



Brothers In Arms

Adam Smith checks out Jelco's new flagship SA-750D tonearm...

Right then, let's start out with a quick quiz. Mobile phones away, please, no conferring and fingers on buzzers. "What links Acoustic Research, Revolver, Avid, Acoustic Signature, London Acoustical Developments, Sumiko, Audioquest, Pro-Ject and Ariston?" If you're thinking turntables, very good – award yourself a point. Now to part two – "who links all the above names?" Now, if you said 'Adam Smith', because I just mentioned them all in the same review, then frankly you're not really trying. However, if you said "Jelco" then go to the top of the class!

Jelco is a fascinating company, simply because it has been so influential yet remains largely unknown in the hi-fi world. In fact, the Jelco Ichikawa Jewel Company has a history stretching back to 1920 and Ichikawa-san himself holds a 1977 patent for a 'Pick-up arm rotary pivot bearing structure ("One Point Cross Suspension System")! This is clearly a company that knows their tonearms and deserves far more than to be dismissed as merely an OEM source of arms for eighties turntables.

Not only did the classic and sought after Sumiko MMT and Audioquest PT9 models roll out of the Jelco factory, but there are a couple of current models from one

or two prestigious manufacturers that are made there – possibly the distributors would rather you didn't know this, so my lips are sealed!

In a reaction to the renewed interest in vinyl however, Jelco have recently introduced a new model bearing their own name. Until now, their range was twofold – the SA-250ST straight arm, as featured on the Revolver Replay and Avid Diva II decks, and the S-shaped version of it, the SA-250, which can be found on decks from the likes of TW Acoustic. However, they recently upped their game somewhat and it appears that I was not the only person to sit up and shout 'I recognise that!' when they unveiled the SA-750D. Now I have heard that, although very well-meaning and helpful, Jelco are not the easiest company to deal with, mainly due to the language barrier, but several people have persevered and now, thanks to Dave Cawley

Sumiko was quite clear as soon as I unpacked the SA-750D, but it has clearly evolved. Most obvious is that the arm has a common feature of older Jelco designs, the oil damping pot on top of the horizontal bearing. Jelco supply a pot of oil and give a guide to topping up and this can pay dividends in terms of damping out arm resonances and adding a modicum of extra control to more wayward cartridges. Other than this, the arm has Jelco's patented one point cross suspension system and comes complete with a detachable and sturdy SME-style headshell, which makes cartridge fitment nice and easy. Bias is applied by a rotary spring control, and the SA-750D mounts using a single 30mm diameter mounting hole – a solid base secured by three bolts is supplied.

The arm comes complete with the basics, namely a full-size paper mounting template and another

"I was taken aback at its sophisticated performance and sheer musicality..."

a batch of SA-750Ds have made it to the UK. Not only did Dave supply a sample for review but he also trusted me with a recent eBay acquisition of his, namely a mint Sumiko MMT [see BOX].

The family resemblance to the

paper sheet, which serves as an all-in-one technical drawing/specification sheet/instruction manual – basic but effective enough. Finally, the most notable aspect of the arm is its glorious finish – an absolutely *pristine* dark chrome plate. The old MMT is

no slouch in style terms, thanks to its smart matt black finish, but the SA-750D definitely trumps it. As to actual build quality, regular readers will know that I have long used SME as a benchmark, but if I were them, I'd be getting nervous, as Jelco are creeping up. Finally, Sound Hi-Fi Also supplied a Jelco arm lead – a very solidly constructed item using gold plated connectors and high quality OFC cable for around £85 for a version with phono plugs (straight or right-angled arm connectors are available) or £125 for versions with balanced XLRs.

SOUND QUALITY

At the Jelco's £400 price point there are two main competitors. First is a favourite of mine, the Roksan Nima unipivot and the other is actually more than one item, namely hot-rodged Rega variants from the likes of Michell (TecnoArm), Origin Live and Audio Origami. Sonically these are quite different and so I was keen to see how the SA-750D would fit in. The answer was intriguing...

Knowing the cheaper SA-250 variants are very fluid performers I was pleased to hear that the SA-750D upheld the family tradition but even I was not prepared for the sheer sophistication that the top model in the range brings. I have been playing with a Goldring 2500 cartridge for the past few months and it is an excellent performer but is more sensitive than many designs I have come across in terms of arm matching. Most recently it has been sat in my Audio Origami'd Helius Aureus Gold arm, but I gradually came to the conclusion that the two did not really gel. However, in the SA-750D, the sounds coming from the Goldring were nothing short of a revelation, and it gave truly the best performance I have heard from it to date. The Jelco is still a bit of a smoothie at heart, but this particular version has a real sense of authority and control to it, but without ever making you feel that it is doing so by aggressively hammering its point home.

Spinning a few favourite records, I was highly impressed by the way in which the SA-750D takes absolutely anything in its stride, and never seems to lose its sense of unruffled ease. Setting up a nicely judged, detailed and emotive soundstage, the result was to let you hear into records in a sumptuous manner. True, the Roksan Nima is an expert at this as well, and offers that tad extra unipivot-style airiness, but it is a little less assured at the low end and occasionally seems to struggle with

complex and weighty bass lines. Not so the SA-750D – it pumped out the synth bass from Rosie Vela's 'Zazu' with dignity and aplomb, adding a fulsomeness and depth to the underpinnings of 'Magic Smile' that meant the track held the attention perfectly. Equally however, Rosie's vocals were beautifully formed and stepped smartly out of the loudspeakers to capture my attention magnificently.

Across the top end, the SA-750D is a smooth yet insightful performer, and its treble blends seamlessly with the midrange to offer a beguiling and emotion-packed performance. Not a hint of splash ever passed its output plugs, but the Jelco was always in control of the finest top end details lurking within the depths of the mix. Tarja Turunen's vocals from Nightwish's 'Century Child' had the hairs on the back of my neck standing up and spinning Nick Drake's beautiful 'Northern Sky' had me sniffing. Regular readers will know that emotion and insight is where I feel the many Rega-based designs fall down, no matter how 'turbocharged' they are. Where they do score however, is in terms of bass dynamics and sheer low end alacrity and I have to say that the likes of the TecnoArm does still come out on top here, although I feel the differences are subtle and you would definitely have to go looking for them.

Swapping MM for MC and changing the Goldring for my Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII was a nice easy job, thanks to that detachable headshell. Suitably set up, the good things just kept on coming from the SA-750D and it proved that a high quality MC held no fears for it. The overall nature of the sound remained, with the AT adding a fine dose of MC-style insight and clarity, but it showed that the arm's character is a strong yet neutral one and it is one that seems merely to be fine-tuned by your choice of cartridge. I actually spent a whole evening swapping in and out a few more that were rattling round in the Smith vinyl toolbox and at no time did I catch it out – even a rather laid back Audio Technica AT-440MLa seemed to come out of its shell by just the right amount.

Above all, however, this consistent nature that the Jelco possessed did not result in a dominant sonic signature. In fact, I would say that the SA-750D's most notable feature is in the way it simply does not get in the way of the music. Obviously when reviewing, it is my job to try and listen to the item I am reviewing but with

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Garrard 301 and LAD GAJ942 turntables
Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII & Goldring 2500 cartridges
Whest Audio PS30R phono stage
Naim SuperNait amplifier
Modified Ferrograph S1 loudspeakers

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Wielding the toolkit and swapping the SA-750D for its ancestor, the Sumiko MMT, was an obvious step I just had to take. Firstly, the MMT was not quite a drop-in replacement for the SA-750D as it has a smaller diameter mounting pillar, but the sonic similarities were definitely there. The MMT has the same easy-going yet focused and detailed nature of the newbie, but seems to be just a little rougher round the edges. I suspect due to twenty-odd year old wiring. Equally, bearing use over the same length of time seemed to have reined in the SA-750D's spaciousness and fluidity a little. Interestingly though, there were both upsides and downsides to this; although the MMT could not match the SA-750D for scale and sheer clarity as a result of a slight graininess, the flipside was that when the music became darker and heavier, the MMT seemed happier to get down and grunge along, right in the heart of the mosh pit! All in all, the MMT is a worthy classic arm and is well worth seeking out. It also makes a fitting basis for Jelco's new top design.



the Jelco I found it incredibly easy to 'tune it out', sit back and really enjoy what I was listening to.

CONCLUSION

I had a feeling I might like the Jelco SA-750D, but ended up quite taken aback at its sophisticated performance and sheer musicality. It is an easy arm to get the best from, simple to set up and beautifully built. However, what most surprised me with this review was the discovery that the SA-750D is only a little dearer than the SA-250 and SA-250ST. Excellent performers though these two designs are, I cannot help but feel that the extra hundred pounds or so buys you a sonic improvement that sounds much more. On this basis, not only is the Jelco SA-750D a very capable tonearm but also something of a bargain.

VERDICT

Jelco may be best known for budget OEM arms, but the silky smooth SA-750D shows they can mix it in the higher echelons with ease.

JELCO SA-750D

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FOR

- sonic uniformity
- engaging, revealing nature
- svelte musicality
- build and finish

AGAINST

- nothing at the price