

Sumiko Oyster Rainier Moving-Magnet Phono Cartridge

by Thom Moon

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Sumiko, a longtime importer and distributor of high-quality audio equipment, is now owned by the McIntosh Group, formerly the Fine Sounds Group and owner of McIntosh Laboratory, Audio Research, Sonus Faber, Pryma, and Wadia. For years, Sumiko's Oyster and Pearl moving-magnet and Blue Point moving-coil cartridges have been considered great values by many reviewers and audiophiles. Recently, they added three new low-priced MM models to their Oyster line, to fill the price gap between the Pearl (MM, \$119 USD) and the Blue Point No.2 (MC, \$449). The new models are the Rainier (\$149), the Olympia (\$199), and the Moonstone (\$299), and Sumiko recently gave me the opportunity to check out all three. This review is of the least expensive, the Rainier.

Description

Sumiko's new cartridges offer something I've always considered a benefit: all three use the same body, the only difference being the stylus. So, as with many Grado and Ortofon cartridges with which I'm familiar, if you want to upgrade, all you need is a new stylus, not the entire cartridge. Kudos to Sumiko!

The Rainier comes in a lovely wooden box with a wrapper printed with its name and specifications. The cartridge itself is fairly nondescript in appearance, but is well finished with no rough edges. Its white stylus surround denotes it as the Rainier.

The Rainier has a simple elliptical stylus (only in relation to the higher cartridges in the series; no elliptical stylus is truly simple), and its cantilever is an aluminum pipe. Its specifications include a frequency response of 15Hz-25kHz, channel separation of 25dB at 1kHz, channel balance of 1.5dB at 1kHz, and output of 5.0mV. The range of vertical tracking force (VTF) is 1.8-2.2gm, with 2.0gm as the recommended value.

The Rainier comes with a limited, nontransferable warranty of one year on parts and labor. If there's a problem, you pay the shipping to Sumiko's facility in Berkeley, California; they pay for shipping it back to you. Proof of purchase is required, so save your receipt.

Setup

Installing the Oyster Rainier in the headshell of my Dual CS 5000 turntable's tonearm was pretty much a snap, largely because Sumiko's new cartridges come with a great mounting feature: threaded nuts built into the cartridge body to accept the supplied hex-head screws. There's no fooling around with tiny, separate nuts, often the most frustrating part of mounting a cartridge. The cartridge's mass of 6.5gm is about average for an MM cartridge -- it wasn't hard to balance the tonearm, and set the VTF and antiskate. As Sumiko recommends, I set both to 2.0gm.

While a stylus's vertical tracking angle (VTA) can make a significant difference in the sound of LPs, Sumiko realizes that, in the real world, few vinylphiles have turntables that offer adjustable VTA. So they've designed the new Oyster cartridges to "give excellent performance over a very wide window of rake angles."

Use and listening

Before doing any serious listening, I played a variety of LPs -- classical, rock, and jazz -- to break in the Oyster Rainier. During break-in, the Rainier did a nice job handling one badly warped LP -- disc 2 of the original soundtrack album for *FM*, a film from 1978 (MCA MCA 2-12000) -- with no sign of mistracking or other unpleasant aural effects.

I began my serious listening with Paul Simon's *Still Crazy After All These Years* (Columbia PC 33540) and "My Little Town," the only track on the album on which he reunites with his former partner, Art Garfunkel. It's a pretty intense recording right from the start, and gets only more so as it goes along. Right off the bat, the bass line was nice and meaty, the drums punchy, the piano strong -- just as I imagine Simon, Garfunkel, and engineer and producer Phil Ramone wanted them. The duo's vocal blend came through outstandingly, and seemingly without effort on their part. During the crescendo at the end of the track, the trumpets came through right and tight, with absolutely no slop (except for a mistake one trumpeter makes right at the end, no fault of the Rainier).

I've always thought that on Billy Joel's second album, *Piano Man* (Columbia PC 32544), he did a lot of things right (even though he's rumored to hate it). The disc's magnum opus is "The Ballad of Billy the Kid," a wholly fictionalized version of the outlaw's career -- especially at the very end, when the protagonist becomes a kid named Billy from Oyster Bay, Long Island (where Joel himself grew up), "a six-pack in his hand." Still, Joel wrote a heck of a composition; the bridges sound like something Aaron Copland might have scored for his ballet about Billy the Kid. In this recording the instrumental sound is so tight it could squeak, and that's how it sounded through the Rainier. The power and virtuosity with which Joel plays his piano reminds me of Leonard Bernstein, and that power remained intact through the Sumiko -- its reproduction of the piano was flawless. In the final bridge, leading to the climax, the drummer, Ron Tutt, goes absolutely nuts -- I'm surprised his sticks didn't shatter -- but there was no compression through the Rainier.

The Rainier seemed to remove itself from the conversation and just let the music through. This early in my auditioning, I was already very impressed.

My next move was to big-band jazz, in the form of a 1970 LP by Woody Herman's band, *Heavy Exposure* (Cadet LPS-835), which featured mostly young players, such as Bill Chase on trumpet, Tom Malone (later of the Blues Brothers Band) on trombone, and Donny Hathaway on piano. When this album was released, many big-band fans accused Herman of selling out because it included covers of such songs as the Temptations' "I Can't Get Next to You" and "Aquarius," from *Hair*. Others, including yours truly, thought it was fabulous -- the band really *swings!* My favorite cut is "Lancaster Gate," in which various instrumental parts cascade over a strong bass-and-drums line in a huge swirl. Many cartridges make a jumble of that swirl, but the Rainier did an exemplary job of presenting a cohesive ensemble sound with enough detail and separation to keep it from sounding like a mess.

I then pulled out Diane Schuur's *Schuur Thing* (GRP GRPA-1022), just for "Love Dance." Dave Grusin's lush arrangement features synthesized strings, Grusin on keyboards, and a tenor sax player you may have heard of: Stan Getz. It's a gorgeous recording, and Schuur tones down most of her usual vocal acrobatics for a pretty sensual performance. The soundstage wasn't especially deep, but it was wide, and Getz's sax wove in and out behind Schuur's voice with precision. Very satisfying.

It's amazing how easily a cartridge's cantilever can be destroyed, and I managed to trash the Rainier's in about a second. Sumiko sent me a replacement so I could continue my review. The cause of the first stylus's demise -- other than my clumsiness -- was the Dual's wonky headshell. So I called in my backup turntable, a classic Pioneer PL-516. I also pulled out another classic: *Time Out*, by the Dave Brubeck Quartet (a pristine copy of Columbia PC 8192), for "Blue Rondo a la Turk." My reasoning? Paul Desmond's sweet alto sax is countered by Brubeck's nearly brutalizing piano -- he plays *hard* on this track. The Rainier did a fine job of bringing through the percussive sound of the piano without overpowering the sax.

Comparison

My standard cartridge in the Pioneer 'table is an older Grado Gold (around \$200), a lovely-sounding moving-iron design I've had for a number of years. I played another cut from *Time Out*, the famous "Take Five," in which there's serious back-and-forth among the quartet: Brubeck's piano anchors the left channel, Desmond's sax is just to right of center, and Eugene Wright's bass and Joe Morello's drums are solidly to the right. The Sumiko was more dynamic than the Grado, more effortlessly handling the loud drums and the highs of Desmond's alto sax. Both had good bass slam and produced silky midrange tones. In short, both sounded excellent -- but I give the nod to the less-expensive Sumiko Oyster Rainier for its better reproduction of this recording's wide dynamic range.

Conclusion

I think Sumiko might have a hit on its hands. The Oyster Rainier offered a lovely, warm sound with a wide range of recordings, but could still kick up its heels as required. It handled warped records with aplomb, and LP surface noise was minimal, even from records I can't get entirely clean. But when the groove was trashed, that came through in no uncertain terms.

The Oyster Rainier performed well with both new and old records. It was far simpler to mount in a headshell than many other cartridges -- a real treat for a cartridge swapper such as I -- and it appears to work well with nearly any medium-mass arm.

The next time I'm on the lookout for a new cartridge, the Sumiko Rainier will be on my short list. It should be on yours.

... Thom Moon

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Associated Equipment

- Turntables -- Dual CS 5000, Pioneer PL-516
- Phono cartridges -- Shure M97xE, Grado Gold
- Preamplifier -- Linn Majik 1P
- Power amplifier -- NAD C 275BEE
- Speakers -- Acoustic Energy Radiance 3, Advent ASW-1200 subwoofer
- Analog interconnects -- Straight Wire Chorus
- Speaker cables -- Acoustic Research 14-gauge

Sumiko Oyster Rainier Moving-Magnet Phono Cartridge

Price: \$149 USD.

Warranty: One year parts and labor.

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