

Sumiko Oriole

Made in Japan for US-brand Sumiko, the low-output Oriole MC sits between the Songbird and flagship Starling pick-ups in its range-topping Reference series

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

What goes around comes around: if it wasn't for Sumiko, we would probably still be listening solely to moving-magnet cartridges. As recounted in our review of the Sumiko Celebration 40 [HFN Apr '22], company founder Dave Fletcher helped introduce to the West Japanese audiophiles' passion for moving-coils in 1972. Sumiko's latest, the Oriole, is entirely representative of 21st century MCs, a half-century on since Sumiko made us aware of Supex, Grace and the rest.

BODY TALK

Part of its Reference Series, the Oriole is not exactly 'low cost' at £1499 but it seems a bargain compared to today's high-end norm of around £3000-£5000. It looks the part too, being of immaculate construction and of the school that eschews body shells. For those who value looks, the view of cantilever, magnets, coils, etc, can be as enticing as a precious stone, wood or machined alloy body.

There is but one negative to the form. Arguably, the delicate, hair-thin wire

workings of a cartridge demand protection from the outside elements – a body shell affords both environmental and acoustic shielding. The same argument is posited for removing the shell as a source of resonance, a major issue in cartridge design and behaviour. Instead of opting for solid mineral or metal bodies which should suffer minimal resonance, or wooden bodies which artisan cartridge designers posit can be tuned, none can

match the complete absence of the body.

Sumiko further channels any remaining, unwanted vibration away from the mechanism via its hefty alloy top plate. All of the Oriole's components are held

'It displays incredible mass and substance down below'

together in a PEEK polymer shell, the black plastic frame that carries everything from the four colour-coded pins to the moving parts, magnet, and coils, etc. This is bonded to the chunky alloy 'vibration energy sink'. PM's photography allows us to study this in greater detail than would holding the actual cartridge... unless, that is, you have a jeweller's x20 loupe.

Though probably not a reason why cartridge designers have made these *à la fresco* models, or 'open architecture' in Sumiko parlance, is the inescapable fact that there's no easier type of cartridge to setup and cue. Because of this, the Oriole is so simple to mount and align on a gauge

LEFT: Sumiko's Oriole MC is packed into a fragrant wooden box and includes a protective, full-body stylus guard (removed here)



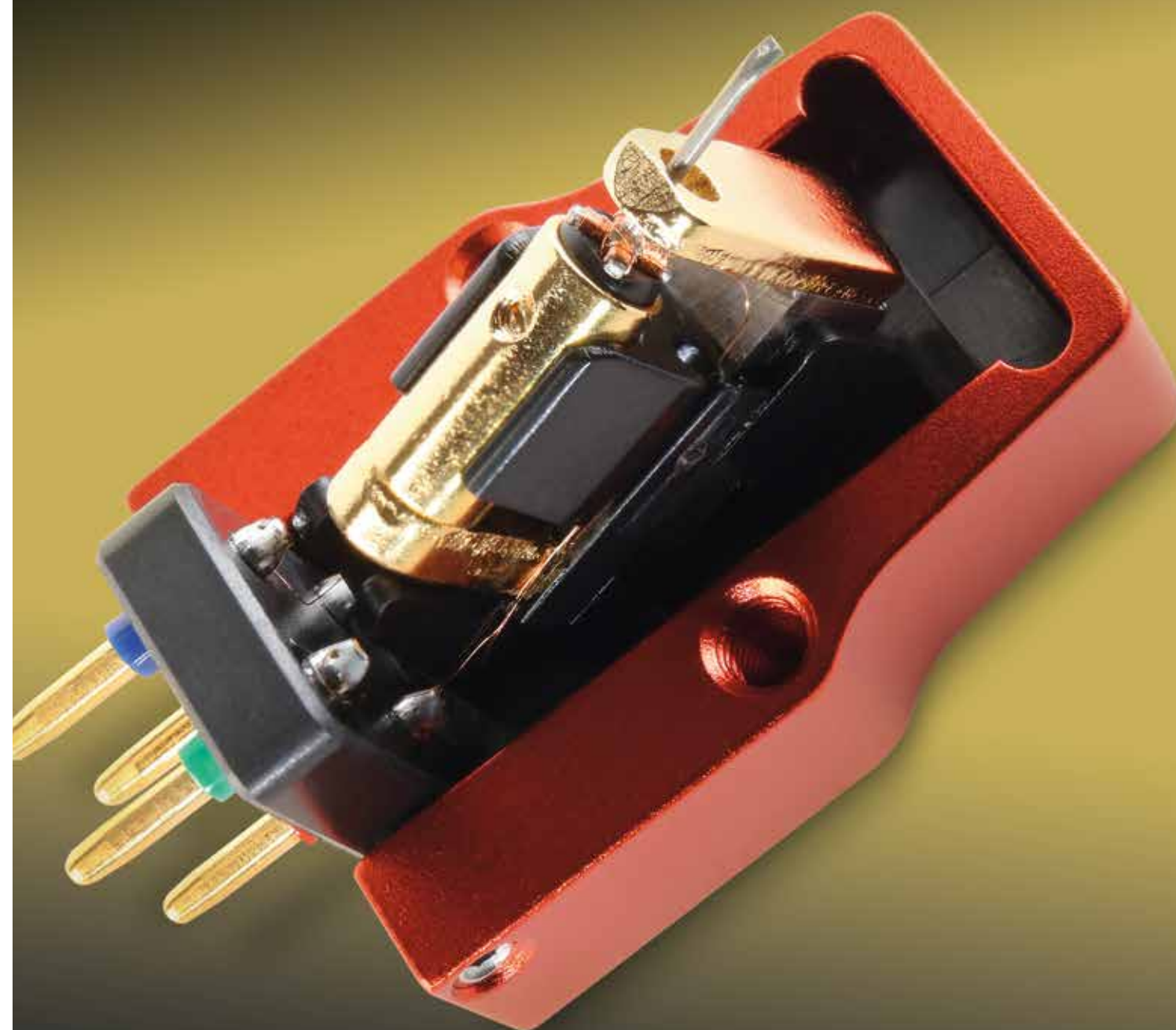
ABOVE: The reinforced alloy pipe cantilever is fitted with a nude Shibata line wcontact stylus while the exposed magnet and pole pieces are clamped into a (black) PEEK polymer shell

that it's almost embarrassing. That solid metal top, too, invites the kind of screw tightening that destroys head shells for those so inclined to overcompensate.

SURGICAL SPIRIT

As for the rest of the recipe, it includes an aluminium tube cantilever and a superb nude Shibata line contact stylus, beautifully fitted. The cartridge tracks superbly at 2g [see PM's Lab Report, p91] while the 0.3mV output puts it in the middle of medium-to-low output cartridges. I ran this into 50 and 100ohm noting that the Oriole responds in terms of level and overall tone with incremental adjustments in loading.

Where one needs to behave like a surgeon is in VTA setting because, with this stylus profile, it's inherently a critical matter. To these well-seasoned ears, the Oriole can veer toward the bright segment of a Venn diagram. Getting the VTA absolutely spot-on – dipping the arm slightly at the rear – not only minimises the risk of edginess or sibilance, it also makes the soundstage snap into focus. There ➤



'Sumiko has always opted for an X- or cross-shape former to support its MCs' copper coils'



CARTRIDGE

is a rewarding absence, too, of the 'needle chatter' many cartridges suffer, as noticed if you put your ear close to the tonearm.

SINGING LIKE A BIRD

Mention of the stereo soundstage is deliberate here, as creating a convincing space for the music is one of the more immediately identifiable characteristics of the Oriole. It's as if someone had turned a classic Denon DL-103 [*HFN* Jul '09] through 90°, the sound here rather deeper than it is wide.

This is categorically *not* a demerit but a constructive observation – if you have a massive room, it's a boon because your loudspeakers will be far enough apart to ensure that the soundstage is as wide as you could want, while the depth is cavernous. It's a perfect example of using both VTA and speaker toe-in to work with each other. Tweaky? Perhaps. But you're reading *Hi-Fi News* after all...

Please place into context my earlier comments regarding the possible brightness of the Oriole. With Paul McCartney's brand-new *Man On The Run* soundtrack [Capitol 602488235280], the sound was actually sweeter than I expected, while the bass was incredibly 'melodic' for lack of a more precise term. This should surprise no one as Paul is a legendary bassist and his albums have never sounded thin because bass always enjoys prominence in Macca mixes.

Here the Oriole addresses its Sumiko legacy because it was moving-coil cartridges that introduced to many Western ears a gentle, less-aggressive, warmer bass than was available with the MM cartridges of the pre-MC era. Sumiko's latest offering ensures that the bass lopes along beautifully, notably in 'That Would Be Something' and 'Let Me Roll It'. But where does that leave harder bass when it's required?

THE YOKOHAMA CONNECTION

Very few artisan cartridge brands actually mount their own diamonds or wind their own coils – this is the preserve of specialist OEM producers including China's Skyanalog [*HFN* Sep '24 & Mar '25] and Excel Sound in Yokohama, Japan. Formed in 1970, the Excel Sound Corporation was once the go-to supplier of high-quality MMs for brands including Pioneer, Trio (Kenwood), Sansui and Sanyo. During the first vinyl boom it was producing over 50,000 units per month, and although it diversified its business interests from the 1980s, Excel Sound remained a supplier of bespoke MC cartridges for the likes of Sumiko in the US. In 2015, as the 'vinyl revival' promised a viable economy of scale, Excel Sound launched its own MCs under the Hana brand [*HFN* Dec '20 & Mar '26].

In practice, the Yokohama connection is about the only thing Hana and Sumiko have in common as the magnet and yoke structures differ between the two brands. The armature and coil windings are also distinct for where the Hana carts have a square former, Sumiko's mechanism has always used an X- or cross-shape former to support the copper coils [see inset picture]. Depending on how the magnetic circuit is arranged, one shape or the other will offer the optimum profile to cut the lines of flux between the poles. Excel Sound clearly has great expertise here, as it does in mounting an exquisitely fine Shibata stylus onto the end of the crimped, stiffened alloy cantilever seen here – moving (tip) mass is reduced, the pipe bending mode is pushed outside of the audioband and frequency response is impressively extended [see Lab Report, p91]. **PM**



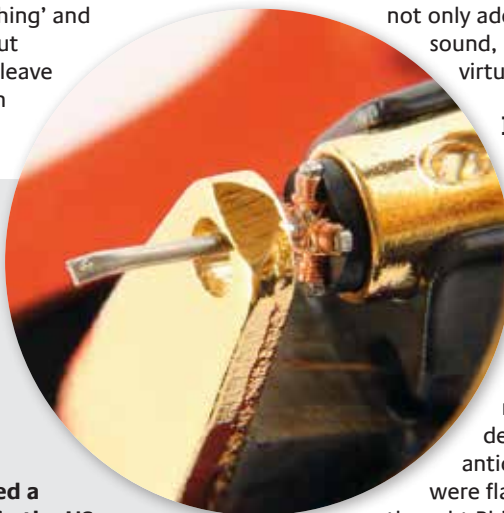
ABOVE: The Oriole's massive, red-anodised alloy mounting block has threaded inserts for locking tight into a headshell. The alloy cantilever moves up into position, and the X-shaped armature aligned, once tracking at 2g

Turning to an album where the bottom end isn't gentle by design, and with the virtuoso hard funk of 'Duck' Dunn's bass, is Sam & Dave's *Hold On I'm Comin'* [Rhino Reserve RHI 780921]. The Oriole displayed incredible mass and substance down below. This was particularly desirable as this is a mono version of the album, so it not only added heft to the overall sound, it presented another virtue of the Oriole.

FAT TRACK

It wasn't just the rock-solid central imaging, even without the preamp's mono button activated. It might have been the recording or maybe wishful thinking on my part, but the mono image was wider, deeper and 'fatter' than anticipated. Indeed, there were flashes of sound where I thought Rhino had made a mistake and let some stereo creep in.

While the McCartney album featured Paul's and Linda's easy-on-the-ears voices, Sam and Dave allowed me to hear the interplay between the rasp of Dave and the soaring gospel tenor of Sam. The Oriole dealt with their disparate but complementary textures with the ease that identified a dearer, wooden-bodied but now defunct moving-coil of near-mythical status. Yes, you do get a whiff of the old non-stone-bodied Koetsu pick-ups, but perhaps this should not surprise as Sumiko was that cartridge's first US importer. ➞



CARTRIDGE

RIGHT: The chamfered cartridge pins are clearly labelled but care must be taken to ensure a snug fit. Care must also be taken with that exposed cantilever, although cueing is very easy indeed!

As much as I feel shame whenever I resort to that easy, lazy method of classifying components, that of suggesting a product works best with a specific genre, the Oriole really showed its mettle with metal. The terrific pressing of Bad Company's near-eponymous debut *Bad Co.* [Swan Song R1 8410] facilitated this cartridge's talent for the three crucial ingredients in any hard rock experience.

SLAM JAM

First and foremost, it handled the attack and range of Mick Ralph's lead guitar work with such ease and such smoothness that any earlier concerns about a brittle top end were dispatched with vigour. Secondly, the bass had all the weight, mass and power needed to sustain a massive-sounding song like 'Can't Get Enough'. How it handled the energy and slam of the percussion showed this to be one of the cartridge's fortes.

And the third requisite for convincing stadium filling? The forcefulness of the Oriole delivered Paul Rodgers' lung-busting vocals as unconstrained as they should be. But *Bad Co.* wasn't all about justifying a place on Led Zeppelin's label. What prevented me from having to be apologetic and allowed me to not have to feel guilty about calling this a 'rock' cartridge was the way it respected the quieter moments.

Recalling the McCartney album's softer vocals, Bad Company's 'Ready For Love' and 'The Way I Choose' stand or fall on the emotional content of a ballad, even with moments demanding the mass of a hard rock song. *Bad Co.*'s piano interludes were suitably sweet and ringing, again belying the Oriole's bias toward the bright, while the acoustic guitar on 'Seagull' had so much air I was reminded of the wooden-bodied Mr Brier [HFN May '86] and EAT's Jo N°8 [HFN Dec '19].

Certain albums are so well-recorded that they tend to make every system sound better than it ought to. I know that's ridiculous as the system can only be defined



by its limitations but *The Incredible Jazz Guitar Of Wes Montgomery* [Craft CR00850] is one of those lush-sounding albums that cosset as much as they reveal. But what would the upper frequencies of the Oriole do to the star instrument?

SPEED KING

First, I had to get past speed, having forgotten Montgomery predates Eddie Van Halen as a peerless shredder. My goodness, could this guy pile on the notes! The Oriole definitely kept up with him, with speed and attack. Arrayed behind him were piano, acoustic bass, and drums, all treated with the kind of refinement I would normally attribute to something like an old Ortofon SPU [HFN Jan '84].

What I thought was a rock cartridge was metamorphosing into a jazz cartridge, or to be more precise, a universal cartridge. Which is as it should be. Then again, how could I not love a cartridge named after one of the pioneering doo-wop groups of the 1940s? ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

So solid and reassuring is the Sumiko Oriole, from its sound to its construction, that the only caveat is obvious: this MC won't likely appeal to those who fear fully-exposed cantilevers. Get past that, and this cartridge is an exemplar of modern MC performance, without the price tag of, say, a new La Cornue-equipped kitchen. Spend time on the setup, especially VTA, and you'll think this cost £3000.

Sound Quality: 86%



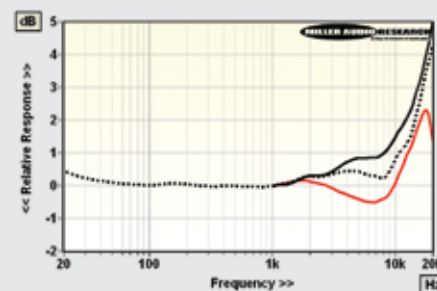
LAB REPORT

SUMIKO ORIOLE

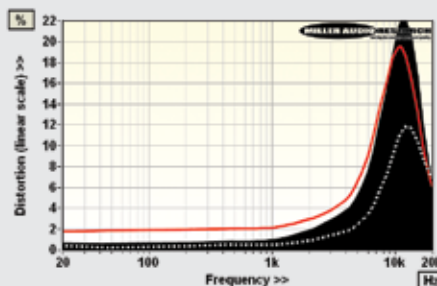
While the Oriole is pitched as a lower output, lower cost sibling to the flagship Starling MC [HFN Mar '20] – it has an alloy pipe cantilever instead of the latter's boron rod – both share hallmark qualities in their extended response, superb tracking prowess and distortion profiles. The Oriole certainly has fewer coil turns and a reduced 5.5ohm coil impedance versus 28ohm for the Starling – hence the lower 282µV vs. 580µV output, respectively (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec). Also, while the Oriole has a slightly 'looser' 0.4dB channel balance it does offer a superior 28dB separation through bass and midrange that holds to a full 25dB at 20kHz.

Once again, VTA looks closer to 26° than the claimed 20° while the 10-11cu suspension compliance, combined with the modest 7.3g bodyweight, renders it very compatible with a wide range of medium mass tonearms. Contradicting this relatively low (stiff) compliance, the Oriole remains a very secure tracker at its recommended 2.0g downforce, achieving ~80µm via the left/right channels, respectively, and keeping hold of the highest +18dB groove modulation (re. 315Hz/5cm/sec) at 0.4% THD.

Also seen with earlier Sumikos, there's some slight generator asymmetry, the right channel possessing a hotter response that lifts to +5.7dB/20kHz vs. +4.3dB/20kHz on the left [dashed trace, Graph 1]. The lateral output [L+R, black trace] is also stronger than the vertical [L-R, red], favouring central/in-phase performers in the soundstage. Do also bear in mind that this extra 'brilliance' really only kicks in above 10kHz... Distortion is uniformly high on both channels – up to 12%/12kHz [stereo, -8dB re. 5cm/sec; Graph 2] – not because the Oriole is especially non-linear, but mainly because of this uncommonly extended HF response. PM



ABOVE: Freq. resp. curves (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, black) vs. vertical (L-R, red) vs. stereo (dashed)



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

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-Coil / 7.3g
Recommended tracking force	2.0mN (18-22mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	282µV / 0.4dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	11cu / 10cu
Vertical tracking angle	26 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	>80µm / 80µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	1.1-14.7% / 0.6-11.8%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.4 to +4.3dB / -0.3 to +5.7dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	28dB / 25dB