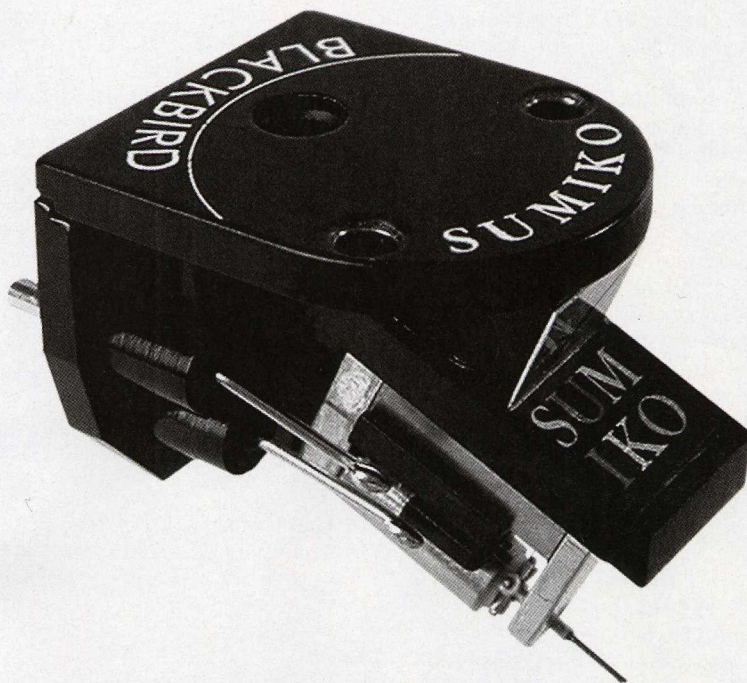


# Sumiko Blackbird Moving-Coil Phono Cartridge

George Graves



**I**T'S KIND OF FUNNY, actually. You open the familiar slightly perfumed wooden box, and inside is a phono-graph cartridge that looks suspiciously like a Sumiko Bluepoint Special, the world's most popular moving-coil cartridge for more than a decade. Look a little closer and it is slightly different. The plastic is black, not blue, the mounting plate is heavier and circular in shape, but otherwise, on cursory examination, there is little to differentiate our old friend the Bluepoint Special from this, the new Sumiko Blackbird.

Both the Bluepoint Special and the Blackbird are body-less moving coil cartridges of high output (2.5 mv). Both have a dangerously exposed cantilever and stylus, and

no stylus guard. Both are made in the same factory, and were designed by the same person. They look enough alike to be mistaken one for the other (except for the plastic color) but don't do it. They are as different as night and day, Japanese and English, beef and chicken.

Where the two differ is mostly in the cantilever and stylus design. The Bluepoint Special was originally, simply a Bluepoint (a P-mount cartridge, remember those?) with the plastic case removed. Most of the increased performance over the standard model was eventuated by the reduction in mass and the absence of the cheaper cartridge's resonant plastic body as well as

flimsy P-mount-to-standard-mount adapter.

The Bluepoint Special has a thin-wall aluminum tube cantilever and a fairly standard elliptical diamond stylus of 0.3mm by 0.8mm. The new Blackbird replaces that aluminum cantilever with one made from long-grained boron, a material with an incredibly high stiffness-to-mass ratio. The Blackbird's diamond is a much smaller; lower mass, proprietary profile elliptical shape.

I had been using a Benz Micro Glider in my system as my reference, but like many of us, I do have a perfectly serviceable Bluepoint Special lying around. The Benz and the Blackbird are similar cartridges in concept and execution as well as

price. Certainly, when one is thinking about cartridges in this price range, these two will likely come to mind and are obviously competitors. But just for comparison's sake—due to the outward similarity and family heritage— I decided to reinstall the Bluepoint Special and use it as a baseline for comparing both the Benz Micro Glider and the Blackbird.

### The Bluepoint Special

I reinstalled my Bluepoint special according to the usual procedure, applying the recommended 2 grams of stylus force, and gave it a long Saturday afternoon listen. As I remembered, the BPS (Bluepoint Special) proved to be a good tracker. Its superbly sectioned and polished tip gleans great amounts of information from the grooves with less surface noise than many high-output moving-coil cartridges. High-excursion passages are tracked at 2 grams without a hint of breakup and the dread inner groove distortion is all but nonexistent. The cartridge paints with a broad brush with large, stable images to complement its big sound. Soundstage is only average, however, with front-to-back layering somewhat compressed, especially in the upper mids. The top end of the BPS is what can only be described as bright. From about 5Khz on up the cartridge exaggerates upper-end detail slightly and because this brightness is very clean and distortion free, it makes the cartridge sound as if it is super analytical and therefore eliciting great detail from one's recordings. This type of sound, while certainly not accurate, can be, nonetheless, very addictive. It makes one's better recordings set-up and do tricks, and certainly is not the screechy sort of top end that one often associates with cheap MCs, especially older designs. I can readily see why the BPS has been so popular for so long. For the money it's a remarkable buy; musical, easy on records, and able to drive almost any phono section without resorting to expensive and often colored step-up devices. If all you've got is \$350 to spend on a cartridge, you really cannot do much better than this.

### Hello Blackbird

Using the extremely comprehensive and surprisingly entertaining instruction booklet that came with

the Blackbird, I installed it in my trusty AudioQuest PT-8 arm. Every aspect of the installation is covered in the book, from horizontal alignment to VTA to stylus pressure recommendations; all profusely illustrated and crystal clear. After using all due diligence, - the naked, and totally unprotected stylus assembly, you know- the cartridge was ready to play a stack of my favorite audiophile recordings as well as some regular old standbys. But first, it had to be broken-in. Like most of us, I spend most of my listening time on CDs and in my case, SACDS and DVD-As, and I don't really listen to LP as much as I used to. I have thousands of LPs but most of the time, I find myself listening to the little silver discs instead of the big black ones. Therefore, the Blackbird somewhat languished in my turntable setup and it took literally months for the 100 hours to accumulate that I like to 'cook' cartridges for before evaluating them. Finally, at the end of February 2004, I figured I had put enough time on the cartridge, and it was time to listen with a critical ear.

### The World's Best Record

I have the world's best phonograph record. It is a re-mastered Mercury "Living Presence" recording of Antal Dorati conducting the London Symphony Orchestra in Stravinsky's complete ballet, "The Firebird" (Mercury SR90226). What makes this recording so special? Well, it's part of the Classic Records "45 Series" and as the moniker indicates, it's mastered at 45 RPM. It's also pressed on only one side of the 180-gram virgin vinyl disc. The

recording consists, therefore, of three 45-RPM sides to duplicate what would normally fit on one two-sided 33.3-RPM release. It is the best sounding recording that this listener has ever heard. I use it as well as another disc from the series: Reiner and the Chicago Symphony in a collection of Albeniz, Goyescas, and De Falla compositions called "Spain" (RCA LSC-2230) for all my cartridge evaluations. The third and final audiophile record I used is a direct-to-disc recording of the Glenn Miller Orchestra directed by Jimmy Henderson and recorded in 1977 by Wally Heider in Studio A at the Capital Records facility on Wilshire Ave., in Los Angeles (Century Records GADD1020). Other records include various jazz recordings, and some symphonic band by the Cleveland winds on Telarc to check bass performance.

### How does it Sound?

My overall impression of the Blackbird is one of supreme refinement. Like its sibling, the BPS, the Blackbird is a good tracker. If anything, it picks up even less surface noise than does the BPS, and like the older design, simply sails through whatever audio obstacle course that one is likely to throw at it including the infamous Shure test record. On the "Firebird" disc, the climactic and orgiastic "Infernal Dance of Kastchei and his Court" the Blackbird never misbehaved once. If it can track this 45-RPM cut, it can track anything.

The quiet opening of the Firebird is myriad of post impressionist orchestral colors. Simple solos con-

## NOTES

**Sumiko Blackbird Moving-Coil Phono Cartridge**, \$749.00. Sumiko Audio, 2431 Fifth Ave., Berkeley, CA 94710; phone 510/843-4500, fax 510/843-7120; website [www.sumikoaudio.net](http://www.sumikoaudio.net), e-mail [info@sumikoaudio.net](mailto:info@sumikoaudio.net).

Specifications: High-output moving-coil, with low-mass elliptical stylus and long-grain boron cantilever. Dynamic compliance is 12 x 10<sup>-6</sup> cm/dyne. Frequency response is 10 Hz to 50 kHz. Output voltage is 2.5 mV into 47-kilohm input impedance standard for moving-magnet cartridges. Separation is 35 dB at 1kHz. Balance between channels is within 0.5 dB at 1 kHz. Recommended tracking-force range is 1.8 to 2.2 grams. Cartridge weight is 9.6 grams. Mounting is with standard half-inch hole spacing.

trast with complex tonalities to form the fabric of this perennial concert favorite. The low volume passages easily get lost in surface noise on most pressings of this performance, but the blackbird reveals them in pristine silence. Where the BPS and the Benz Glider exhibited some surface noise on this cut, the Blackbird revealed a velvety black background from whence the music just emerged. I attribute this mostly to the somewhat different stylus shape used by Sumiko for this cartridge. Basically, it's riding in a different part of the groove than are the BPS and the Glider, a part not worn by previous plays.

Where the BPS is bright and clean, the Blackbird is merely clean. While this presentation might seem somewhat dull to those upgrading from a BPS, one will soon find that this is actually more realistic and much more musical. The bass on the Blackbird is very similar to the BPS, and is, compared to the Glider, a bit less well controlled. The big bass drum on Telarc's famous record of Holst's "Suite #2 for Military Band" With Frederick Fennell and the Cleveland Winds (Telarc #5038) is just a hair woollier on the Blackbird than on the Benz.

I'm not saying one is right and the other wrong, just that they're "different" in much the same way as two fine speaker systems are different.

The all-important midrange is where the Blackbird really shines. (Editor's Pun: Uh, George, I think the phrase is "spreads its wings.") This cartridge is smooth and yet it has real bite. The brasses on the aforementioned Telarc wind ensemble disc have real authority and sound quite the real thing (the "Overture" cut from Handel's "Music for the Royal Fireworks" and Falla's Dances from "The Three Cornered Hat," Classics RCA LSC2230). Yet, the sound is never forward in this all-important range, nor does it exhibit the suckout that many moving-coil cartridges exhibit just before the transition to the brightness range. Glenn Miller's classic sound of trombone, saxes, and muted trumpets is a great test of midrange. Too forward and the brass tends to overpower the ensemble, too reticent and the performance is rendered limp and lifeless. The Blackbird gives this stunning direct-to-disc recording a you-are-there quality that, on the right speakers, can be startling. My Benz is somewhat sucked-out in this

range, and the Blackbird is a breath of fresh air here.

Imaging is much better than either the BPS or the Glider. The soundstage is wide and deep, with no falloff on the edges of the ensemble. The "Firebird" recording is spooky in its ability to place instruments in space and the Blackbird reproduces this imaging information beautifully. One can tell where each instrument in the orchestra is in relation to the listening space. How C.R. Fine, Mercury's recording engineer, was able to get this kind of soundstage and imaging specificity with three spaced omni directional microphones, I'll never know. Maybe that's why he's still a legend.

Overall, The Blackbird is quite an achievement for the folks at Sumiko. The outward resemblance of the Blackbird to the older Bluepoint Special is merely that – an outward resemblance. The Blackbird not only raises the bar considerably from the Bluepoint Special, but in my estimation it also eclipses the Micro Benz Glider in this price range as well. If you are in the market for a cartridge in the range of \$500 to \$1000, put this one on your short list. You'll be glad you did.

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