

Sumiko's new \$750 Blackbird moving-coil phono cartridge hopes to establish itself as *the* performance benchmark in the sub-\$1000 price class, which means its mission is not so much to push the edge of the performance envelope but to serve as a reference cartridge for the real world. Sumiko's designers intend for the Blackbird to provide much of the sonic splendor of more exotic designs, but in an affordable and easy-to-live-with package that—importantly—does not place unrealistic demands on the rest of the system (the “Ferrari for the Common Man” concept, if you will).

Though influenced by Sumiko's popular Blue Point Special cartridge, the Blackbird is a sophisticated new design that blends conventional and exotic technologies and construction techniques (and that yields *much* better sound than a merely “tweaked up” Blue Point



Special ever could). Like the earlier model, the Blackbird is a high-output (2.5 mV) design that features a resonance-resistant “body-less” cartridge frame from which generator components are suspended. Its generator (or “motor”) has a low-mass, “special grind” elliptical stylus (no tip dimensions are quoted) mounted in an exceptionally light and stiff long-grain Boron cantilever rod. The cantilever rod, in turn, is terminated in a small, resonance-

controlling inertia block, and suspended by a purpose-built synthetic rubber surround whose hardness and repulsion factor are, says Sumiko—specifically optimized to match the characteristics of the Boron cantilever. Finally, all Blackbirds are assembled and calibrated by hand, then given a battery of objective and listening tests before shipment. Together, these factors point toward a cartridge built with great attention to detail, and one that represents good value for your money.

In the well-written manual, Sumiko explains some of the thinking that shaped the Blackbird's design. For example, despite the advantages that a lower output design might have offered, Sumiko gave the Blackbird high output specifically so that it could be used with good-quality moving-magnet phono sections (arguing that low-output moving coils often fail to achieve their full potential because few audiophiles can afford the high-gain/high-resolution/low-noise phono sections necessary for them to perform at their best). Similarly, Sumiko chose a comparatively conventional elliptical stylus, claiming that a low-mass elliptical stylus can resolve plenty of inner detail, yet without becoming too finicky about vertical tracking angle (VTA) adjustments, a problem that easily could arise with a more exotic stylus shape. Obviously, Sumiko has thought through the

characteristics it wants this real-world reference cartridge to have. But the key question is whether the Blackbird's sound makes it the leader in its price class.

Since I've not yet heard all of the top cartridges in the \$750 price range, I can't say with certainty that the Blackbird is the "best in class" performer, but I can tell you it is an extremely competitive design that sounds *far* more expensive than it is. From the beginning, audiophiles have turned to moving-coil cartridges in search of finer resolution and better communication of musical details than moving-magnet or moving-iron cartridges typically afford. Even so, many enthusiasts perceive a substantial performance gap between \$750 moving coils and upscale models in the \$1500-\$3000 price range, and what makes the Blackbird special is the fact that it narrows that performance gap in three important areas.

First, the Blackbird offers really solid and finely textured midbass—an area essential in music. Instruments such as pipe organ, low percussion, bass (electric and acoustic), low winds and brass, and even the low-frequency reverberations of the hall can bring tremendous weight, warmth, and vitality to music *if*—as is the case with the Blackbird—our hi-fi equipment gives them their due. Now the Blackbird is by no means a thudding, bass-heavy cartridge (and until you get its VTA dialed in you might even perceive it as bass shy). But once you find a stylus rake angle that yields good overall balance, the Blackbird brings bass instruments alive in an authoritative (though never overblown) way. You can hear its sheer bass power in the aptly named "Gravity's Angel" track from Laurie Anderson's *Mister Heartbreak* [Warner Bros.]—a track whose mysterious, beautifully phrased bass line is infused with a quiet yet electrifying sense of energy. Many cartridges present this bass line in an offhand or even emasculated way, but the Blackbird presents it with all of its underlying energy and urgency intact. What is more, its bass is also articulate—as you can hear on the "Amelia" track from Joni Mitchell's *Shadows and Light* [Asylum], where Mitchell is backed by the incomparable Jaco Pastorius on fretless bass. Pastorius' bass tone is rightly admired for its singing, almost vocal quality (what some bassists call the "mwaaahh" voicing), and the Blackbird captures that tone with great delicacy and nuance. Some affordable cartridges give you appropriate bass weight while others deliver bass tautness and finesse, but the Blackbird gives you *both*, and at a sensible price.

Second, the Blackbird strikes an excellent balance between openness, definition, and smoothness in the upper midrange and treble regions—areas where some moving coils run into problems (the dreaded "rising upper midrange/treble" phenomenon). Happily, the Blackbird generally steers clear of the overshoot, ringing, and upturned treble that sometimes pass for "definition," instead reproducing the overtones of percussion, strings, brass, and female

voice with appropriate clarity and delineation—almost never sounding aggressive or edgy (except, perhaps, on the most brutally modulated recordings). Listening to the Blackbird, I found myself enchanted by the natural shimmer and decay of percussion and vibraphones on *The Best of the Modern Jazz Quartet* [Pablo], and stirred by the vigorous yet clean attack I heard on large-scale string, brass, and choral passages in the Klemperer/Philharmonia recording of Mahler's *Symphony No. 2* [EMI]. Naturally, the Blackbird does not magically "cure" problems with inherently bright recordings (nor would you want it to), but when recordings get the treble and upper midrange right, so does the Blackbird.

Third, the Blackbird delivers superb midrange resolution and focus that, I feel, sound as if they are coming from a higher-priced cartridge. Frankly, I didn't fully recognize the excellence of the Blackbird's midrange until I pulled out two of the most natural-sounding records in my collection: the Seelig/Turtle Creek Chorale/Women's Chorus of Dallas recording of Rutter's *Requiem* [Reference Recordings], and Dave Grusin's *Discovered Again* [Sheffield Labs]. In the "Out of the Deep" section of the Rutter *Requiem*, the Blackbird caught the dark, hushed, reverent sound of the vocalists with great purity, and it created a thoroughly believable soundstage, effortlessly capturing the reverberant sound of the hall. Then, on the "Three Cowboy Songs" medley from the Grusin album, it captured the voice of each instrument in the ensemble with an invigorating, "be the recording console" immediacy and realism (ever the hallmarks of great direct-to-disc recordings). The Blackbird's midrange raises the bar for affordable moving coil cartridges, stepping free from the slight graininess or coarseness that sometimes holds back others in this price range.

Clearly, the Blackbird has some delightful core strengths, but there are a few areas where I have minor reservations about its performance (not so much "problems," per se, but rather "limitations to keep in mind"). First, although the Blackbird offers unusually good resolution within its price range, be aware that some models with 4-figure price tags offer finer resolution still (and with superior top-to-bottom continuity). Second, the Blackbird can sound congested (even a tiny bit ragged) on extremely complex or heavily modulated material (e.g., the Mahler *Symphony No. 2* recording referenced above). The problem is not that these infrequent moments of congestion are terribly objectionable (they are in fact pretty minor), but rather that—when they arise—they represent a noticeable break from the Blackbird's typical midrange smoothness and purity. Again, some more costly models can handle modulation "torture tests" more gracefully. Finally, the Blackbird tended toward an ever-so-slightly midrange-forward sound. You can mitigate this tendency through careful VTA adjustment (which will help balance the relative levels of the midrange

and midbass), but it is a characteristic to bear in mind when matching the Blackbird with other system components.

Sumiko's Blackbird is one of the finest cartridges I've heard in its price range, and it serves as a highly credible "reference cartridge for the real world." Is it the best \$750 cartridge available? You must answer that question for yourselves, but I strongly suggest that—before dropping anywhere near \$750 on a new phono cartridge—you first spend quality time with the Blackbird. 

Specifications
Generator Type: High Output Moving Coil
Suspension: Synthetic Rubber
Cantilever: Long-grain Boron rod
Stylus: Low-Mass, "Special Grind" Elliptical
Output Voltage: 2.5 mV
Recommended Load: 47k Ohms
Compliance: 12 x 10 ⁻⁶ cm/dyne
Tracking Force Range: 1.8-2.2 Grams
Frequency Response: 10 Hz – 50kHz
Weight: 9.6 Grams

Associated Equipment
Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 300 integrated amplifier and Tri-Vista SACD/CD player, Meadowlark Kestrel 2 loudspeakers, Epos ESL3 loudspeakers, Linn Sondek LP12 turntable, Linn Ittok LV-II arm, Richard Gray's Power Company 1200S power conditioner, Audio Magic interconnects, Audioquest CV-6 speaker cables, Auralex acoustic damping foam, and Mark Genfan acoustic diffusion/absorption panels.

Manufacturer Information
Sumiko 2431 Fifth St. Berkeley, CA 94710 510-843-4500 www.sumikoaudio.net Price: \$750