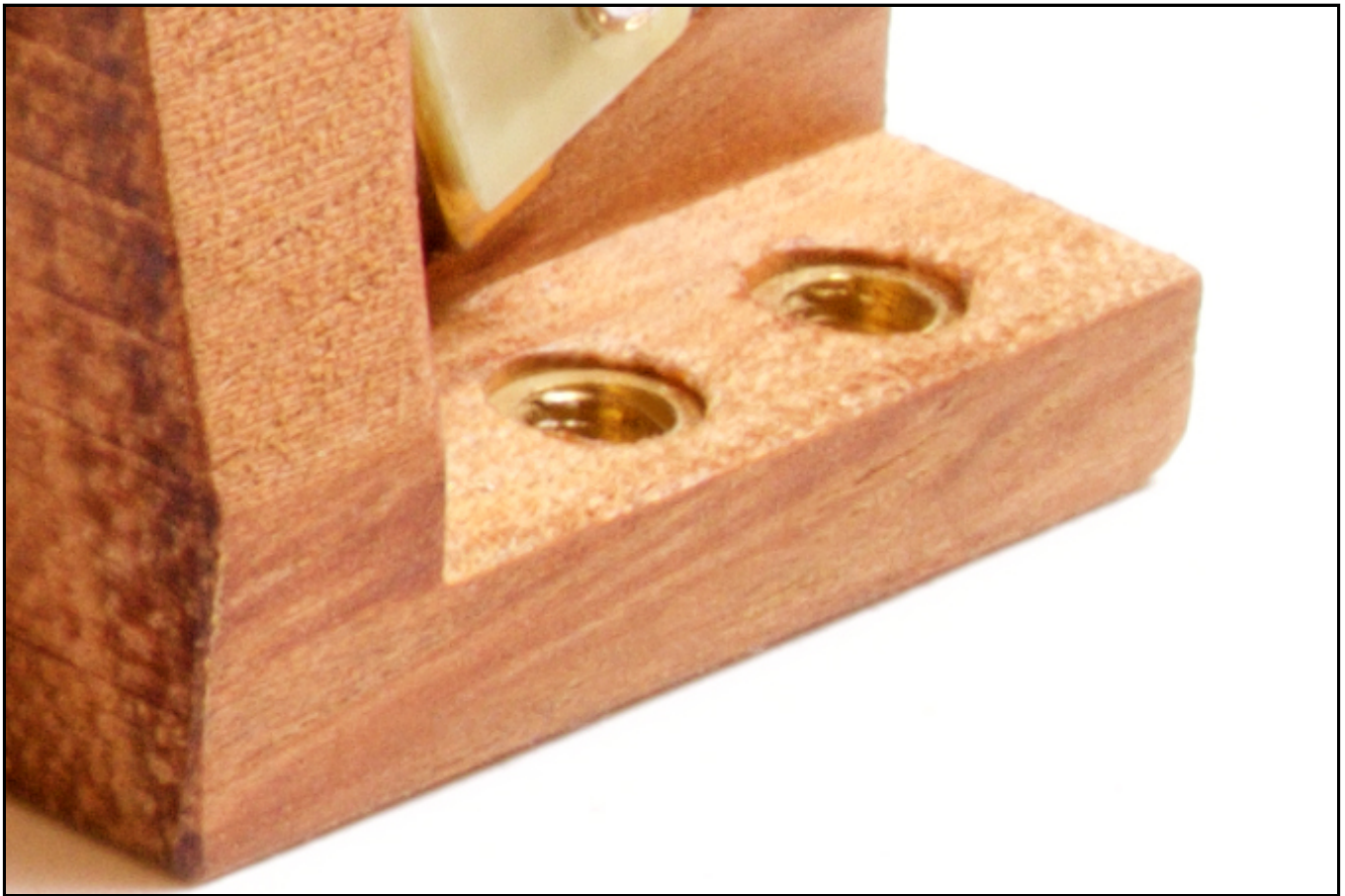
Side A of Radiohead's magical *A Moon Shaped Pool* (LP, XLLP790) revealed more of the Crimson's gifts. In "Burn the Witch," Thom Yorke's plaintive falsetto is first surrounded and threatened by an immense and ominous orchestra; then, in "Daydreaming," he floats along atop a repetitive, Satie-like piano motif lathered with a swirl of hallucinogenic leitmotifs. The contours of his voice were beautifully reproduced by the Crimson as, verse by verse, his singing evokes fear, alienation, deep sadness, mystery, and beauty. If there's one rock band whose work will be studied and deconstructed in classrooms a century from now, my bet is that it will be Radiohead.



For my next two courses I moved on to live recordings. First, the Crimson transported me to New York City, on a Sunday in the summer of 1961, and a jazz club called the Village Vanguard, where the Bill Evans Trio was playing: *The Complete Village Vanguard Recordings, 1961* (LP, Riverside RIV-36005-01). The combination of realistic recording -- individual hand claps, clinking glasses, fingernails on double-bass strings -- and the Crimson's extraordinary reproduction of it all made for a mesmerizing hour. As Bill Belmont's liner note suggests, the only thing missing from my living room was the cigarette smoke.

I then tried to return to New York, this time to Halloween 2010 and a sold-out concert by the Black Crowes: *Wiser for the Time* (LP, Silver Arrow SAR10). I didn't get there -- the Crimson's hyper-revealing nature, which had made possible the trip back to 1961 and Bill Evans, didn't suit this less-than-stellar recording. Unlike the Shilabe and the Rosewood, either of which can make many badly recorded records listenable, even enjoyable, the Crimson sounded as if its stylus was stuck in thick, cloying cream sauce.

The Crimson Stradivarius was a memorable transducer in many ways. Its surgical attention to detail and nuance nonetheless left intact a hefty dose of musicality. Soundstages had impressive width and depth, and tonalities throughout the audioband were extremely balanced. The Shilabe and Koetsu are warmer and more forgiving. The Shilabe is a touch slower, with less leading-edge crispness -- a meaty, beaty, big'n'bouncy sound that favors rock and lower registers. The Rosewood Signature Platinum is more rich in the midrange and perhaps a bit prettier overall. The sound of the vdH Crimson was more neutral, balanced, and crisp than either.



Which of these three to buy will come down to which of these qualities you want more and/or less of, and what type of music you listen to. An aficionado of classical or live acoustic music would be hard-pressed to find a more truthful cartridge than the Crimson Stradivarius. If your listening preferences tend toward a particular style of music, I suggest you specify it to Randy Forman before ordering -- I suspect that some tweaking by A.J. van den Hul in his shop will deliver a semi-bespoke cartridge that would be even more pleasing than a stock unit.

Just desserts

The van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius sounds more neutral, even, balanced, and real than any other cartridge I have heard. By definition, that makes it, for me, of reference caliber, and a perfect addition to a reviewer's toolbox or a music lover's analog source. Fed well-recorded LPs, it will deliver equal portions -- *large* portions -- of truth and beauty.

... Tom Mathew

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Associated Equipment

- **Speakers** -- DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/93, Horning Eufrodite Ellipse, Jamo R909, Vivid Audio Oval K1
- **Amplifiers** -- Shindo Laboratory Cortese and Haut-Brion
- **Integrated amplifiers** -- Luxman L-590AX, SPEC RSA-717

- **Preamplifiers** -- Shindo Laboratory Masseto and Monbrison
- **Digital sources** -- Aurender X100L music server (12TB) streaming Tidal HiFi, Luxman DA-06 DAC, MHDT Havana DAC, Apple MacBook computer
- **Speaker cables** -- Auditorium 23, High Fidelity CT-1 Enhanced, Skogrand Ravel
- **Interconnects** -- Auditorium 23, Sablon Panatela, Shindo Laboratory, Skogrand Ravel
- **Digital cables** -- PranaWire Photon USB
- **Turntables** -- Garrard 401 with Ortofon TA-210 tonearm and Woodsong Audio plinth; Garrard 301 with AMG 12J2 tonearm and Woodsong Audio plinth; Thorens TD 125 turntable
- **Cartridges** -- Dynavector 10x5, Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum, Miyajima Laboratory Shilabe and Zero, Ortofon Xpression
- **Phono connects** -- Bob's Devices Sky 30 step-up transformer, vintage phono cable
- **Phono preamplifier** -- Luxman EQ-500
- **Power conditioners** -- Shindo Laboratory Mr. T, Silver Circle Audio Tchaik 6
- **Furniture** -- Kansa audio stands in Indian rosewood, maple burl, and amboyna; Symposium speaker stands
- **Accessories** -- Acoustic Revive RR-888 ultra-low-frequency pulse generator
- **Record cleaners** -- VPI HW-16.5, Audiodesksysteme Gläss Vinyl Cleaner Pro (in for review)

van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius Phono Cartridge

Price: \$4995 USD.

Warranty: One year parts and labor (200-hour refresh available to original owner).

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