

Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation (£1995)

Sumiko has nearly 40 years' experience with MC cartridges. Its flagship model is the beneficiary...
 Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller

Moving-coil cartridges have been around for more than a half-century, but they didn't displace the moving magnet as 'the audiophile's choice' until the 1970s. Before that, MMs ruled for two simple reasons: higher output and better tracking ability. For decades, Shure, Goldring, ADC and other moving magnetics were default purchases. They put few demands on phono stages, allowing the industry to standardise 47kohm inputs, and MMs (allegedly) took better care of LPs.

But then moving-coils struck. Sumiko's Palo Santos Presentation is the top-of-the-line cartridge from the company that many credit with introducing moving-coils to the West [see box-out below]. As such it has real pedigree. Although the 'recipe' for a good moving-coil is hardly a mystery – the world is awash with superb examples – there is an artistry that must surely have been mastered by a company with Sumiko's enviable know-how.

Taking its name from a type of Brazilian Rosewood, the Palo Santos Presentation features a new 'generator anchoring system' to improve rigidity and reduce

resonance. Its body is shorter than its Pearwood sibling, which accounts for better clearance over the record surface to allow you to see the long grain boron cantilever during set-up. Also part of the design is a new line contact stylus said to be the most expensive money can buy: a specially ground, Vital PH diamond.

INSIDE THE BOX...

From the instant you open the box, you're assailed with a sense of 'attention to detail' that bodes well. While I could have done with a stylus cover, the packaging encourages safe handling: you simply

hold the cartridge in its 'well' while undoing the bolts that keep it in place. But, as one wag once told me, 'anyone who spends this kind of money on a cartridge deserves what he gets if he's

too clumsy to handle it.' Having seen my share of broken cantilevers – I watched as a friend circumcised a brand-new \$6000 MC when it was caught by his baggy T-shirt as he reached over his turntable – I think that may be a bit harsh. To ensure that it doesn't happen, the Sumiko arrives with what may be the most detailed user's manual I have ever seen, bar none. Read it

'The Sumiko is like a Koetsu after a week on an all-protein diet'



ABOVE: The cartridge arrives in a beautiful wooden box. But be careful: no stylus guard is supplied

cover to cover *before* you take out the Palo Santos, and you'll be safe enough.

What you find is a cartridge designed for ideal set-up. It has parallel sides and a flat front with enough clearance to allow you to see the stylus/cantilever. Unlike some cartridges I could name, its widely-spaced pins are colour-coded. The top plate is flat metal, so you can tighten it to your heart's content.

It was a breeze to fit to SME's Series V-12 on the 30/12 and the arm on Clearaudio's Concept. The 0.5mV output fed ample signal to the Audio Research PH5 phono stage at 100ohms, as well as NAD's PP-2, which happens to be fixed at 100ohms. The rest of the system consisted of the Audio Research Ref 5 preamp, Quad II-Eighty power amps and Sonus faber Cremona Auditor Elipsa, with Yter, Atlas and Kimber wires.

CLEAR SAILING

It starts with remarkable overall poise, much of it due to the Palo Santos' superb tracking skills. The Sumiko maintains composure regardless of genre. I played two LPs so opposed in attitude that they could have been different formats: recent 180g pressings of Humble Pie's *Smokin'!* and Peggy Lee's *I Like Men!*. The cartridge sailed from raucous boogie, with a screeching lead vocals, to silky lounge music embracing one of the huskier, sexier female vocalists of the past century.

Such disparity, though, cannot reveal the signature sound of the cartridge because the two are so dissimilar. Humble Pie's recording is all about impact and

WHO IS SUMIKO?

Most distributors are just that: importers of equipment. Sumiko, though, started out as much a manufacturer as it did an importer, its roots appropriately being in cartridges and tonearms. In the 1970s, the MC revival had yet to spread from Japan to the West. Legendary designer and Sumiko co-founder Dave Fletcher is credited with bringing Grace tonearms and Supex cartridges to the USA. He, in turn, is said to have introduced one Ivor Tiefenbrun to the pairing, who used them successfully on his then-new Linn LP12 turntable, until introducing Linn's own arm and cartridge. Along the way, Sumiko gave us The Arm and many other cartridges, before evolving into one of the USA's top suppliers of high-end hardware, including SME, Pro-ject and Sonus faber. Fortunately for us, it hasn't allowed its success in distribution to put an end to cartridge manufacture.

