

## Equipment Reviews

### Sumiko Reference Starling Moving-Coil Phono Cartridge

Written by Jason Thorpe | Created: 15 July 2018

The world of phono cartridges doesn't change quickly, and it's hard to imagine a more mature technology than the moving-coil cartridge, introduced 70 years ago. Sumiko has been producing phono cartridges for decades now, but their product line hasn't changed much in the last few years -- the Oyster Blue Point No.2 has been in constant production since 1990, which for a consumer product is forever plus one year.

Turns out that Sumiko cartridges have been built by the same Japanese company since the inception of the Oyster Blue Point Special, a nude cartridge (see below) that bears some resemblance to the brand-new Reference Starling, reviewed here. So despite the Starling and its Reference-series nest-mate (sorry -- that's the first and last bird joke you'll read in this review) Songbird being all-new cartridges, Sumiko's lines of cartridges have a continuity that goes back a full human generation.

Sumiko has introduced the Starling and Songbird to bridge some of the price gaps in their two series of MC cartridges, Reference and Oyster. The Reference Starling, retailing for \$1899 USD, fits nicely between the Reference Blackbird (\$1249) and the Reference Pearwood Celebration II (\$2799). The Reference Songbird (\$899) falls between the Oyster Blue Point Special EVO III (\$549) and the Reference Blackbird (\$1249).

At \$1899, the Reference Starling is at a challenging crossroads. MC cartridges are essentially disposable items. They wear out and retain little to none of their initial value -- like brake pads or tires. It's hard enough for the cost-conscious audiophile to lay out a grand for speakers, let alone for something that will wear out in a few years. There are tons of inexpensive MC cartridges for \$800 to \$1000 that I can see many audiophiles buying after taking a deep breath and checking their credit-card balance. Not much more than that and such outlays begin to feel like conspicuous consumption. Of course, there are plenty of folks who can fork over \$1000 for a cartridge as easily as you or I buy a pack of bubble gum, but they're probably not reading this review -- an extra \$899 is neither here nor there. Besides, if it's not that hard to add a zero to the price, why not move way up market?

So \$1899 is a difficult price point -- more than many can comfortably spend on a cartridge, but perhaps not exclusive enough for the few who don't have to worry about finances the first of each month. That said, I think it's also possible to view the Starling as a slight stretch on the cash front, but it's a reach that's cool if it *really* buys a ticket to that exclusive world of hand-made, world-class cartridges.

What's really new in the Reference Starling? According to Bill Rudolph, Sumiko's analog production manager, the main focus in designing the Starling was to control resonances -- much effort was expended on the cartridge's CNC-milled aluminum body and how it supports and connects with the motor. The stylus is a MicroRidge diamond on a boron cantilever, and the coils are wound with wire of pure copper. Sumiko states that the Starling outputs a plump 0.5mV, and that its compliance is 12x10<sup>-6</sup>cm/dyne at 100Hz. Its mass is on the high end of reasonable at 9gm, and the recommended vertical tracking force (VTF) is 2.0gm.

The Starling is totally nude, as cartridge makers say; that is, its cantilever and motor both hang out in the wind, unprotected. It wouldn't take much to destroy all that delicate, exposed hardware, so caution is crucial. Before I install or remove a nude cartridge, I remove my watch and get nude myself, stripping down to my underwear before entering my cartridge-installing kung fu meditative state. This time I didn't feel the need for such spiritual discipline -- the Starling comes with a form-fitting plastic guard that fully covers it. There's little chance of smoking the stylus, or ruining the motor by letting its extremely magnetic guts suck up a tiny cartridge-mounting screw.

Mounting a new cartridge is always an adventure -- there are few industry standards guiding their physical dimensions. The Starling's mounting holes are threaded, which is always nice, but its signal pins seem a bit smaller in diameter than the norm. That usually means it's time to squeeze the tonearm's lead clips smaller, to make a tight fit around the pins, but the Starling's pins are slightly conical -- they widen a bit as they near the cartridge's body. Without having to futz around with the diameter of the clips themselves, I got a nice, tight grip by pushing the clips all the way down on the pins.

The rest of the setup was uneventful, and since the Starling is buck naked, it was totally simple to set azimuth and alignment. There's no need to try to scope what's going on under a low-rider body -- there's no body. It was a pleasure to set up this cartridge.

The Starling sounded best and tracked without problem at 2.1gm. That VTF is near the top of Sumiko's recommended range of 1.8-2.2gm, but the smidge of extra pressure added a nice feeling of power and warmth that made me all snugly inside.

With my JE Audio HP10 phono stage, I found that the Starling had plenty of gain running at 65dB. This cute-as-the-dickens cartridge is nice and fat in the gain department -- it should be compatible with any reasonably priced phono stage. I monkeyed around with impedance settings, dithering between 100 and 250 ohms, and generally preferred the more relaxed sound of the lower value.

Running the Starling through my AQVOX 2 Ci, I used that phono stage's balanced current-amplification inputs and so didn't have to fiddle with impedance settings. The Starling sounded utterly at home here also.

Bottom line: The Reference Starling was easy to work with. I can't imagine any well-designed phono stage having difficulties with this guy.

#### Listening

My go-to record for testing a newly set-up turntable is Eleni Mandell's *Country for True Lovers* (Heart of a Champion HoC-011). This album has it all -- Mandell's clear, well-modulated voice is perfectly centered on the soundstage, with a presence that evokes a real-sounding if slightly-larger-than-life head in the middle of my room. Add in rich bass and crystalline guitar and cymbals and you've got a near-perfect-sounding LP. And the music is just fantastic, which helps more than you might imagine when you're listening to it repeatedly.

I'd given the Reference Starling a rough setup, nailing the VTF but leaving the detailed alignment for later, and my first listen to this new-out-of-the-box cartridge left me somewhat befuddled. Oh sure, I still needed to futz with azimuth and vertical tracking angle (VTA), but there was a clarity, and space between the notes, that were new to my system. The bass felt weightier but also of corporeal size, and the guitar inhabited a time-aligned, three-dimensional space. I was instantly sucked into the spaces *between* notes -- into a silence that inhabited the areas around and between the instruments and Mandel's rich, evocative voice. It was as if the Starling had Windex'd a bunch of dirt and grime off my aural window on the soundstage. Despite its being a brand-new cartridge whose sound I was sure would loosen up a bit as it broke in, I was suddenly all a-tingle about spending more time with it.

More often than not, a given component will pull me more toward some types of music than others. Unlike young Hans Wetzel, I don't go all sciency and trot out the same dozen or so recordings in a formalized review process. I'm far too disorganized for such experimental rigor. No, I listen for a while, then drift off to familiar recordings that I really *want* to hear again, or browse my record rack for something that fits both my mood and the tenor that the component I'm listening to has infected me with.

Which is why I yanked out Frank Sinatra and Duke Ellington's *Francis A. & Edward K.* (Reprise FS 1024). This rich, tasty slice of late-1960s swing sounds a mile deep, and something about the Starling made me reach for it. I don't remember how I got it, but somehow I lucked into an original white-label promo copy of this 1967 studio session that's perhaps the ultimate, ideal, *perfect* blend of everything Sinatra and Ellington did best. When all facets of my system are conjoined in synergy, this album makes me want to laugh and cry at the same time. As with the best examples of Ellington's craft, this album simultaneously radiates peace and power, with space between and around the performers. The Starling again did that Windex thing, accentuating the sense of radiant ambient space *around* the music, giving a hugely realistic sense of the studio's acoustic. What's really surprising about my promo copy is that despite the fact that it's mono -- there's no real imaging or soundstaging -- the acoustic is just massive, a huge, blossoming monster of a room. The Starling gave me a full dose of this recording's considerable depth. It took my breath away.

To put it in context, my Roksan Shiraz cartridge (\$6000) reveals a *very* small bit more ambience, a slight increase in the sense of the walls of the studio -- but so little that I have to listen hard for it. The Starling countered with the solidity of Sinatra's voice, adding some welcome solidity to the size of his head.

There was a fatness, a juiciness to the size of the aural pictures painted by the Starling. The tonal balance itself was fairly even, with just a bit of a midrange rise to warm up the sound, but the jammy way the Starling reproduced instruments wasn't a result of that baby bump. Rather, it was a result of its "pitch-black" backgrounds and excellent retrieval of detail, and its dynamic snap. The combination of those characteristics produced aural images that reached out from between my speakers and just *demand*ed my attention.

By *fatness*, I don't mean sluggish, sloppy, or bloated. Think *fat* like a really good belly dancer in a room full of rhythm-challenged, rail-thin supermodels. Nimble but solid, able to change directions in a flash without exposing sharp edges. Describing the Starling's sound as *fat* is the highest compliment I can lay at this cartridge's feet.

After a two-month wait for Amazon to get its shit together, I finally received Howe Gelb's *The Coincidentalist* (New West NW 5079), a 2013 album that had eluded me on vinyl for quite a while. It was worth the wait. The first track captivated me -- "Vortexas" bemoans the downsides of living in a trailer park in rural Texas: aluminum foil on the windows, the whole nine yards. Gelb's grumbling, moaning voice jumped out at me with the sort of huge body that this cartridge seems to expertly portray. It felt as if Gelb were sitting on my chest, but as his voice coalesced out of a thick, beefy gravy, it spread out in a contradictory delicacy on the background vocals and crisp snare drum.

The Starling had its way with the leading edges of transients, too -- that snare drum, and Gelb's delicate piano work in "Picacho Peak." It's an electric piano, I think, and the Starling clearly portrayed the initial keystrokes from way low in the register, up through the midrange. That's where musical realism starts, I think, and it was in reproducing stark, delicate, sparse music such as this that the Starling sounded its best.

Small jazz combos -- even busy, paid-by-the-note sessions -- *ruled* via the Starling. Classic Records' reissue of John Coltrane's *Blue Train* (Blue Note/Classic ST 46095) -- yeah, it's stereo, so sue me -- just came alive via the Starling. The silky, grit-free way it reproduced Jo Jones's ride cymbal in the title track, along with the very slightly burnished tone it induced in Lee Morgan's trumpet, coaxed me to give it a bit more throttle and listen at a higher level than I'm used to. With "Blue Train" wicked up like that, I could feel the music as a physical force, especially those cymbals, which hovered like dragonflies in mid-air. This sufficiently endeared me to the Starling that I could happily continue to listen to this cartridge, despite its retailing for less than a third the price of my reference Shiraz. Add in Coltrane's blistering tenor sax, and I felt I knew these artists on a first-name basis, and could almost forgive Paul Chambers's lame-ass bass solo halfway through.

Time to find out what the Starling can do with something a little less precious. What about some slammin' rock? I've heard Miles Davis's *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* called the best rock album ever made, and in my opinion it's the best gem in my pile of MoFi Davis reissues (Columbia/Legacy/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab MFSL-440). While there isn't a dud among those, *Jack Johnson* is, to me, the winner by far. I play this record once a week at least, and never tire of it.



John McLaughlin's incendiary wah-wah guitar slashes through "Right Off" from start to finish, and his chord choices are the oddest I've ever heard. They shouldn't exist. They *should* sound utterly around the corner and out of key, but instead, they work! However, McLaughlin's guitar has to fight it out with Billy Cobham's ride cymbal, which uses much of the same frequency bandwidth as the guitar's overtones. I've heard components muddy this, unable to keep the guitar overtones distinct from the ring of the cymbals -- but the Starling nailed it, reproducing each instrument as its own entity. I listened to "Right Off" at least a dozen times through the Starling. While I love this music for its own sake, it also showed off everything this cartridge did well.

Looking back through this review, I see that I haven't spilled much virtual ink on how the Starling reproduced each frequency range -- bass, midrange, treble, blah blah blah. I did mention a slight midrange bump, but I think I've skipped detailed descriptions of those bandwidths because they're just not important here -- the Starling's real magic was its reproduction of space and soundstage depth. Don't fret that I'm glossing over problems -- the bass was just great, and the highs were present and relaxed yet detailed. I just didn't find myself paying attention to the frequency extremes -- most of the time, I was bowled over by how well the little Starling presented me with a huge world of music.

#### Wrap it up?

An analog front end is only as good as the cartridge -- the single tiny point that makes actual physical contact with the record groove makes all the difference in the world. The differences among cartridges can be huge, less like swapping out interconnects than like trying a new pair of speakers: overt, immediately audible changes that slap you in the face. Which is what any good audio component is supposed to do, right?

The Reference Starling slapped me in the face. While I know that Sumiko has been in the cartridge business forever, and obviously should know by now how to make a good cartridge, I hadn't expected this level of performance for a (pretty much) affordable price.

If you're looking for a new phono cartridge and you're dithering by \$1000 to either side of the Starling's \$1899 price, I think you owe it to yourself to consider either raising your budget to get into a true high-end moving-coil, or lowering it to save some bucks.

Highly recommended.

... Jason Thorpe

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#### Associated Equipment

- Analog sources -- Pro-Ject RPM 10, VPI Prime Signature turntables; Ortofon Quintet Blue, Roksan Shiraz, Top Wing Blue Dragon cartridges
- Digital source -- Logitech Squeezebox Touch
- Phono stages -- AQVOX Phono 2 Ci, JE Audio HP10
- Preamplifier -- Sonic Frontiers SFL-2
- Power amplifier -- Bryston 4B3
- Speakers -- Definitive Technology Mythos ST-L, Focus Audio FP60 BE
- Speaker cables -- Nordost Tyr 2
- Interconnects -- Nordost Tyr 2
- Power cords -- Nordost Vishnu
- Power conditioner -- Quantum QBase QB8 Mk.II
- Accessory -- VPI Cyclone record-cleaning machine

Sumiko Reference Starling Moving-Coil Phono Cartridge

Price: \$1899 USD.

Warranty: One year parts and labor.

