

Sumiko Starling

One-time distributor of Grace, Kiseki, Supex and other brands from the vinyl vault, Sumiko is also a manufacturer with a legacy. Here's its new open-bodied MC flagship
 Review: Adam Smith Lab: Paul Miller

One testament to the continuing love for vinyl is that the steady trickle of brand new cartridges making their way onto the market shows no sign of abating. The latest company to pep up the party is US-based distributor and manufacturer Sumiko.

To begin with, it has introduced a range of four new moving-magnet designs in the form of the Rainier, Olympia, Moonstone and Amethyst. Costing £160, £225, £325 and £625 respectively, these are positioned in the main at the more affordable end of the market. However, to whet the whistle of vinylistas with greater means, it has also debuted two new moving-coil designs in the form of the £899 Songbird and £2099 Starling we have on test here.

Sumiko has been making cartridges for around 40 years [see PM's boxout, p49] and, although a US company, it has sourced its models from the same Japanese factory all that time. Its affordable MM designs have earned a reputation as being consistent performers while the sensibly-priced Blue Point MCs have been reliable go-tos for a number of years now. The hitch was that there were a couple of gaps in the Sumiko range that needed to be filled.

BUILT FOR BUSINESS

With the latest and highly-regarded version of the Blue Point Special Evo III retailing for £599 [HFN Mar '11], there was something of a hop and a skip to the next model in the range – the Blackbird [HFN Nov '13] at £1399. A fairly enthusiastic leap was then required to reach the most expensive models in the series – the £3499 Pearwood Celebration II and flagship Palo Santos Presentation [HFN Jul '10] at £5000 with its rosewood body and line-contact stylus.

But back to the Starling which, like the Songbird and Blackbird, features an exposed generator assembly. This can pay big dividends when it comes to both mass

RIGHT: The gold-plated yoke and magnet assembly of this flagship open-bodied MC contrasts with the anodised black of the Starling's resonance-deadening 'half shell'

reduction and resonance optimisation while it also lends the cartridge a business-like, if not high-tech, appearance.

NAKED TRUTH

The downsides to this arrangement are that not only is a naked assembly prone to attracting dust, but care and a steady pair of hands are needed when fitting the pick-up to the arm, or damage can easily occur.

Both models are based around a milled aluminium alloy top plate but differ in their cantilever materials and stylus configuration. Also, while the Songbird is available in both high (2.5mV) and low output flavours only a single, low-output version of the Starling is offered.

As one might expect given that the Starling is Sumiko's flagship open-bodied

cartridge, a good deal of technology lurks within its minimalist frame. The coils are configured in an 'X' arrangement and are connected to a boron cantilever with 'Micro-Ridge' stylus. The suspension of the stylus assembly is based around a synthetic rubber material said to ensure that the

cartridge's compliance will be better controlled in different climates and over years of use. What this promises for the end-user is a pick-up that should meet its original specification for longer and even extend the

constraints of total playing time and wear and tear on the stylus, of course.

The Starling is supplied in a very stylish wooden box [see pic, p51] complete with mounting hardware and comes ensconced in a very sturdy protective plastic guard. The user manual, downloaded from Sumiko's website, is no less than 15 pages long and is an absolute masterclass in everything a manual should be. After providing some explanation of the design ethos behind the cartridge it then sets aside the ten pages that follow to guiding the owner through both installation and set-up in order to ensure that optimum performance can be achieved.

RIGHT ON TRACK

Duly adhering to the guidelines set out in the manual, I initially installed the cartridge into my SME 309 arm. The Starling mounts from above via threaded holes in its top plate, but I was still thankful for the SME's removable headshell on this occasion. One other thing to note is that the cartridge connection pins, with their chamfered edges, seem a little smaller than usual – I had to gently squeeze the headshell tags closed a little in order for them to grip effectively. Still, this done, the Starling was aligned and set to track at its median value of 2.0g on my Michell Gyro SE turntable.

While the Starling has a rising top-end [see PM's Lab Report, p51] you have no reason to fear that this is an overtly 'bright'

'I found every vocal tremor sent a shiver up my spine!'



LEFT: The Starling's massive alloy mounting plate has threaded inserts for locking tight into a headshell. The boron cantilever moves up into position, and the coils aligned, once tracking at 2g

the Starling made abundantly clear. However, set up on an Audio Note Arm Two/II, which has a rather more languid nature, the balance of the overall performance shifted in a slightly softer direction. The Starling can be quite neatly fine-tuned in this respect. Ultimately I preferred the sheer dynamics and exuberance it was capable of when used with the SME 309 and that was how I listened to it for the rest of the review. But there could be no denying that the Audio Note Arm Two/II and Starling combination exhibited a subtlety that was highly appealing.

The Starling also works wonders when it comes to revealing filigree detail. Nothing remains hidden from this pick-up! The merest brush of a cymbal or the faintest squeak of finger on fretboard is laid bare, but never does this forensic ability threaten to disturb the main flow of the music.

In fact, I don't think I have ever heard Tony Bowers' fingers sound quite as distinct when playing the walking bass line that introduces Simply Red's 'Sad Old Red' from their *Picture Book* LP [Elektra EKT 27 960452-1]. And while the Starling was busy revealing the movement of his hands up and down the fretboard, it was equally as adept at delivering all the richness of the notes, each starting and stopping in such a way as to propel the music along.

DEPTH CHARGE

The word 'detail' kept cropping up in my listening notes when considering the Starling's handling of the low-end.

There is always a concern that a cartridge that delivers exceptional top-end extension might be found a little wanting lower down the frequency range. But this was not the case here. The level of bass detail it pulled from the depths of each track played was highly impressive.

What's more, the Starling seemed to know precisely what to do with this information and, as a result, is one of the most involving cartridges I have encountered at the price. The solid yet syncopated bass line that underpins

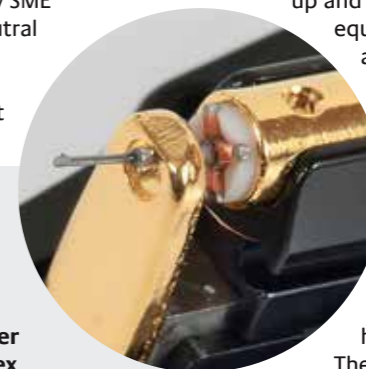
or raw-sounding MC. Its stylus profile, together with its remarkable tracking abilities, mean that this is far from being one of those hard and brittle-sounding designs that threatens to shatter glass when the going gets tough. Rather, it's a wonderfully even-handed cartridge in the way it handles music.

That said, there is a sparkle to the Starling's performance. What this means, however, is bags of glorious detail dragged effortlessly from the depths of the grooves and served up in a capacious soundstage with instruments perfectly ordered. If you want to shut your eyes and visualise

exactly where your favourite performers are sitting when they play, then the Starling will make the perfect listening companion. What's more, it doesn't simply dissect the music in a surgical manner but always endeavours to remain faithful to the musical message as a whole.

FINGER PICKIN' GOOD

Even better, the sound of the Starling can be tweaked by changing the tonearm with which it is used. My SME 309 is an essentially neutral performer and adds no warmth or euphony to the presentation – a fact



SUMIKO'S STORY

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, and legendary designer and Sumiko co-founder Dave Fletcher is credited with bringing Grace tonearms and Supex cartridges to the USA. He is also said to have introduced Linn's founder, Ivor Tiefenbrun, to the Grace/Supex combination that partnered the fledgling Linn LP12 turntable, until Linn's own arm and Asak cartridge took precedence. Over the decades Sumiko gave us the MDC-800 (known as 'The Arm') and the Virtuoso DTi pick-up, among many other cartridges, before evolving into one of the USA's top suppliers of high-end hardware. More recently it has joined the Fine Sounds Group team, distributing in-house brands including Sonus faber – the latter also supplying Sumiko's active subwoofer range. This success in distribution has not come at the expense of its own design innovation or build quality as the exquisite micro-ridge diamond, boron cantilever and X-shaped 'moving coils' illustrate here [see inset picture]. PM

CARTRIDGE

RIGHT: Another view of the magnet, cantilever and (just visible) coils. The chamfered cartridge pins are clearly labelled but care must be taken to ensure a snug fit

Sade's cover of 'Why Can't We Live Together' from her *Diamond Life* LP [Epic EPC 26044] motored along with gusto, forming an unshakable foundation for the remaining instrumentation and Ms Adu's voice.

Having already applauded the Starling's bass detail and extension, I should contrast this against bass *impact*. Given that this cartridge could lock onto a rhythm with precision and capture the finest low-end detail of any song playing, a little more sheer weight would not have gone amiss. Rush's epic instrumental, 'Leave That Thing Alone' from their album *Counterparts* [Atlantic 7567-82528] highlighted this. Geddy Lee's bass was a joy to behold, but a slight lack of grunt from the late Neil Peart's kick-drums held the performance back from being one of perfection.

REAL SCOOP

What was absolutely beyond reproach, however, was the superb level of midrange clarity, air and atmosphere that the Starling generated. Alison Goldfrapp's vocals on the track 'Annabel', from Goldfrapp's *Tales Of Us* album [Mute Artists STUMM356], were gloriously emotional, every vocal tremor sending a shiver up my spine. Equally, the acoustic guitar backing was crisp, immediate and set at just the right position in the soundstage to give a fine sense of depth and space around the performers.



Of course, we don't all own pristine audiophile albums, so a good test of a cartridge is how well it is able to deal with something a little less perfect. My copy of Bach's *Concerto In C Minor For Two Harpsichords And Orchestra* [Nonesuch H-71019] is well-used but certainly still has plenty of magic to be found in its old grooves.

Fortunately, the Starling MC cut through any haze like a warm spoon through ice-cream. The two harpsichords providing the main action in the *Allegro* movement were dynamic and natural-sounding, with the interplay between them a delight. Meanwhile, the supporting strings appeared at just the right distance in the soundfield to augment the harpsichords, never overwhelming them while still maintaining their own clarity. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Sumiko's attempt at filling what it sees as a gap in its lineup has been a huge success. The Starling may be nerve-racking to fit but the challenge is rewarded once the music starts. Yes, it is very crisp and detailed but it has a poise, polish and panache that is alluringly addictive. The way in which it disdainfully shrugs off poorer pressings is also a revelation. This is a welcome addition to a fine range.

Sound Quality: 86%

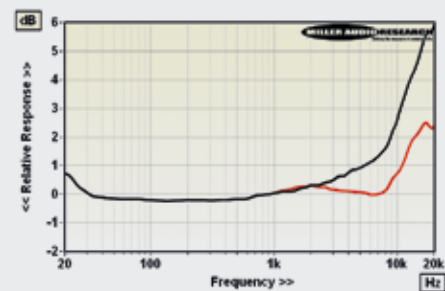


ABOVE: The Starling is packed in a fragrant wooden box and includes a clip-on stylus guard (removed here)

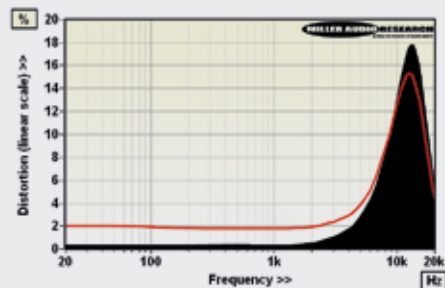
SUMIKO STARLING

While certain design features – not least the X-shaped coils, the pre-tensioning of the suspension, superb tracking performance and extended but 'bright' treble response – all have a Lyra-esque quality [HFN May '13], the Starling is otherwise quite distinct. There is some slight asymmetry in the generator here, so the right channel has the hotter response with a +1dB lift through midrange and presence leading to a kick above 10kHz that reaches +6dB/20kHz on lateral (L+R) cuts and +2.3dB/20kHz with vertical (L-R) traces [Graph 1, below]. The left channel has a milder +2.5dB/20kHz (lateral) and +1.5dB/20kHz (vertical) response, but distortion is uniformly high on both channels – up to 20%/15kHz (–8dB re. 5cm/sec) – not because the Starling is especially non-linear, but because it has an uncommonly extended HF response.

Output is a dB or so higher than Sumiko's 0.5mV spec. at 580µV (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec), the channel balance is tight at 0.2dB and separation modest at 25dB through the midrange. The 'micro-ridge' stylus is well polished and precisely mounted on its boron cantilever, and although VTA looks closer to 26° than the claimed 20° its 10-11cu suspension compliance, combined with the modest 7.8g bodyweight, renders it very compatible with most of today's 9-14g effective mass tonearms. Moreover, and despite the relatively low (stiff) compliance, the Starling is a very secure tracker at its recommended 2.0g downforce, achieving >80µm/80µm via the left/right channels, respectively, and keeping hold of a high +15dB groove modulation (re. 315Hz/5cm/sec) at <0.5% THD. In common with previous Sumikos, this is the antithesis of the soft-sounding MCs of hi-fi yore! PM



ABOVE: Frequency response curves (–8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, black) versus vertical (L–R, red)



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, black infill) and vertical (L–R, red) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harmonics) vs. frequency from 20Hz-20kHz (–8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-coil / 7.8g
Recommended tracking force	18-22mN (20mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	578µV / 0.23dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	10cu / 11cu
Vertical tracking angle	26 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	>80µm / 80µm
L/R Distortion (–8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.37–21% / 0.35–18%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+2.4 to –0.4dB / +5.9 to –0.5dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	25dB / 15dB