

Vertere SG-PTA arm, and Mystic and Sabre cartridges

AS WELL AS BUILDING COMPLETE TURNTABLES, VERTERE HAS HIGH HOPES ITS ARM AND CARTRIDGE OPTIONS ALSO HAVE THIRD-PARTY APPEAL. ED SELLEY EXPLORES

The available options for those of us who use turntables that partly or entirely depend on third party tonearms to work have become a little more limited of late. First SME ended the sale of their arms as individual items and then Jelco – a company which also produced a number of branded arms for other manufacturers – called it quits altogether. In this climate, the decision by Vertere to update the SG-PTA, its more affordable tonearm (a relative term when the other one is over £30,000, but accurate nonetheless), comes as a very welcome one. Not only is there an arm, though, there are two cartridge options to complement it.

The basic numbers of the £2000 SG-PTA are encouragingly versatile: it's a nine-inch design, with a 228mm pivot-to-spindle measurement, that makes use of the 'old Rega' single hole mounting, and therefore fits onto a considerable selection of turntables beyond Vertere's own MG and SG models.

Visually similar to the old SG-1 arm, it represents an evolution of that model rather than a clean sheet design, the key design factor of both models being their bearing, which adapts the principle of a unipivot and retains the single point termination on the arm side as would a traditional unipivot design. However, where the Vertere differs is how the spike is seated: three silicone nitride balls serve to cup it, and ensure its movement is more controlled and free from bearing chatter. Even the manner in which the arm moves during cueing is reassuring.

The bearing supports an arm-tube made from roll wrapped carbon fibre, terminated in a structurally bonded aluminium fitting that supports the headshell. On the £3500 PTA HB version of the arm,

this is made from titanium, as the high strength to weight ratio and benign resonance characteristics are ideal for the task, and the two models also differ in terms of their arm wiring, the HB version gaining a handmade internal wiring fitment.

At the other end of the arm, the counterweight is also revised. There's enough movement in the Tri Pivot bearing to require careful azimuth setting, and on the original SG-1 this was achieved by rotating the counterweight on the stub – which also tended to alter the tracking force. The PTA's revised counterweight features a threaded bar that can be moved from left to right to set azimuth independent of the counterweight moving, and – in keeping with many arm designs from Vertere founder Touraj Moghaddam – the weight is positioned relatively low to reduce the centre of gravity of the arm itself. Fine adjustment of weight and resonance is aided by a smaller movable weight on the armtube itself, and this can be adjusted independently of the main counterweight.

The effect of these changes is to change the arm from a low- to a medium-mass design, due in no small part to the arrival of not one but two Vertere cartridges since the original SG-1 arm was launched. The main driver for the changes is the £2200 Mystic moving coil design, the on-paper specs of which are relatively conventional. An aluminium cantilever mounts a micro elliptical bonded stylus and a pure copper cross coil powered by a samarium cobalt magnet. Output is quoted as 0.5mV and, aside from the relatively high 1kOhm recommended resistance, it presents simple requirements for a phono stage.

Mystic details

However, it's the details of the Mystic that intrigue. The body is machined aluminium and relatively large, and at the top are three raised sections that serve as the actual point of contact between the headshell and body. A huge amount of care has been taken in the design of the Mystic to ensure that vibrations are controlled and dissipated and this seems to have been a priority over and above the use of anything excessively exotic on the inside. As £2000 cartridges go, it is also relatively simple to fit and align too. Vertere supplies it (and the arm too for that matter) with a pair of machined thumbscrews that simplify the business of attaching cart to headshell enormously.

The second Vertere cartridge is more intriguing still, again not because any technology it makes use of is especially exotic but because it is an example of a relatively new category – high end moving magnet. At £845 the Sabre isn't the most expensive such design out there, but it's still proportionally more than many models of a notionally similar specification. Like the Mystic, the innards of the Sabre are good but relatively conventional: an aluminium alloy cantilever mounts an elliptical diamond stylus, and the magnet is Alnico and generates an output of 4.0mV. Although it's relatively heavy at 10.3g, on the plus side it should present no difficulty to any phono stage on the market.

Again, though, it's the details of the Sabre that set it apart from the pack. The body is aluminium alloy, withing which the generator is supported on four spike screws to reduce susceptibility to vibration – a design idea that goes all the way back to the Roksan Shiraz – and this is further assisted by another variation on Mystic's mounting point system. Unlike the Mystic, intended to use the SG-PTA as its 'preferred' arm, the Sabre is also engineered to run effectively on Vertere's DG-1 turntable with its intriguing 'Groove Runner' arm, but it seems easy enough to install on a variety of arms.

Installing the SG-PTA on a third party turntable, in this case a Gert Pedersen-modified Michell GyroDec, is logical and reasonably confidence-inspiring. While

the arm isn't a true unipivot, some free movement is present – but only within fairly well defined boundaries – and the revised counterweight makes this a much less fiddly arm to set and balance than its predecessor, which I also lived with on the GyroDec. The range of adjustment in terms of the counterweight headshell and VTA range means there aren't many cartridges it won't mount happily, and some brief tests with an EAT Jo No5 – a veritable whopper of a design – didn't faze the SG-PTA at all.

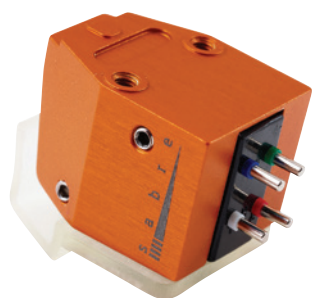
Beyond working in a mechanical sense, the arm begins to demonstrate some consistent and positive characteristics too. Enjoying the beautifully intimate *World on the Ground* by Sarah Jarosz, the SG-PTA takes the 'like a unipivot but not' theory that could be applied to the design and does a reasonable stab of applying it to the sound too. This is an arm that flows through music in a way that really only shows up when you listen to the same material on something more rigidly coupled. It is utterly unforced, regardless of the speed of the music being played.

Enormous heft

At the same time, there is an underlying heft to the performance that a more conventional unipivot will struggle to achieve. The enormous low notes that punctuate the opening 'Sea Bourne' on Dead Can Dance's *Dionysus* have genuine depth to them but the effect is far more than a blunt instrument. There's texture detail and that same sense of flow that the upper registers have and it makes for a level of realism and tangibility that ensures that decidedly indelicate music sounds as appealing as the simpler 'girl and guitar' fare that unipivots excel at.

Going all Vertere and initially fitting the Sabre to the SG-PTA does nothing to alter the fundamentally positive qualities of the arm. Aligning and balancing the Sabre is wholly straightforward and once up and running, the performance of the combination is sufficient to have many people thinking about how much they might 'need' to move to moving coil. The glorious modern classical of Poppy Ackroyd's *Resolve* is spacious but never diffuse and the huge amount of fine detail that this record packs into it is revealed in a natural and unforced way. The piano is the core focus of the album and it boasts natural tonality and the weight and scale it needs to really convince.

At the same time, it's only fair to say that the Sabre is capable of delivering a great deal of these characteristics on some of the other arms available here. Running it mounted on an SME M2-9 on an AVID Ingenium Twin sees it deliver the same wholly convincing tonality and weight in that context too, as well as reflecting the rather more matter of fact nature of these two devices. Transplant it to Rega's lovely Planar 10 and it is no less happy there, again doing a fine job of conveying the unforced and



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even handed nature of the Rega. This comes with the caveat that the weight of the Sabre precludes it being mounted to the RB3000 arm with the thumbscrews, requiring more conventional (and lighter) bolts instead.

None of this should be taken to reflect badly on the SG-PTA. It manages to sound glorious with the Sabre, and the openness it demonstrates is beyond anything else I have to compare it against, but there isn't a definitive advantage from going 'one make' for both arm and cartridge – the Sabre has wider appeal than that. If you're reading this as a valve phono stage owner, where any move to moving coil comes with the attendant complexity of step up transformers, the Sabre will raise the bar of what might be achieved while still sticking with a moving magnet cartridge.

It's worth making this distinction though because the relationship between the Mystic and the SG-PTA does genuinely warrant being seen as synergistic. The Mystic sample in question is my own and it has spent some months running on the end of the older SG-1 arm before being moved to the PTA. In the time I've had the Mystic I've also had cause to test it on the Rega Planar 10, AVID/SME M2-9, an Audio Note Arm III and an SME IV. The latter two arms in particular did things that kept the SG-1 honest; the Audio Note creating a tangibility and the SME a low end heft that the older SG-1 didn't always have an answer for.

Combining the Mystic and SG-PTA creates a playback system that answers those questions emphatically. Not only is the result better than any context I have heard the Mystic in before, it is realistically the best such combination I've spent any time with, even at the relatively steep £5,500 all up cost. In essence, the arm lets the Mystic exhibit the qualities it possesses better than any other environment I've used it in before.

Utterly beguiling

Those qualities are utterly beguiling too. The Mystic is not a cartridge that will grab you in the first five- or even fifty- minutes of listening. What you hear is unquestionably extremely good; possessed of the effortless scale and realism that a good moving coil delivers so effectively, but there's no shock and awe to the Mystic. Instead, over the ensuing hours you use it, you realise that you genuinely cannot unsettle the balance, articulation that it offers.

All too often, the move to more capable equipment comes with the unfortunate side effect of ensuring that certain areas of your music collection seem to become off limits, but the Mystic is utterly immune to this effect. It manages the seemingly contradictory ability of being detailed, spacious and tonally accurate but doing so in a way

that doesn't leave the limitations of less sublime pressings – of which I have to admit to having a great many – laid bare.

Combine the Mystic with the SG-1 PTA and the result is unforced, articulate brilliance. Once again, getting the combination up and running is entirely straightforward and when you do, the qualities of the arm ensure that the cartridge doubles down on that effortless ability to make music. The quirky yet joyous *Moon dust for my Diamond* by Hayden Thorpe escapes from the grooves of the record without much in the way of perceivable mechanical process. This is a very 'studio' album, so the soundstage that it generates is the creation of a mastering engineer rather than the recreation of performers and instruments but, here it feels natural and believable in a manner that is maddingly hard to describe but ensures you sit there listening to it content that what you are hearing is real.

A painless arm upgrade

What's no less impressive about this, and something that should be a tonic for anyone looking for candidates to equip a turntable from a different manufacturer is that, underneath all this, it is still entirely possible to perceive the influence of my GyroDec. There's a width and unflappable cohesion that this much-modified example possesses and it augments that unforced, flowing musicality of the arm and cartridge in a manner that is to the benefit of both. I'm sure that the results of going all in with Vertere are spectacular, too, but if you're reading this with one of the various turntables that for so many years have been sold with a view to using a Rega arm up to a given point and SME thereafter, this is an utterly credible alternative that, no less importantly, is completely painless to live with.

All three of these components are exceptionally good though. The Sabre is possibly the 'simplest' of three to frame. It's a largely viceless cartridge that rivals the heft and articulation of similarly priced moving coil designs while being – all up weight potentially aside – a painless and simple device to partner up. That it doesn't suddenly do anything significantly different on the end of the SG-PTA is a reflection of how simple it is to partner up.

The Mystic is no less even-handed but here there's a synergy with the SG-PTA above and beyond what it has so far achieved for me before that warrants seeking out. The SG-PTA began life as a series of tweaks to better match up to the Mystic and, while I have absolutely no doubt that great results are likely to be something you can obtain from a wide selection of cartridges used on the SG-PTA, the results of combining Vertere arm and pickup are something truly special and should delight anyone fortunate enough to own them.