



Sumiko Audio Palo Santos Presentation Cartridge (TAS 206)

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With a name like Palo Santos Presentation, it's hard to imagine anything less than a high-achieving audio component. This is Sumiko Audio's latest flagship cartridge, and it is indeed an achievement. A low-output moving coil design, the Palo Santos Presentation is the culmination of improvements and advances from materials to manufacture.



Of these advances, the most significant, says Sumiko, is the new generator anchoring system, wherein the front yoke makes a high-pressure fit against an Alnico magnet—a technique that Sumiko states improves rigidity and reduces resonance and background noise. Mounted on a long-grain boron cantilever, the Palo Santos uses an ultra-low-mass Ogura Vital Design PH diamond stylus—a costly design profile that removes excess “moving mass closest to the tip of the cartridge, leaving only that which is deemed vital.” Sumiko characterizes the result as “working with only the heart of the diamond.”

Heart? Who knew? The Palo Santos forgoes the conventional suspension material of butyl rubber, opting for the longer-term tracking ability of more stable, longer-lasting synthetic rubber. Weight is 8.3 grams. Finally, the handcrafted wood body (sumptuous Brazilian rosewood) is shorter in height, making it easier on the eye (and nerves) to mount and align this cartridge. Nevertheless, steady hands are a requisite given the absence of a stylus guard.

The output voltage of 0.5mV places the Santos in the sweetspot for moving-coil enthusiasts, an output that is robust enough to perform with the vast majority of phonostages and also provides excellent signal-to-noise ratio. Optimal tracking force is said to be 2.0 grams, and I found that to be just right. Playability was uniformly excellent. The cartridge never mistracked even at in-room sound pressure levels that sometimes transformed my room into The Hurt Locker. The instruction manual is comprehensive and addresses common set-up concerns, making appropriate suggestions about everything from azimuth to vertical tracking angle (VTA). With the SME V as my reference tonearm, I tend to run the arm tube parallel to the surface of the record, which in my view imparts the smoothest overall tonal balance from most recordings.

Sonically, the Palo Santos has one of the most unhyped sounds that I've heard from a moving coil. It boasts dimensionality and presence and speaks in a single voice. It may not immediately grab you when the stylus first alights in the groove—the initial sensation is more of a contemplative and soothing ahh, rather than a heart-stopping, head-ducking whoa! But the Palo Santos is a conniver as it ever so slowly draws you into its naturalistic web, conveying complexities of timbre and space and atmosphere so authentic that they make it easy to let the cartridge go uncredited. By this time, the Palo Santos has got you in its clutches. Essentially midrange neutral, its signature subtly veers to the warmer end of the spectrum, a bit laid-back but far from bloodless, with just a hint of upper-treble shading. The soundstage of the Palo Santos strikes me as less forward than some, a characteristic I noted during “I'll Be Seeing You [Pop Pop, ORG],” where I found Ricki Lee Jones had stepped back slightly in the mix. However, that's not to say it's a laid-back performer in the low-energy sense of the word. It isn't. It's almost easier to portray the sonics of the Palo Santos in terms of what it doesn't do, or, more accurately, overdo. The Palo Santos is not a That's Entertainment-style cartridge, pulling out all the tiresome audio tricks. It's far more Bolshoi than Busby Berkeley. Transients are quick but don't draw the kind of attention of some cartridges that seem pre-sprung on hair triggers. And the PSP doesn't X-ACTO-knife images or widely spread orchestral layers. Yet, it doesn't overlook these elements, either. While I don't think it quite sends the full breath of unrestricted harmonic air billowing



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through the treble, it also doesn't suggest any of the falsely tipped energy that is just as likely to be high-frequency electronic noise from elsewhere in the recording chain rather than on the recording.

In fact, to appreciate the scale of its "presentation," listening to pure, unamplified acoustic music is a must. One of my most natural recordings is Vaughn Williams' *The Wasps: Overture* [RCA] where the Palo Santos truly strutted its stuff. The violin section, imitating a swarm of wasps, swirls and sweeps across the soundstage, soon to be joined by the brash brass with the ominous growls of bass viols adding to the tension. The ethereal presence of the harp to the right of center stage is notable for its articulation, but in my view it shouldn't harden or overwhelm in its forwardness. The Palo Santos strikes the appropriate balance. It renders low-level timbre beautifully—the dark nasality of an oboe, the heavier shading of a viola, the buoyancy of a violin. Or, for example on the latest reissue of Dire Straits, *Love Over Gold*. The track "Private Investigations" features a classical guitar, an instrument that only sounds strident in a poor recording or because of tonal inaccuracies in the playback chain. The cartridge revels in small differences, like the grade of grit of the sand blocks throughout this track. Only in minor ways does it leave some performance on the table. It flags ever so slightly in bottom-end resolving power and crunch. And I've heard a bit more air and bloom from orchestral strings and winds and generally finer low-level harmonics, but all in all, that is pretty much the ballgame.

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