

H van den Dungen

From selling on cartridges bought on weekend trips to London to replacing styli on a production line for mere pounds, few figures in the hi-fi world can boast such a varied career as Herman van den Dungen. **Ken Kessler** meets the man behind PrimaLuna

With a career that corresponds almost precisely with modern high-end audio, Herman van den Dungen can boast juggling three disciplines concurrently. He's a distributor, a retailer and a manufacturer, now best-known for PrimaLuna valve products. Regardless of your political stance, PrimaLuna's Chinese-made tube hardware was among the first to be acceptable by Western standards, Herman exploiting the low prices of manufacture in Asia, but insisting on reliability previously unknown in their electronics. The beneficiaries have been audiophiles on a budget. And it was pricing that got him started back in 1975.

'I was a teacher, statistics and economics, but I became interested in hi-fi. I started – maybe I shouldn't

say this – I started to do grey import! I was interested in all kinds of cartridges, and I found a brochure at that time from Lasky's or Audiotronics. I saw that Shure cartridges and SME tonearms were priced much lower in the UK than here in Holland, so I would take the ferry at the weekends, go to London to buy all sorts of cartridges. I started selling them here with a little margin.'

GOING PROFESSIONAL

Before long, Herman decided to make it a profession, becoming the official distributor of Grado cartridges. 'And before van den Hul, I was already replacing diamonds and cantilevers. As a teacher, I was driving on my holidays to Germany to a company called Weinz, they were producing diamonds for B&O and Philips. At first I sent styli there to be replaced, but one evening, Mr Weinz, in his Mercedes S500 or whatever, stopped at my little apartment. After he was visiting Philips, he came to us even though relatively-speaking we did so little business. And what he said was, "What we can do, you can do, too."

'He said, "Come to Germany, and in two days I can show you how to fit Shibata styli." So there I was, sitting between German women who were replacing styli, and I had a small diamond of 10 Deutschmarks at the time in tweezers, and ping! Oops! Again, same thing, 10 Deutschmarks ended up somewhere on the floor. So there I was, really learning the basics. I put thousands of Shibata styli in cartridges in the Netherlands, and it was very small business, but every stylus gave me 25 Guilders. And out of that little money I could do further business.'



At the time, the late 1970s, audiophile discs were becoming must-have items, with the majority of the labels based in the USA.

'At some point, I came into contact with Sheffield Lab Records. So I contacted them, and I bought my first 50 or 100 records, back then sent by sea – it seemed like a thousand years by boat. I started to sell them, and later on Telarc records, so that finally, I became a distributor of specialty records. I was the biggest one in Europe, I had all of the labels, a monopoly. Especially Mobile Fidelity, it was fantastic because I saw the advertisements for *Crime of the Century*, Pink Floyd, that couldn't be! That was *good* music, not the music you found on audiophile records!'

Herman had contacted Mobile Fidelity to be told that because of rights issues, it couldn't ship the records to Europe.

'But through all kinds of ways we got them in – we had a thousand,

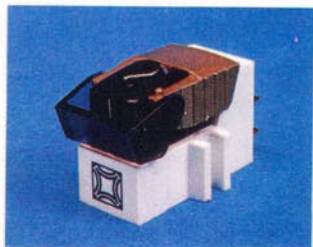
ABOVE: Herman van den Dungen, photographed at CES, 2009

BELOW LEFT: A JVC 4MD-20X cartridge fitted with a Shibata stylus; after sending cartridges to Weiss to have their styli replaced Herman was invited to learn how to fit Shibata styli himself

RIGHT: In 2003 Herman launched PrimaLuna. Its first product was the Prologue One integrated with EL34s tubes; a version with KT88s followed

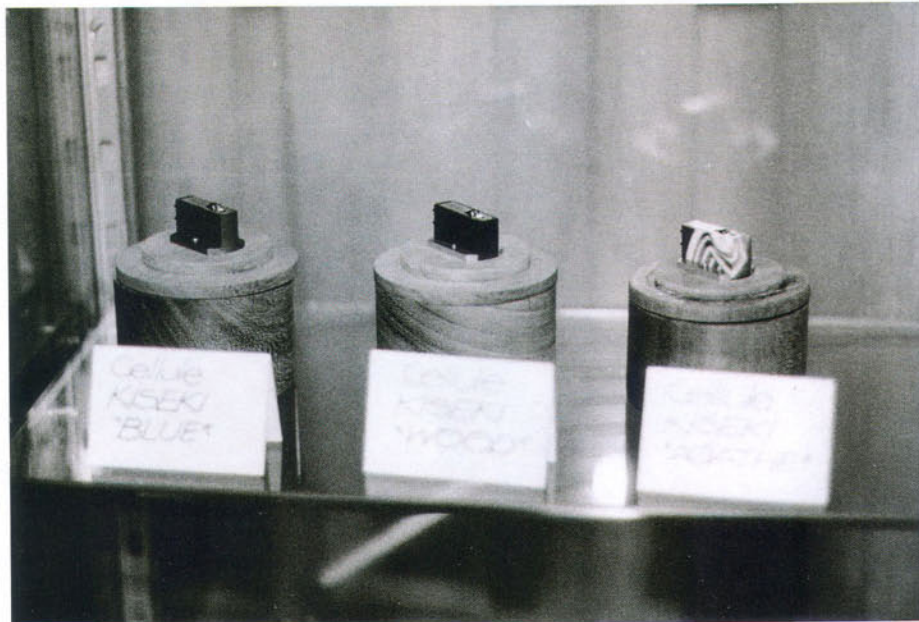
4MD-20X Unique 4-Channel/2-Channel Stereo Cartridge With SHIBATA Stylus

The 4MD-20X V-shape magnetic cartridge has an extended range frequency response (20 – 60,000Hz) which is as much as three times wider than a regular stereo cartridge. It means this cartridge can reproduce the perfect discrete 4-channel sound.



SPECIFICATIONS

Application	Playback of CD-4 discrete 4-channel or 2-channel discs
Structure	Magnetic
Stylus	Shibata Stylus, 4DT-20X
Output	2.0mV at 1kHz and 50mm/s
Output Balance	0.5dB
Frequency Characteristics	20 – 60,000Hz
Channel Separation	More than 30dB (at 1kHz) More than 20dB (at 30kHz)
Impedance	25kΩ (at 1kHz)
DC Resistance	100Ω
Stylus Pressure	1.5 – 2.0 gr.
Compliance	35 × 10 ⁻⁹ cm/dyne
Load	47kΩ – 100kΩ



two thousand pieces per title. That was fantastic. And at the same time, we started to do a little hi-fi [hardware] distribution. I remember Dahlquist, and at that time I also started up Koetsu distribution in Europe. [See *HFN* June '09.] You had Sumiko in America; I set up the network in Europe.

'Sugano [of Koetsu] did not speak any language other than Japanese, he had a daughter who could only speak a little bit of German with a dictionary in her hand. So I was calling, but at that time you had to go through the operator in the middle of the night, 12 o'clock, 1 o'clock. I took the phone from my bedroom and would go to my living room, and I would talk to the operator and talk to the daughter at Koetsu. I would say, "Hello? Hello?" And the daughter would say "Hello?". I remember the operator once saying, "You better say more

than 'hello' because this is f***** expensive."

Herman eventually went to Japan and made contact with Sugano.

'And every month I would get 30 cartridges to distribute in Europe. I worked with Quadramail in the UK, Jon Soyka, who left. And along came Ricardo Franassovici of

'I put thousands of Shibata styli in cartridges; every stylus gave me 25 Guilders'

Absolute Sounds. I took a special phone number for Ricardo, because he wanted to have the distribution so much he was constantly calling my normal business number. I took another line for him and it's still my private line!' (Laughs.)

'So I built up the distribution network, but because it was high-end, you had a few good dealers. But you are very dependent on that, which is dangerous, of course. One of my best dealers decided that he was no longer interested in hi-fi. He was going into photography, which is very interesting, but brought me nothing. All my sales were gone, so then I started up a shop with one of the guys who worked for him. That was my first shop, and

out of that we grew to four shops. At the same time, it was a kind of revolution, a distributor who opens retail shops. But some brands I didn't sell in my own shops because I had an agreement with dealers, and that was always respected. So I could do the two things together.'

MANUFACTURING BECKONS

PrimaLuna and Mystère, though now a dominant part of his empire, were not Herman's first brands.

'Prior to the creation of Kiseki moving coil cartridges, I had silver-wound Audiophile Products transformers made in Japan by Mr Kondo – this was before anyone knew him. I was selling that together with Koetsu cartridges. Then, when Mr Nakanishi took away the Koetsu distribution from Sumiko in the USA and me in Europe, I had to come up with something else, which was my Kiseki range. So the Audiophile Products transformer and Kiseki were my first productions. Then I made the interface mat as Audiophile Products, which was used by Oracle for a long time. Kiseki sold world-wide. I cannot tell you how many we sold. If at that time the internet had existed, you would be probably be talking to another Mr Buffett!'

The AH! Tjoebe CD player was the first thing Herman issued in electronics. 'One year, we were at CES with the "European Mafia" [the collective, unofficial term for a group of powerful and influential distributors], and if someone found something interesting, we would call each other, see each other and take the distribution. And I found a CD player with tubes. "This is impossible!" It was the California Audio Labs' Tempest. ☞

ABOVE: In 1981 Herman launched his Kiseki range of moving-coil cartridges; shown above are the 'Blue' 'Wood' and 'Agate' models

BELOW RIGHT: Yoshiaki Sugano of Koetsu; after meeting him in Japan in the late '70s, Herman began distributing Koetsu in Europe



MOVERS & SHAKERS

I was so surprised, couldn't understand how it would work. 'So I called everybody, and that became my favourite CD player. But the damn thing broke every six months. By a certain point, I got so tired of it, I said to my technician, "I want to have a CD player with a tube output, if you can make one... I'd been using the Tempest for many, many years, I was even buying secondhand ones to replace the broken ones.'

In 1998-9, Herman offered one CD player, a heavily-modified Marantz CD-38 but with many options. What remained of the Marantz were the case, front-panel display, drive mechanism, DAC, headphone socket and remote control. Herman's crew replaced the solid-state muting circuit with a mechanical relay and the standard clock with their low-jitter Supercrystal; also added was an AC noise filter.

What made the £285 player worth double the price of the donor



ABOVE: Hermann pictured in 2005 with Jozefina Krahulcova of EAT Valves

LEFT & BELOW: Launched in 2006 and run by Herman's technician Marcel Croese, the Mystère range of amplifiers is based on Pentode valve circuits; the brand both complements and competes with PrimaLuna, but Herman's hands are on both reins



Marantz was a valve output board bearing two Philips 6922 military tubes, and a parts list that included a dedicated toroidal transformer for the tube stage, premium components from Wima and Vishay, a Philips TDA1546 DAC chip and dual-mono Burr-Brown OPA604 op-amps for voltage gain. Options included other DAC chips, an upsampling board to 24-bit/192kHz processing, Tjoebe Shoes vibration-control devices and more.

MODDER TO MAKER

In Herman's words it was 'a coincidence' that drove him to full-scale manufacturing instead of mere modification. When we started AH! Tjoebe, I had help from an Italian friend. He is a guy with very good ideas and a very good memory. In fact he's a kind of encyclopaedia if you want to know something: if you need a screw of 2-3mm, you go there, and so on. For whatever reason, he mentioned at a certain moment, "I have a nice product, an integrated tube amp, maybe you want to listen to it. Maybe it's something for you." 'So he brings it over, we listened to it, but I had other stuff in the shop that sounded better. So my technician listened to it, started to change things, and modify things, and finally we came up with something and felt, "Hey, if we can

make this at an affordable price, then we have a very nice product to sell in the shops."

'So we started with a few units, later on a few more, and it became a bigger thing. I discussed it with Kevill Deal at Upscale Audio in the USA, who had been doing the AH! Tjoebe CD player for a long time. And he said, "No Chinese stuff. I have seen so many problems and I don't want to lose my money," and so on. I said, you know me, and if I sell you something it is reliable. And if it's not reliable, I'll make it reliable.

'If I sell you something it is reliable. And if it's not reliable, I will make it so'

'So he said, "That's true. But it has to be easy for the customer." So my technician, Marcel Croese, he's Dutch, used to work for Goldmund but he returned from Switzerland and came to work for me, we were talking about how to bias the tubes. And then after some time, he came up with Adaptive Auto-Bias – that made the thing easy to use, for the American customer sitting somewhere with no dealer near to him, no screwdriver, no meter needed. So it started to be successful in the United States. In the Netherlands, it was already doing good. The first one was the ProLogue One with EL34s, and

Mystère **allReviews**

Personal reviews |a11

Herman van den Dungen
initiator, co-designer, distributor, Netherlands

Mystère Motivated

In the World of HiFi "and the rest of the World" a "review" is an important tool to market new and existing products. In most cases a "review" is a description of what a professional audio journalist (the "reviewer") thinks, feels when he is using a product for a SHORT period of time. As a reader you have to keep that in mind.

More and more you see a new kind of reviews, the so-called CONSUMER reviews. Chances are that these are less professional in writing (however that is not always the case as there exist many well-written consumer reviews, some even more full to read than professional reviews), but the fact that these reviews are often based on a longer period of use, make them extra interesting to read too.

What you almost never see, are reviews by dealers, distributors. And you can wonder why. The distributor is often the first one to decide if he is going to invest in a new range of products. He has to invest in goods and execute a good marketing plan. Next to that he

MOVERS & SHAKERS

1975

Herman van den Dungen starts sourcing cartridges in UK for sale in Holland

1976

Begins distributing Sheffield Lab audiophile LPs

1978

Acquires Mobile Fidelity distribution

1979

Commences distribution of Koetsu cartridges.

Launch of Audiophile Products

1981

Launches Kiseki range of MC cartridges

1985

Release of CD Interface Mat

1986

Cogelco Cable; Milltek cartridges

1987

Record Interface Mats

1990

Opens retail stores Dé Hifiwinkel, Eindhoven

1993

Opens The Hifishop, Tilburg and the HifiGallery, Brussels

1994

Opens De Hifistudio, Emmen

1998

Opens Dé Hifiwinkel, Nijmegen

Launch of AH! Tjoeb

2003

Birth of Prima Luna

2006

Launches Mystère

2009

Buys Bow and Thule

we made a KT88 version, then a preamp, power amp, mono amp and finally, the CD player.'

The original was made in China, so Herman was buying directly from them. 'And because it was such a success I made an agreement with them that I was to buy the model exclusively. The chassis, the design, with all the changes that we made, they would not sell it to somebody else, as a copy or whatever.'

Mystère took the range up a level. 'It's a pentode design, another circuit. Marcel has been working on the PrimaLuna line, but his heart is a little bit more with pentode designs, so he explored that design to the maximum that he could, and that is the Mystère line.'

Does DiaLogue compete with Mystère? 'Yes and no. Everything competes with everything, but I prefer to have two brands in my hands, so I have more of a chance that the customer will be mine. But we differentiate between them with totally different looks, ergonomics, manufacturing partners. Mystère is more for the die-hard audiophile, you have no remote, you have a resistor ladder volume control, the parts are a little bit higher level, so it's a little bit higher-priced.'

TAKING A BOW

Herman recently acquired Bow Technologies and Thule. 'Both have unique design factors. You have everything from Sweden, Denmark – if you look at the range of Thule, you think more of the Primare line of products, while Bow is of a higher level. More design, more electronics – in my opinion Bow's founder, Bo Christensen, is a fantastic designer, but once he has done that, he is already thinking of the next thing. With me, I want to manufacture it to the maximum and bring it to the market.' Bo has moved on to a new company, Artora, but the lines of communication remain open between him and Herman, should the latter need any advice.

Although resolutely a two-channel manufacturer, Herman knows that he needs to consider the possibilities of multichannel.

'But if I do something multichannel, it has to be so simple that even I understand it! Otherwise, I won't go into it. If I look at my phone [holds up his mobile],

it's so complex I almost don't understand how I make a call.

'With PrimaLuna, the only thing that we have to do now is finish the design of the DiaLogue Three preamplifier and DiaLogue Eight CD player. It's exciting for me because we are going to do two tube clocks in it, and the tube clock is a completely crazy, original PrimaLuna design, because who is thinking of it, a tube as an oscillator. But it works fantastically, so now they are building prototypes with two tube clocks in it. It's a player, but it has digital inputs. You can even connect a computer to it, through USB.'

TUBE SERVER?

Herman has his work cut out with re-establishing Bow and Thule, and hasn't ruled out a server product (with valves!). 'Bow is a good platform for me. I could go to a lower price level but still a good quality level, but in my mind I have ideas about going up. Thule? My main interest is the designs, the designs are for sure not perfect. My and Marcel's and the others' job is to make it as reliable as our PrimaLuna and Mystère products, and as good-sounding.

'Thule has three different ranges: in every range they have integrated amps, CD, DVD, stereo

preamp and they also are a bridge to multichannel. So maybe when we finish the stereo, we look at the multichannel line.'

Despite a plethora of electronics lines, Herman has said 'No' to speakers. 'I don't think that our expertise is there. We have tried to have the AH! Tulip speaker, which is a fantastic speaker. It's based on the speaker Mark Levinson used for Red Rose – the nice thing is that the speaker cost nothing, but we had a special stand design that was made out of solid aluminium and the stand *made* the speaker! It was a monitor with a tripod stand under it and we had the three rods of the tripod going through so you could integrate it, but the Chinese company who made the tripod didn't want to do it – it was so expensive as you have no quantities.

'Sometimes it makes me think of the time I was building electrostatic speakers for myself, as a hobby, and I think that when I'm retired, I'm going to do that again.'

And just when will you retire? 'When I'm in the grass.' ☺

BELOW: (Clockwise from top) PrimaLuna ProLogue Two amp (*HFN* March '05), DiaLogue Two amp (*HFN* July '08), ProLogue Eight CD player (*HFN* Nov '08) and DiaLogue One amp (*HFN* June '09)

