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SUMIKO

PALO SANTOS PRESENTATION

Popular specialist elevates its cartridge to high-end status

PRICE £1,995 CONTACT Symmetry Systems ■ 01727 865488 ■ www.sumikoaudio.net

Sumiko is a company that has long been associated with good-value moving coil cartridges, a reputation it has carved out primarily with the Blue Point Special. It's a model that is now in its third incarnation and one that continues to set the standard at its price point. This is also the least expensive nude cartridge on the market – something which is not so much the case with the Palo Santos Presentation, the manufacturer's most ambitious design to date.

This is not Sumiko's first foray into the high end, however. The Pearwood Celebration started the trend: it's now in its second iteration and incorporating some of the features which the Palo Santos builds upon, but at nearly half the price. These include the connoisseurs' choice of magnet, Alnico, a long-grain boron cantilever and a machined Teflon back-plate, the latter housing tapered hollow mounting pins which make fitting fiddly cartridge tags far easier than usual.

The latest model ups the ante with a Brazilian rosewood palo santos body, one that is shorter in height than the Pearwood in order to make it easier to align the cartridge. It has a new generator anchoring system that has been created to improve rigidity and thus reduce resonance. Unusually, you can clearly see the workings of the cartridge because there is no cover plate on the bottom. It's not something we've come across in a wooden body design before and a it's tacit way of saying that the hardwood is there for sonic rather than structural reasons. It's topped with a polished stainless plate that's tapped for a pair of stainless bolts that are supplied in three lengths, along with an Allen wrench to suit. The shiny plate looks great sticking out underneath our SME V headshell.

The stylus is a Vital PH line contact type in diamond that is designed to track at between 1.8 and 2.2g, with 2g being the optimum. The cartridge itself weighs a fairly manageable 8.3g.

Internally, the generator system's front yoke is put together with a high-pressure fit against the Alnico, in an attempt to ensure linear magnetic density. The cartridge is described as low output and produces half a millivolt – quite manageable for MC phono stage. The preferred load impedance varies according to whether you reference the box or the web page (the former is probably correct at 10 – 100ohms). The boron cantilever is suspended in a synthetic rubber that Sumiko selected not only because of the potential for controlling its characteristics, but also because it has a far greater life expectancy than natural designs which suffer when exposed to UV.

The Palo Santos is nicely packaged and supplied with an informative booklet on the dark art of cartridge set up. Even if you don't buy this cartridge, we'd recommend you download the set up PDF from the Sumiko website. Of particular interest is the manufacturer's recommendation that you run anti-skate at two-thirds of downforce. This is something that we have done for some time, but is different to the usual recommendation of equalling downforce.

SOUND QUALITY

This is undeniably a revealing and neutral cartridge and one that responds quite dramatically to the subtleties of set-up. Sumiko recommends using downforce as a means of making small VTA changes which, as it recommends a 1.2-degree rake for the cartridge.

It is also extremely quiet: surface noise is well-repressed, a result of the extremely small profile of the stylus. In action, it gets out of the way rather effectively, letting the quality of the music and recording shine through and only rarely revealing any inclinations of its own. This could be a vagary of set up, of course,

as setting VTA perfectly for one slab of vinyl is not the same as having it correct for all of them – especially when mixing heavyweight and regular pressings.

With Keith Jarrett's *Changes*, the slow build up of the piece is mesmerising, with shimmering piano and fine cymbal work gradually transforming into a crescendo of Jack De Johnette's drums. Here, the kit really jumps out of the speakers. There is no shortage of transient attack, but it is never accentuated by the cartridge, which does pretty well exactly what the groove defines. It also does scale with aplomb. Whether it's Felix Laband's handcrafted halls of echo and reverb or Lambchop's multi-instrument

soundscapes, there is no sense of the speakers limiting the soundstage – they just disappear into it. With Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark*, the voice is enormous.

At times it could be a little more colourful and exciting, but that is clearly not its remit – this cartridge is all about revealing what's on the disc. It turned in a more convincing result with a Townshend Rock 7/Rega RB300, a combination that allowed for a more musically engaging result that brought out the greatness in

old favourites such as Steely Dan's *My Old School*.

Sumiko has produced an extremely revealing and subtle cartridge in the Palo Santos Presentation. It requires careful setting up for best results, but is better than most at getting out of the way and letting the character of the record take centre stage. ■

Jason Kennedy

“There is no shortage of transient attack and the cartridge also does scale with aplomb”

