

Group test verdict

In a closely fought test, it's the details that matter. Thankfully, **Ed Selley** has been studying them intently to pick a winner

EVERY CARTRIDGE HERE presents a decent case as to why you might choose it. The Nagaoka JT-80LB and Audio-Technica AT-VM95 both have the scope to liven up a slightly soft-sounding system (and in the Nagaoka's case, help deal with any gain issues too) and both present an energetic and detailed performance. The Audio-Technica also has the benefit of potentially being a very cost-effective upgrade for people already in possession of a more affordable member of the VM95 family. Both models can be a little on the bright and hard side, however,

which somewhat limits their appeal as all-rounders.

The Gold Note Vasari Red and Goldring E4 tie for third, in part because they share some elements of sound and behaviour. The Vasari Red is not the most detailed and dynamic performer, but many will enjoy its big and characterful sound and be utterly unconcerned by that. It's a very engaging introduction to the Gold Note family. The Goldring digs out a little more information from the recording and has a similarly refined and engaging presentation. Like the Gold Note, it lacks a little drive and

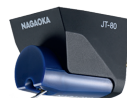
excitement but at £200 it's strong value and will work well in a variety of different systems.

The Grado is the priciest cartridge here, but you can see why. It's the most distinctive-looking in the group and feels bespoke and special in a way that others don't. It delivers a fine sonic performance that balances superb tonality with a level of timing and fluency that is likely to win over many fans. Only the slightly higher price and more limited scope for upgrade in the future really count against it, but it's still a very fine cartridge.



WINNER

The Sumiko Olympia is simple to install and use, is keenly priced and has scope for a future stylus upgrade. It then delivers the best balance of tonal realism, timing and drive in the entire group. Taken across the spread of its abilities, it takes the test win.




Make/model	Audio-Technica AT-VM95SH	Gold Note Vasari Red	Goldring E4	Grado Opus3	Nagaoka JT-80LB	Sumiko Olympia
Price/month	£190	£250	£200	£265	£219	£225
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ease of drive	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	A great performer and cost effective, but not quite the perfect all-rounder	A highly musical offering that offers fine performance in a user-friendly package	Decent all-rounder will work well in lots of systems, but won't please everybody	Not the most ballistic, but delivers a big and confident performance	Confident and capable cartridge, but might sound a little forward	Brilliantly balanced cart that sounds great and offers upgrade potential
Website	audio-technica.com	goldnote.it	goldring.co.uk	gradolabs.com	nagaoka.co.jp	sumikophonocartridges.com

Key features						
Stylus	Shibata	Conical	Super Elliptical	Elliptical	Elliptical	Elliptical
Cantilever	Aluminium	Aluminium	Aluminium	Aluminium	Aluminium	Aluminium
Output	3.5mV	4.0mV	3.5mV	4.0mV	5.0mV	4.0mV
Weight	6.1g	7g	6.9g	8g	6.9g	6.5g
Replacement stylus	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No

TRY WITH THESE

TURNTABLE:
Kestrel Audio KT-200 **£900 HFC 504**

Splitting the difference between the Pro-Jects and Regas of this world, the Kestrel is a characterful and engaging performer that is likely to sit very happily with the balance of the Sumiko



INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:
Rega Elex Mk4 **£1,200 HFC 500**

This Rega integrated amplifier is absurd value for money. As well as great sound, it comes with an excellent phono stage as standard.



STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER:
Mission 700 **£1,300 HFC 496**

The 700 is a fairly large speaker for the asking price, but this lends it a tremendous sense of scale and impact along with the endless ability to enjoy itself. Its looks might be retro, but it's bang up to date.

