

Sumiko Celebration 40

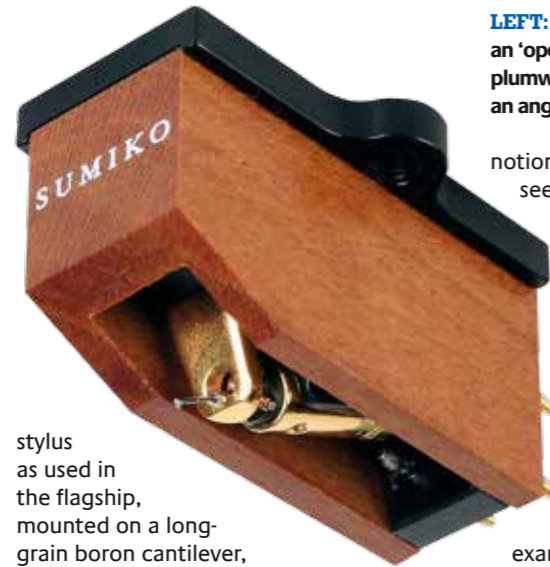
Launched to mark Sumiko's 40th, this latest version of the 'Celebration' moving-coil takes its cues from the mkII Pearwood, albeit with Plumwood to invoke a unique hue...
 Review: **Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller**

This celebratory model, marking 40 years, recalls a bygone time, its perfectly apt wooden box [pictured below] and body inadvertently honouring a specific Japanese MC cartridge with the greatest claim to establishing the genre in the West: the original Koetsu [HFN Nov '80]. What doesn't evoke the 1980s is the £3199 price tag, although this is perhaps not so forbidding when we can list a dozen £10,000-plus cartridges, aimed at those who quaff Petrus at every meal...

The made-in-Japan Celebration 40 is positioned one-from-the-top in Sumiko's five-strong family of 'Reference' MCs, and the company also offers seven MM models from £75-£625. Above the Celebration 40 is the £4999 Palo Santos Presentation [HFN Jul '10] which looks very similar save for its darker wood body.

AUDIOPHILE CARPENTRY

And it's all about the wood, though there are other differences to account for the £1800 disparity. The Celebration 40 is fitted with the same 75x2.5µm Microridge



stylus as used in the flagship, mounted on a long-grain boron cantilever, while the milled Teflon back-plate, motor and anti-resonant machined aluminium cradle are housed inside a plumwood body, instead of the Palo Santos' rosewood. The specification hints at differences in the coil windings, magnet and suspension with its compliance

LEFT: The Celebration 40 is, in practice, an 'open body' cartridge with a protective plumwood sleeve. Sumiko has cut the front at an angle to improve the cueing sightline

notionally higher than the dearer MC's [but see PM's Lab Report, p65]. Weight is reduced too – 7g versus 8.3g.

Sumiko attributes great sonic and tonal value to the choice of wood itself, though this is not a can of (wood)worms I'm tempted to open at this point in the review! That said, the construction is excellent, if necessarily less rugged than the bomb-proof build quality of the top-of-the-range bodies employed by Ortofon [HFN Oct '19] or TechDAS [HFN Sep '14], for example. Also, the Celebration 40 is of the absolutely-flat-top school of design, eschewing the recent trend for three-point contact [HFN Feb '22]. Maybe the jury should remain out on that fashion because in no way was the Celebration 40 anything less than securely mounted in two different arms and three different headshells.

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MIX 'N MATCH

Why the toying with headshells? It was all about optimising the effective mass, as I have one deck with a fixed headshell tonearm and one with removable shells. As per PM's Lab Report, I was careful to use one with high-ish effective mass, confirming the final choice with a brace of test LPs.

Despite my ever-increasing, age-related anxiety when faced with other people's costly cartridges, especially those with long, exposed cantilevers and (possibly uniquely in this case) the absence of a stylus guard, I was mildly relieved to

see the Sumiko's body sporting a severe frontal cutaway. At least I could see everything without having to crane my neck downwards, and it proved a godsend when setting the overhang, but I still wished for a stylus guard while securing the '40 into position.

At 10.2mm wide, its narrower-than-usual body is reminiscent of the old Supex SD-900 and Fidelity Research FR1 [HFN Aug '80] cartridge shapes, with parallel sides ideal for positioning, especially with overhang gauges or templates imprinted with a grid. Also, the set up instructions proved to be textbook perfect – the 2g tracking force was ideal as was the recommended 100ohm loading.

This was, by the way, easily determined thanks to the Audio Research Reference Phono 3SE [p50] because I was able to try various loads via remote from the hot seat. Aside from the anticipated changes in output, the sound was intuitively 'right' at 100ohm, which is good news as there's no need to mate the Sumiko Celebration 40 with an exotic phono preamp boasting uncommon input impedances.

KNOCK ON WOOD

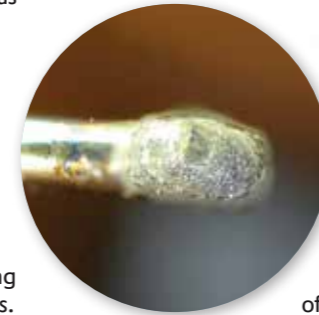
It was, like that wonderful quote from Yogi Berra, 'déjà vu all over again'. I am embarrassed to admit that the Celebration 40, whether deliberately or not on the part of the designers, rendered me misty-



ABOVE: Seen emerging from a hole in the front yoke, the boron cantilever's suspension ensures the coils are optimally positioned in the magnetic field once loaded by a 2g downforce



ABOVE: Partially exposed magnet, yoke and coils are mounted onto a rigid alloy top plate (with threaded lugs), while the 90° angles of the plumwood sleeve assist accurate alignment



LEFT: Micrograph reveals the 'ultra-low mass' 75x2.5µm microridge stylus cemented to a long-grain boron cantilever, as debuted in the Palo Santos Presentation [HFN Jul '10]

eyed and sentimental. I am just old enough to recall the arrival of crazy-money MC cartridges and was an early devotee of the Koetsu Rosewood, one of which I still own. This MC, then, celebrates not just Sumiko's

history, but that of Far Eastern cartridges and their impact on the rest of the world.

There's a certain warmth and timbre to wooden-bodied, hand-built MCs from Japan which, regardless of the actual species of tree, is owned by that genus of cartridges. The Sumiko Celebration 40 exhibits this in spades, albeit with an extra snap of its own. All you have to do to identify this generic trait is compare two MCs from the same family which differ not just in the woods but in the entire choice of materials, eg, jade or stone. The latter are typically cooler, more brash, more forward than wood.

This supports Sumiko's faith in the variances due to wood types, but to me the characteristics are more of a general nature. I do not see myself comparing, oh, cedar to oak to yew. Life is too short... Instead, what the Celebration 40 does overall is a rather nifty trick by demonstrating the richness and warmth of a circa-1985, wooden-bodied MC without veering too far into the overly romantic or too-euphonic lushness which some display.

Not that euphony is a bad thing, and it didn't require hearing the whole of the remastered edition of Tom Waits'

debut, *Closing Time* [Anti, Inc 7565-1], to savour the sweetness and intimacy. The piano throughout 'Ol' 55' retained its percussive bite but also possessed a wonderful liquidity – that's the only word I can conjure up to describe it – with the minimalist backing arrayed behind. It had

an in-my-living room feel that reminded me of Waits' stage set when I saw him in London a lifetime ago.

TRASH TALK

This is a track rich with tiny licks flitting in and out of the background, with loose

harmonising and so much atmosphere that it almost qualifies (like a One-Step pressing) as too flattering to the system, thus creating a better impression than might otherwise be the case. It called for something brash and trashy, like The Runaways' 'Cherry Bomb' [from the *Dazed And Confused* soundtrack, Gramercy/Warner RCV1 24533] which always threatens to tear open a woofer.

Its punk aesthetic, fuzztone, sneery vocals – this is the antithesis of fodder for the sort of cartridges which, way back

'Bobby Darin could swing in any genre he chose'

DAVID FLETCHER

While most distributors are just that – importers of equipment – Sumiko began life as much a manufacturer as it did an importer, and rooted in the vinyl world of cartridges and tonearms. Fifty years ago, the MC revival had yet to spread outside of Japan until legendary designer and Sumiko co-founder Dave Fletcher brought Grace tonearms and Supex cartridges to the USA in the 1970s. The hi-fi jungle drums tell of Dave opening the eyes of Linn's founder, Ivor Tiefenbrun, to the Grace/Supex combination. They partnered the inaugural Linn LP12 turntable, until the Ittok and Asak kicked them from the nest. Over the decades Sumiko gave us the MDC-800 (known as 'The Arm'), the Talisman MCs and Premier tonearms, evolving into one of the USA's top suppliers of high-end hardware. Dave, who passed in 2021 aged 81, had long since sold his shares before, decades later, Sumiko joined the Fine Sounds Group alongside Sonus faber and McIntosh. Thankfully this success in distribution has not come at the expense of its own design innovation or build quality as the 75x2.5µm micro-ridge diamond, 0.28mm-diameter boron cantilever and X-shaped 'moving coils' serve to illustrate [see inset picture, p63]. PM



CARTRIDGE

RIGHT: Another view of the gold-plated yoke, magnet housing and cantilever. The chamfered cartridge pins are clearly labelled but care must still be taken to ensure a snug fit with tonearm tags



when, would only have kissed the surface of mint pressings from Blue Note. The Celebration 40 filled the room with a barrage of angsty thrash, lacking just the merest erg of power required by card-carrying head-bangers.

I double-checked this thought with ZZ Top's 'Tush' from the same LP, and had to alter my opinion. True, it wasn't as 'heavy' as I've heard elsewhere, but it revealed a quality in the Celebration 40 which I hadn't quite noticed, even with the wide-open Tom Waits track: this cartridge produces a panoramic soundstage recalling another vintage MC. Yup, the '40 is nearly as cavernous as the Denon DL-103 and its variants [HFN Mar '21].

This caused a lump in my throat because it reminded me of the '40's deep legacy on a personal level. I considered Sumiko founder Dave Fletcher to be a mentor [see PM's boxout, p62], and he was one of the first to impress upon me the audible, three-dimensional virtues of Japanese moving-coils. The Celebration 40, whether or not those Sumiko engineers who voiced it were of a nostalgic bent, could have been Dave's choice for show-and-tell in that area. I wish he was still with us to hear it.

CHORUS OF APPROVAL

What he probably wouldn't have cared for was a stream of hard rock, so I put on the *Goodfellas* soundtrack [Atlantic RCV1 82152] and cued up Aretha Franklin's 'Baby I Love You'. While this supported the idea of Cinerama-grade soundstage width, happily minus a hole in the middle, yet another allusion to classic MC sound emerged – the way the Celebration 40 separates voices while, at the same time, establishing a cohesive chorus that wouldn't disappoint the ancient Greeks. It's a joy to hear, as this period in Aretha's career showcased background vocals like no other performer thanks to her gospel roots.

It was the next track on the LP, though, that convinced me the Celebration 40 might be something

of a sleeper. By that, I mean it might not be one of the 'usual suspects', and deserving of more attention than it might otherwise get. Hear me out on this...

Bobby Darin's 'Beyond The Sea' remains the perfect example of how he could swing in any genre he chose. The cool brass section communicated so much about the Celebration 40 – speed, attack, transient control, dynamic swings – that I almost forgot to concentrate on his incredible voice. What the heck: the sublime drum sound proved a distraction, too, ranking with the brass for sheer realism.

And that's the real kicker about the moving-coils to which Sumiko's Celebration 40 ultimately pays homage – you forget to analyse, you ignore the picayune concerns about non-essentials, and just wallow in... the music. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

If non-sequiturs amuse, then the Sumiko Celebration 40's deceptive nature will charm you should you expect a throwback to the first wooden-bodied MCs to emerge from Japan – Koetsus or Goldbugs – or the Supexes beloved of founder Dave Fletcher. Instead, this is a sparkling, modern-sounding, secure-tracking MC with no loss of warmth and just the right amount of bass punch. Dave would be proud.

Sound Quality: 87%

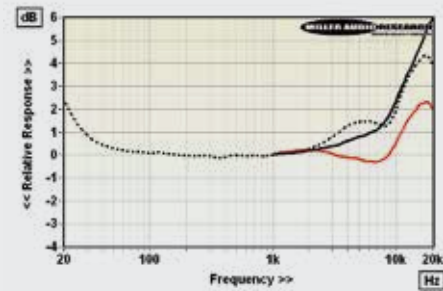


LAB REPORT

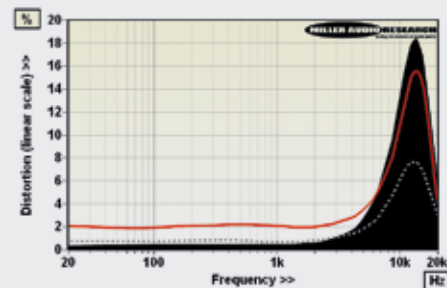
SUMIKO CELEBRATION 40

All the Sumiko Reference series hallmarks are present and correct in the Celebration 40 – X-shaped coils, pre-tensioned suspension, good tracking performance and extended but 'bright' treble response [Graph 1, below]. We saw similar with the Palo Santos Presentation [HFN Jul '10] and Pearwood Celebration II [HFN Jun '20], from which this Celebration 40 is derived, although our sample of the newcomer offered a slightly lower 0.33mV/1kHz (re. 5cm/sec) output. Once again, there's a minor asymmetry in the generator with the right channel providing a marginally hotter response (+4dB/20kHz vs. +2.5dB on the left). Also, L-R cuts are ~1dB less vibrant through mid and presence, taking some 'heat' out of peripheral soundstage detail and focusing attention on in-phase, central performers. Lateral/vertical distortion is uniformly high on both channels – up to 22%/14kHz (~8dB re. 5cm/sec) – not because the '40 is especially non-linear, but because it has an extended and revealing HF response. Stereo THD is lower at <1% up to 3kHz [dashed trace, Graph 2].

The 'microridge' stylus is well polished and firmly cemented onto its boron cantilever [see p63], and although its VTA looks closer to 26° than the claimed 20° and its 8-9cu suspension compliance rather lower than the specified 12x10⁻⁶cm/dyn, the '40 remains a very secure tracker at its recommended 2.0g downforce. On test it achieved ~75µm and kept hold of a high +15dB groove (re. 315Hz/5cm/sec) at <0.3% THD before losing touch at +18dB (~5% THD). Nevertheless, and bearing in mind the Celebration 40's low 7g bodyweight, a high (>16g) effective mass tonearm is recommended to push the combined arm/cartridge resonance frequency down below 10Hz. 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 / 7.1g
Recommended tracking force	19-22mN (20mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	329µV / 0.7dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	8cu / 9cu
Vertical tracking angle	26 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	75µm / 75µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	1.2-12% / 0.6-7.7%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.2 to +2.5dB / -0.3 to +4.1dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	29dB / 17dB