Sumiko Celebration Moving-Coil Cartridge

Let's pretend for a moment that reviews don't have to be 4,000 words long to give good products a suitable mystique. Let's suppose I simply wrote a 20-word review that said, "The Sumiko Celebration cartridge produces exceptional sound quality, with all of the characteristics of a great mastertape, for $1,500."

Not very romantic, is it? Besides, how many audiophiles today have ever heard a mastertape? What do these words really mean?

So, let's make the review a little longer: "The Sumiko Celebration cartridge produces a smooth sound with none of the upper-octave frequency rise of most modern moving-coil cartridges, and with exceptionally accurate reproduction of the entire midrange. It does not have the warmth or deep bass impact of some Koetsu cartridges, but the bass is extended, powerful, and very well controlled and defined. The soundstage is quite accurate, reproducing the depth, width, and imaging on some of my favorite Accent chamber-music records that I remember hearing in some of the mastertapes. Low-level sound detail is quite good, without the kind of exaggerated upper-octave emphasis I hear on many contemporary moving-coil cartridges. Dynamics and transients are not as exciting as on many modern moving coils, but this is probably more accurate in reproducing the original source material. In short, the Celebration cartridge produces exceptional sound quality with all of the characteristics of a great mastertape for $1,500."

Better, but still lacking moxie. No glitz about its features, no comforting technobabble to convince you that its design technology is special.

So, let's add in those details. Sumiko tells me that the structure of the Celebration is a fully enclosed, machined aluminum "cradle" that holds the entire mechanism. It is made of "captured T-6061 aerospace-grade alloy, which is very hard." This cradle eliminates the cantilevering outward of the movement common to standard designs. It uses alnico for magnets, because Sumiko believes that alnico sounds better and provides a sound that is, "Rounder, fuller and with flesh on the bones, the way real notes emerge in air. The minute you hear a samarium cobalt version, it sounds hard, forced, and grainy. It literally sounds like a solid-state amp on the verge of clipping – strained and edgy." Hell, I'd shell out $1,500 for this any day!

I am worried, however, that I can't promise you gold wiring or a jeweled cantilever. Sumiko says it chose copper wire because it sounded better, and that the "cantilever…decision was a little less clear between aluminum and boron. Frankly, we could have gone either way with this one and still had a winner. Ultimately, the boron won out for its softer presentation." Audiophile tradition says that one should go for the most exotic sounding materials for the wire and cantilever regardless of what they sound like.

More seriously, other aspects of the Celebration's design have some practical design advantages over a lot of the competition. It has a 0.5-millivolt output, which is high enough output to work well with a variety of phono sections. Far too many designs are low-output cartridges that are hard to match to head amps or moving-coil gain stages. In some cases, you can even get away with a moving-magnet input, although this can limit dynamics and life if the gain is not really high enough. High output means minimal hum and noise and an excellent signal-to-noise ratio.

The stylus shape is chosen to make alignment easier – something further aided by the only adequate set-up instructions I have ever gotten with a cartridge, and by a rectangular cartridge body that makes visual alignment easier.

This choice of stylus shape also allows me to quote John Hunter of Sumiko in ways that add a note of bitter controversy to the review, and thereby please HP. "I…hate stylus profiles that only two people on earth can properly align, thus the use of an Ogura Jewel Co. PH stylus (audiophiles may have heard about the PA, used by Scan-Tech and others). The PH is more expensive because Ogura takes a PA and carefully machines away as much of the vertical shaft of the stylus as possible without reducing its strength. This yields a stylus consistent with a PA, but with lower effective tip mass and slightly better tracing ability for the entire moving mechanism. It's a great stylus that offers a wonderful balance of detail, air and ease of set-up."

John Hunter has flung down the gauntlet to other stylus designers and will undoubtedly provoke screams of outrage, and provide TAS with hundreds of pages of vicious stylus-designer rebuttals and angry letters to the editor. Who will watch Star Wars if we can provoke Stylus Wars as a substitute?

I cannot, unfortunately, surround Sumiko with suitable mystique. It has no Sweitzer-Deutch elves or Japanese Taoist sprites, or history of leading the rise in cartridge prices. They have actually been involved in producing inexpensive cartridges like the Blue Point. Worse, John Hunter was foolish enough to say, "Believe me, I know that $1,500 is a great deal of money." What kind of mystery is there in a statement like that?

Let's assume, however, that you actually want a cartridge that costs less than $3,000 simply because it provides excellent musical performance. If you do, then follow the set-up instructions and track this cartridge at 2 grams (2.2 grams for optimal tracking at the expense of a bit of life), and you can count on great sound.

String tone and woodwinds have superb timbre, and the reproduction of lower midrange and upper bass gives them exceptional warmth. Truly outstanding performance with cello, bass viol, and oboe. Exceptionally rich guitar tones. (For those of you with Julian Bream records, this is a cartridge you really need to try.) Percussion and piano have excellent definition of individual notes and percussive impacts. Male and female voices are quite natural. At the same time, the Celebration does very well with complex orchestral passages and jazz band music, and is particularly good with older opera recordings – where upper octave "tizz" is about the last thing a cartridge should add to the sound.

The Celebration does have demanding competition, though that competition often costs considerably more. I could choose the Koetsu if I wanted sheer romance, and midrange and bass richness. And I could choose the latest van den Huls for life and dynamics, and for sheer musical excitement in a musically natural way that does not artificially add upper-octave detail and energy. (Listening to a friend's Discovery version of the Clearaudio showed me that it too is an important option with these sonic characteristics.) The Celebration is also a good but not a great tracker. The van den Huls are the only moving coils I know of that really shine on test records, although few records of music are cut in ways that make this an issue. But overall, I have chosen the Celebration. It is one of two my reference cartridges.

So – the punch-line? Well, "the Sumiko Celebration cartridge produces exceptional sound quality with all of the characteristics of a great mastertape for $1,500."

ANTHONY H. CORDESMAN

SPECS

Operation: Moving Coil	Output Voltage: .5 millivolts
Weight: 7.1 grams	Compliance: 13 (x 10-6 cm/dyne2)

Loading: 100-1,000 ohms (solid state), 47,000 ohms (tube)

MANUFACTURER'S RESPONSE

On the subject of tracking forces, AHC asked me about tracking at 2.2 grams and I noticed that he subsequently listened to it and wound up following our lead at 2.0 grams.

Over the years, I've changed my position on tracking-force ratings. I used to religiously use test records to determine the optimal (I thought) tracking force and anti-skate. In doing my development listening to the SME IV.Vi, I noticed that two things were negatively affected by doing so. Tracking force was inevitably a little too heavy and anti-skate was generally far too strong for the cartridge to sound its best.

What the test records were yielding were optimization around worst-case scenarios. The cost to this approach was consistently compromising sound quality in order to allow a heavily modulated (heavy-duty dynamics) groove, usually at the end of a record, from mistracking. I came to understand that I was performing the equivalent of walking around 365 days a year wearing overshoes on the offhand chance it might snow. To be sure, I was prepared for those snowy days, but I missed out on a lot of fun. These days, I usually set anti-skate to about two-thirds of the recommended tracking force, and if I have a known difficult tracker, then I'll dial it up to compensate for that.

JOHN HUNTER

SUMIKO

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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Price: $1,500