

**By Marco Kolks
Hörerlebnis**

The GRAIL: Phono stage produced by Dutch manufacturer van den Hul

Actually, it was only a matter of time before Aalt Jouk van den Hul would accept the challenge of designing and building the perfect phono stage for cartridges. To do this, he, together with R&D man Jürgen Ultee, started mostly from scratch and walked a completely new and innovative road to get there.

De final result, being The GRAIL, proves both of them right in doing so.

First came the question: "what does a phono stage need to have the cartridge reproduce an optimum result?" De answer is: short distances and few components of only the best quality. Utmost absence of negative feedback such as is possible with tube technology (feedback is critical when it concerns an over all feedback, meaning that from the output of an amplifier a corrective signal is being obtained and is being added to the entry signal in the first stage in a reduced way. As it is seen dubious from a sonic point of view, this is not the case with the MC entry of The GRAIL. Local feedback (i.e. negative feedback within a single amplifying stage in a composite amplifier concept) are, however, found in virtually all valve amplifiers – if not for any other reason than because of re-liability by establishing the local points of operation – as is also the case in The GRAIL).

And still no application of tubes that are becoming increasingly more expensive and more difficult to get. The repeated consistency in quality needs to be assured with The Grail. Beside the above, also the microphonic properties of tubes are a serious weakness. At the same time, record play-back should keep its natural, warm sound, as is a specific tube characteristic. Should semi-conductors be necessary, then only without their typical Anemia in the reproduction.

The capacitors in the equalization network have, in a completely new design, been replaced by low-resistance coils. The fact that coils generate a high amount of distortion, says Jürgen Ultee, is an advantage because one simply hasn't applied the correct coils. This procedure requires a careful and elaborate balancing of every single coil. This could also be seen as a protection against the danger of copy-products being produced. It's a rogue who thinks badly about this...

The MC-chip in the input stage comes from the U.S.A. and is being produced exclusively for The GRAIL. Further interesting is, that the gyrator stage (simulation of reactance) has been exclusively built with MOSFETs. Here not only a

phase model is constructed but also the behaviour of a reactance (in this case: inductance) in a way that even the filter-/ sieve function of the coil is being adjusted.

The GRAIL can be used with both MM- as well as MC phono cartridges. Dipswitches, located at the inside of the amplifier (four easily removable Phillips screws hold the top cover) allow you to adjust the amplification factor. The higher, the stronger the output of the signal. Please be careful when making your selection. In case you exaggerate, this may result in a harshness in the louder parts of the music. In the middle of the multi-lingual manual a diagram has been included that explains the process of setting and adjusting. By the way, looking after each minor detail. As this page probably is used more often as a reference, a transparent foil is included for protection. If that's not something....

Regarding the input impedance, this phono stage is very user-friendly as well. When using a MC phono cartridge, the adjustment is fully automatic. Simply plug in the RCA interconnect and of you go! The input impedance for MM, MI (Grado/The Cartridge Man) and high-output MC works by experience fine at 47 kOhm load. Capacitance can, when needed, be simply adjusted bridging the RCA input connectors.

For me completely new is the PCB that has been made of a special high frequency quality base material with pure gold conductive tracks instead of the regular copper ones. This is an extremely noticeable difference compared to the construction of other amplifiers. Even just looking at it clearly shows the difference.

The front of The GRAIL impresses with a solid brushed Aluminum cover with rounded corners. At the lower left bottom the company name van den Hul is placed, at the right side the product name. In the center a red diode indicates that the power is on.

At the rear we find on the left side the entry socket for the power cable coming from the separate power supply. Next to it are four pairs of RCA receptacles: output signal for the pre-amp, adjustment of the capacitance, MM and MC input. Next to these you find an earth-point, thankfully this time not one of these clumsy no-good ones but one of high quality. Further a small switch to select between either MM or MC input.

The actual Phono stage is anything but lightweight. Here we find serious emphasis on low resonance (in this respect, notice the four feet, made from specially selected wood). That it works is confirmed with a simple knocking on the amp.

Over all dimensions (including connectors) of (wxhxd) 4x10x32 cm of The GRAIL make that you'll have to make some room for it. Even more so because of the separate power-supply (size:

(wxhxd) 13x9x20 cm). From a sonic point of view, to have the as little influence as possible, van den Hul advises to place the two parts separate from each other. This is the reason the cable between the two is over two meters long. In case you want to even further improve this power supply, you could replace the standard fuses with a 800 mA (5x20 mm) value for fuses made by Phonosophie or AHP. To do this, open the small plastic cover from below with a screwdriver. Connect, pull, open.

Demanding electronics react, in my experience, very strong on the way it is positioned. This is no different with The GRAIL. Depending on the base (Acapella, Copulare, Klangmanufaktur or SSC) there is a change in sound. Also the power supply should not be put simply on the ground. One would lose too much by doing so. A decent power cable goes without saying. For this purpose, van den Hul adds its own The MAINSTREAM. Alternatives are Dolphin Audio (nice detail), Phonosophie (dynamic and powerful) as well as Klang und Kunst (a bit more warm and saturated). The rest of the set-up consists, next to amplifiers made by Burmester, the speakers are the Violoncello from Acapella, on the analog side (beyond any doubt the absolute top) the Pluto 12 A turntable with the 2 A arm and one of the last-generation van den Hul Colibri SPED cartridges (= Special Edition). It's obvious that the quality of the NF-interconnect is of the same high standard. An alternative to the Acapella pure silver cables are the much more affordable Carbon cables The SECOND, made by van den Hul. The last mentioned require a new-orientation when listening. At first the sound seems less controlled. This turns out to be incorrect. All detail is there, there is no difficulty and the result is an astonishing natural sound. (This is a completely different story all together). Just to be complete, I'd like to mention that I have cleaned all connections, including the ones holding the fuse. Everything together, one can say that the connections were made with innovative techniques. Aalt Jouk van den Hul and Jürgen Ultee have redesigned the phono pre-amp from the ground up, leaving no detail unattended, something that has resulted in fantastic measurement results.

However, no person buys his equipment to be able to show excellent measurements. One wants to listen to good music with it.

Hörerlebnis (Listening experience)

The GRAIL opens itself to the lovers of nice sound and valuable soul. They are being served in high standing and what is listened to will have serious influence on the senses. One of the characteristics of this phono pre-amplifier has captured my attention immediately: it shows new

roads towards natural and spacious imaging. It doesn't do justice to just talk about all the differences in sound stage. There are a whole lot more positive aspects. Most striking to me is the extraordinary plasticity of the image. No matter if you take instruments, voices or recording-(background)noise, The GRAIL shows a stage, a tangibility in my listening room as I've experienced only a very few times before. I'll try to explain in more detail using the LP "Cembalo und Blockflöte" as an example. The harpsichord stands free in space. Even different tonal exclamations are not able to move the exact positioning. Nothing collapses, nothing jumps in front. Much more the positioning of the instruments and their respective sizes, including the flute, is shown. The place of recording is imaged in a way that is very special. Together with The COLIBRI, made by van den Hul, The GRAIL reveals a reality that many audiophiles will appreciate and inspire.

Reproduction is resilient and clear, balanced and not overly aggressive. The GRAIL is like an acoustic microscope for even the most refined tonal sequences. This extremely high level of resolution does, however, certainly not mean that the coherent sound image is violated by individual spikes in any way. The image itself remains tasteful: smooth and round whilst maintaining detail and precision is what I hear, resulting in a high grade of musical intimacy. It is really quite an accomplishment to be able to put down an image that is both transparent and powerful and also being able to reproduce many tonal differences. I have to admit, this is something that really touches me right in my soul. Even with older recordings, The GRAIL removes the veil of age in a way that the violin sounds fresh and lively again. I refuse to reduce what I've heard by breaking it down into separate terms like dynamics, space and easy listening. We're talking here about music and musicality. Hifi never came up!

I've heard this phono stage in multiple set-ups and there were moments I thought "what have I been listening to till now". Limitations as a result of lack of dynamics, missing detail, poor base tones, slow mid- and high frequencies and some more acoustic garbage. The GRAIL comes so close to the music, so dedicated and gives such a credibility that the listener is prompted to all of his favorite records on the platter as soon as possible.

Conclusion: The GRAIL; join the club!

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