

CARTRIDGES

Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation Cartridge



Since many of today's LPs are mastered from digital sources, many vociferous audiophiles willingly sacrifice dynamics and resolution on the altar of tonality. Yes, the vinyl revolution has an ugly side.

Combining this trend with the strong resurgence in vintage gear becomes akin to dealing with comfort food for your ears. Half of your brain wants foie gras. The other half craves a chilidog. Sophistication? Or comfort and convenience? What if you could have both or, at least, a great mixture of the two? Enter the Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation (PSP).

In theory, something slightly mellow makes sense, and it is nearly impossible to have one cartridge that suits everything in your record collection. If you must draw a line in the sand, siding with tonality isn't a bad way to roll. The only problem with said approach? Truly great recordings don't sound much better than the mediocre albums.

Still, hyper-detail gear only goes so far. How many times have you heard a mega-bucks system playing a current audiophile treasure with aplomb, but falling horribly short of expectations when spinning your favorite record? At the end of the day, you want Led Zeppelin, Belle & Sebastian, Diana Ross, and Fleet Foxes to all sound equally great on your system. Plus, the surgeon general says listening exclusively to audio pap like Jacintha is bad for your health. The PSP yields tonal complexity, resolution, and dynamic power with little sacrifice.

The Good, the Bad, the Ugly, and the Average

A two-edged sword, resolution can be a blessing and a curse. The key to the PSP's success relates to its capability as a high-quality daily driver. While some cartridges send you on a limited quest to uncover details previously obscured from view on your best pressings, the PSP illuminates information on less-than-amazing records. Of course, the sonic spectaculars sound great with the Sumiko, but now, I find myself listening to LPs I haven't heard in ages—titles lacking audiophile credentials.

The Fabulous Poodles' *Mirror Stars* never sounded better on my stereo. Even if you aren't predisposed to 80s Britpop, you probably have your own short list of records that sound less than, well, great. And sure, current pressings, such as Amy Winehouse's posthumous *Lioness: Hidden Treasures*, sound as dreadful as anything produced in the Reagan Era. But the PSP transforms Winehouse's posthumous record from nearly unlistenable to a platter you can enjoy on a top-notch system.

The PSP does a fantastic job of analog triage with terrible records, and comes into its own with records possessing average to above-average sound quality. Spinning Classic Records' Led Zeppelin 200g remasters elicits thrills. The cartridge rocks with the best of them, boasting a tonal richness that isn't thin or sterile. John Paul Jones' bass playing on *Led Zeppelin II* possesses the requisite fatness, with no loss of dynamic slam. The PSP keeps the musical pace locked down.

A quick comparison to the Koetsu Urushi Blue, mounted on an identical AVID Acutus Reference SP (both tables playing through the Vitus Audio MPP-201 phonostage), brings to the fore the Koetsu's sonic signature. Both cartridges are equally mellifluous through the midband. But when compared directly to the PSP, the Koetsu sounds slow and rolled-off on the high end—and lacking low-level detail. With the PSP, the drum solo during Led Zeppelin's "Moby Dick" reveals more sparkle in the cymbals, more leading-edge transient attack, and yes, more percussive textures.

Tom Petty's recent *Kiss My Amps: Live* illustrates the cartridge's serious dynamic punch and attack. "Takin' My Time" often transitions from loud to soft. Sumiko's cartridge always keeps separate Petty and Mike Campbell's guitars, and convincingly captures the audience's swelling cheers. With the Pass XA200.5 monoblocks pushed to their limits, the PSP's meaty presentation comes damn close to recreating the live Heartbreakers feel I've heard many times before.

Space, the Final Frontier

Listeners that prefer solo vocalists and/or acoustic recordings will be right at home with the PSP. Its rich tonality and wide dynamic contrast only tell half the story. The cartridge navigates snaky grooves with ease. Spinning Music Matters' 45RPM edition of Art Blakey's *Indestructible* tells one everything they need to know about the PSP's tracking. Blakey's explosive drumming is in your face, as it should be. On ORG's pressing of John Coltrane's *Live at the Village Vanguard*, the PSP effortlessly handles the saxophonist's rapid-fire deliveries and ensures that the brassy "blats" are lively and full of sparkle. Both the aforementioned high-velocity discs often cause lesser cartridges to mis-track.

The PSP also delivers every bit of vocal breathiness. MoFi's current remaster of Priscilla Ahn's *A Good Day* shows how the PSP renders the subtleties of the singer's delicate voice without presenting her on an overblown soundstage. Rather, she's revealed to enjoy an exquisite, finely gradated tonal palette in a realistic

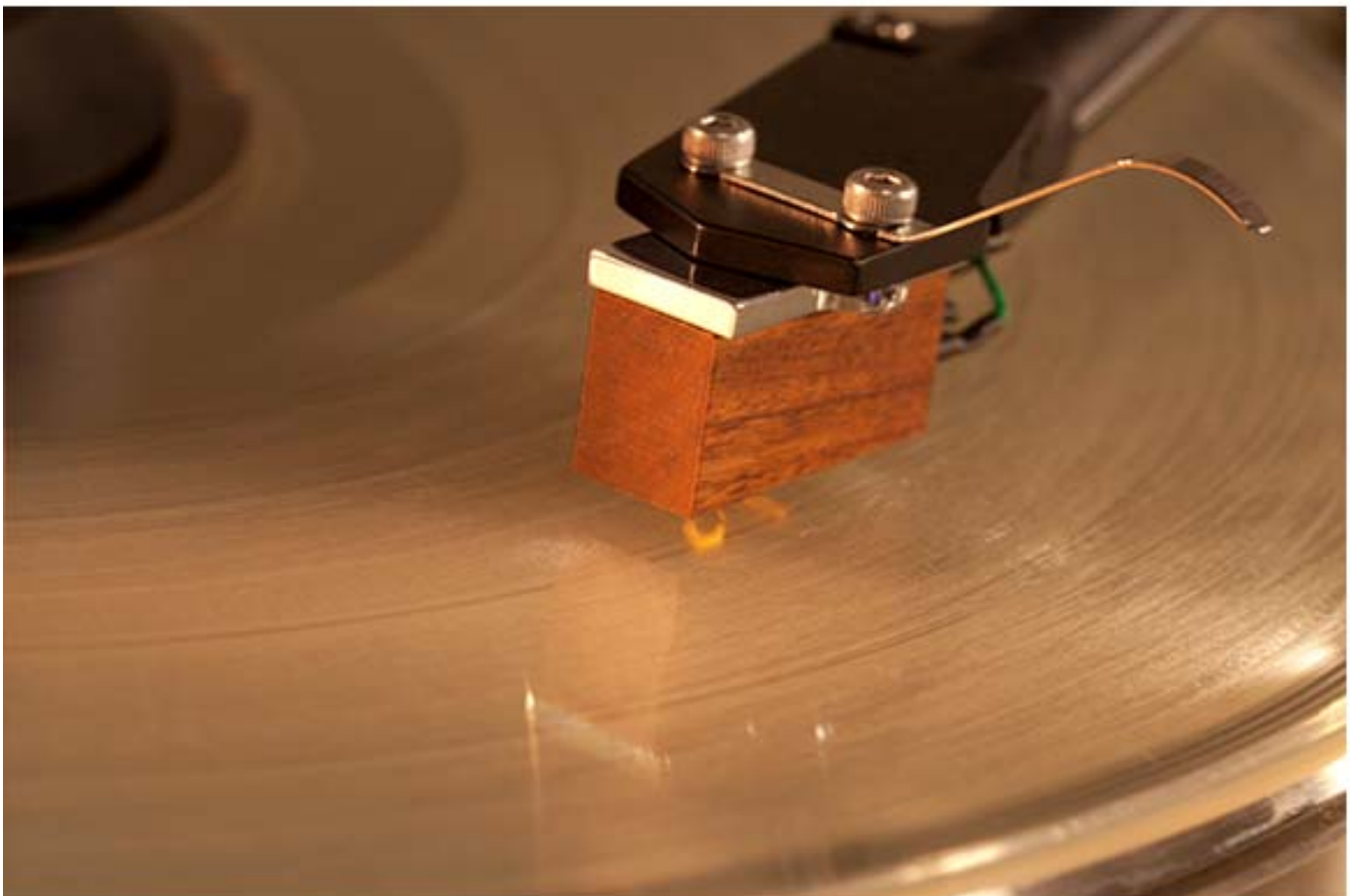
space. I experienced similar revelations with Anja Garbarek's *Smiling & Waving*, on which her voice sounds real in tone and in regard to spatial dimension.

Nuts and Bolts

The PSP sets up quickly. Its medium compliance value (8×10^{-6} cm/dyne) is ideally suited to tonearms like the SME (Sumiko is the US importer). Any model in SME's turntable range makes for a great match. Having turned in fantastic performances with the Funk Firm FX II•R, TriPlanar, Rega RB 1000, and SME 309, 312 and V, it's safe to say the PSP works well with a wide range of tonearms.

The PSP spent the majority of its review time mounted to the SME V tonearm, which mated with the AVID Acutus Reference SP turntable. When the splendid Kronos turntable arrived, I installed the PSP with equally brilliant results on the SME 312 tonearm. Sumiko specifies a load range of 100-1000 ohms, with 200 ohms proving optimum on the Vitus MPP-201 and ARC REF Phono 2 SE phonostages and providing the best balance between high-frequency smoothness and extension. Experiment, however, as your phonostage may yield better results with a different combination. Tracking force is specified at 1.8 – 2.2 grams, with 2.05 grams the best on both SME arms at my disposal. In addition, the PSP has a .5mv output, so gain shouldn't be an issue with an MC phonostage or step-up transformer.

Much like Koetsu cartridges we've sampled, the PSP benefits from optimization and attention to VTA, even if these aspects aren't as critical here as with other cartridges. Think of the PSP as a set of speakers with a big "sweet spot." It's worth taking the time to dial in, but you can expect excellent results along the way—especially if you have an arm like the SME or TriPlanar, which make it easy to set VTA. This cartridge also requires precious few hours for mechanical break-in, as it sounds natural out of the box and slightly improves after 25-30 hours.



Loving It

Audiophiles that want or need to settle on owning one high-performance cartridge will have a difficult time topping the PSP, especially if you are a tone aficionado. For those on stricter budgets, I highly suggest Sumiko's \$2,499 Pearwood Celebration II. It possesses similar tonality, with slightly less dynamic swing. Of course, the better your table/arm/phonostage, the more you will appreciate what the PSP brings to the dance.

Can you get a little more detail here or a little more slam there? Yes, but it's going to cost a lot more money. Or, you will have to reconsider your listening priorities—and now you're back to that place where you primarily listen to just twenty of the records in your collection. That scenario isn't for me. The PSP is staying in my reference system as my daily driver.

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MSRP: \$3,999

www.sumiko-audio.net

Peripherals

Analog Source AVID Reference SP w/SME V, Kronos w/SME 312
Phonostage ARC REF Phono 2, Vitus Audio MPP-201
Power Amplifier ARC REF 150
Preamplifier ARC REF 5SE
Speakers GamuT S9
Cables Shunyata Aurora
Accessories Furutech DeMag, DeStat, GIK acoustic treatments