

Abis SA-1.2

A brand new arm has arrived from Japan boasting impressive build and a distinctive if not entirely unique appearance. Does this heavyweight stand its ground?

Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Newly designed tonearms are rare these days, probably because of the engineering resources required. So the arrival of the Abis SA-1.2 warrants a fanfare. Interestingly, the actual manufacturer of this £1869 arm remains something of a mystery since it was commissioned by Japanese agency Sibatech from a Japanese maker of tonearms. Its president designed the arm, and also a TA-1 sibling, but neither is available on the open Japanese market or Internet – only through Sibatech and its sales partners [see boxout below].

HAND ASSEMBLY

Seemingly of single-piece construction, the SA-1.2 actually comprises four separate parts and is fully hand-made. These are the bearing housing, main armtube assembly, a front collar piece that holds the headshell, and the rear counterweight stub. All fit precisely and are screwed together with exacting torque values in order to obtain optimum performance.

Abis claims that the bearings, in conjunction with the design's horizontal rigidity, enhance bass performance considerably – the '.2' improving over a previous version of the arm, and with revised arm geometry and effective length.

SIBATECH

Sibatech was founded in 1987 and is an example of a Japanese 'selling agent'. Not uncommon in the Far East, these agents represent Japanese companies with marketing, and link the manufacturers with international distributors. Sibatech currently represents Abis, Viv Labs, Glanz, FAL, Hana and others, and provides international co-ordination for Audio Note Japan (Kondo).

The main armtube, like the other parts, is precision machined from a block of aluminium. The centre is hollowed out to allow the fitment of the wayrod and weight that apply tracking force. Another hole in front of this accepts an accessory weight, in case the effective mass of the arm isn't enough for your chosen cartridge. The manufacturer specifically recommends the SA-1.2 for low compliance pick-ups, and lists the Denon DL-103, Ortofon SPU and older mono cartridges as ideal partners.

The L/R tonearm wires are separated in the main armtube, which Sibatech claims maximises stereo separation. But as they are re-joined at both ends I would take this with a pinch of salt! In any case, the relatively low channel separation of the average MC cartridge would probably nullify any small gains from this arrangement.

UK distributor Air Audio offers several buying options. There's a choice of silver or, at a £216 premium, a black finish. An additional headshell can be specified for a further £60 – normally it's £98 on its own. (The headshell connector is the standard SME/IEC socket and so the world is your oyster when it comes to experimentation.) The standard RCA plugs on the arm's output lead can be replaced by XLRs for an extra five-to-six week wait, and the arm's

three-point mounting can be augmented by an adapter to fit an SME cut-out for £159 (silver) or £169 (black). Finally, there's a higher specification UK-made arm cable option for an extra £305.

AN ATMOSPHERIC ARM

Air Audio kindly supplied a suitable mounting plate for my Michell Gyro SE turntable, and fitment and set-up of the arm proved trouble-free. In use it felt secure, solid and very well made indeed.

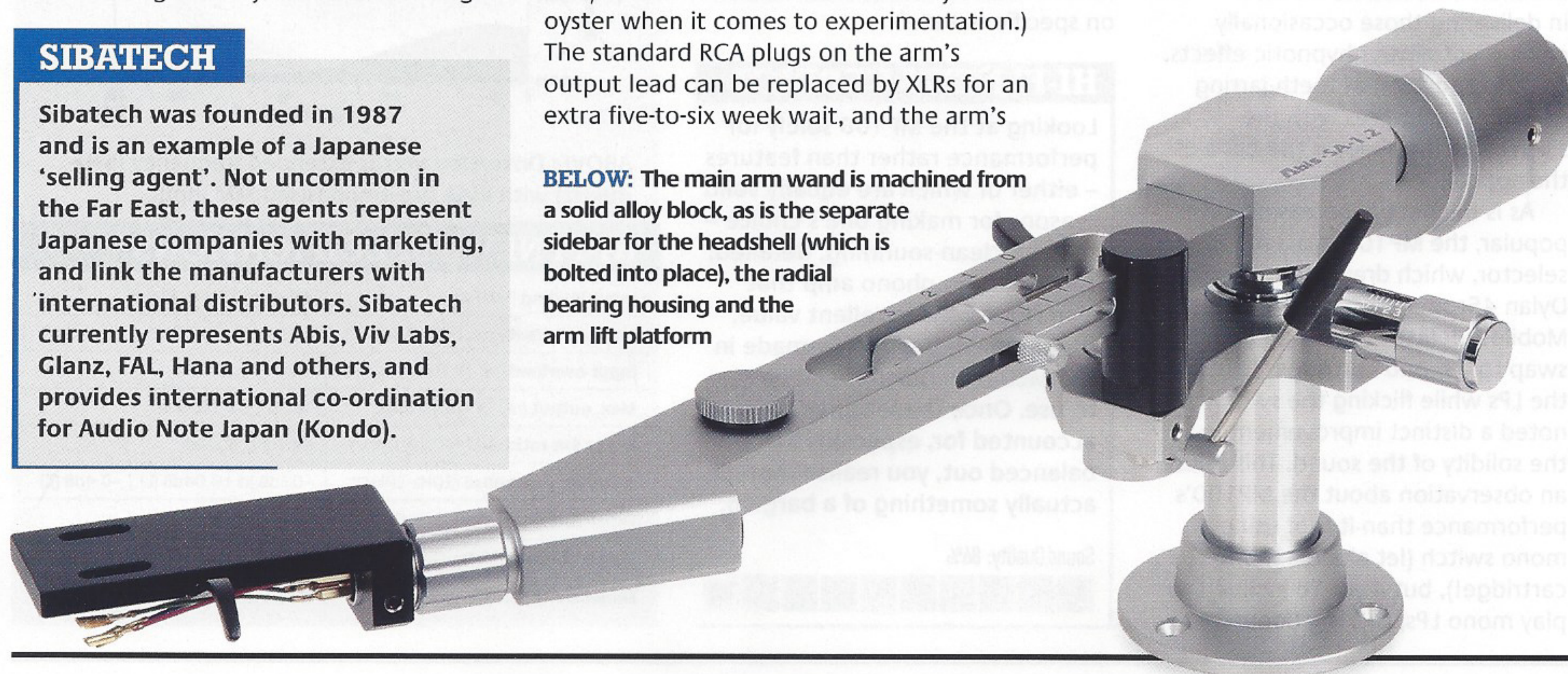
Although I tried some of my regular cartridges it seemed churlish not to explore the arm's essential *raison d'être*. So my trusty Denon DL-103 saw the light for the first

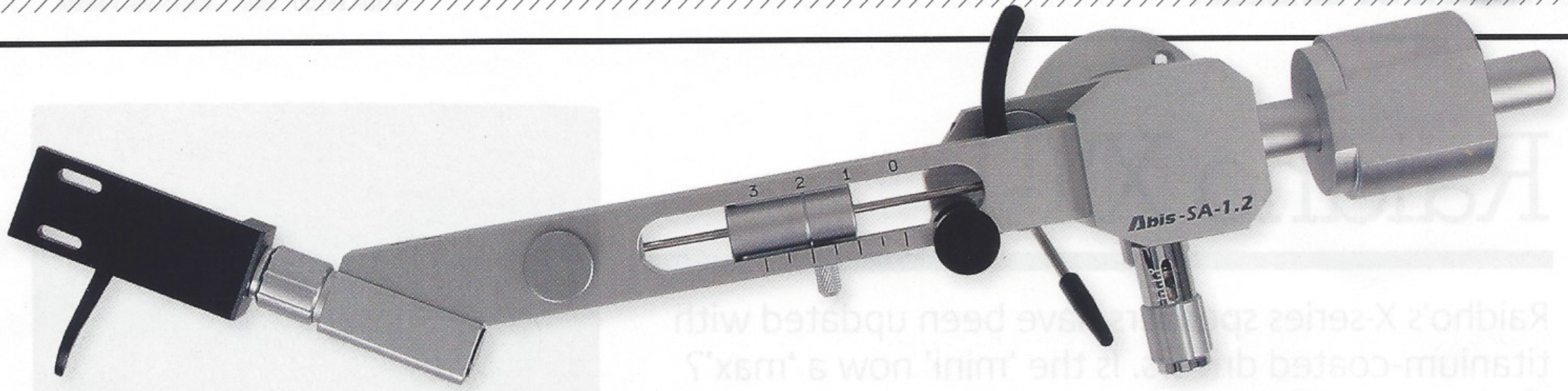
time in some while. It's an MC that only really comes to life in the right arm – the SA-1.2 proved to be the perfect partner and the resulting sound more than lived up to Sibatech's claims.

In fact, I was amused to find that the press releases for the arm on both the Sibatech and Air Audio websites could almost be used as a performance checklist. 'Rich and tight bass?' Check. 'Sound

'The SA-1.2's silky midrange boasts plenty of fine detail'

BELOW: The main arm wand is machined from a solid alloy block, as is the separate sidebar for the headshell (which is bolted into place), the radial bearing housing and the arm lift platform





precise and clean?' Indeed. 'A liquid midrange?' Absolutely. In short, these were no idle claims.

Hence the Abis SA-1.2 is a very compelling listening companion. It draws you into the music and presents material in an ebullient way, which makes listening a pleasure. Do not think for a minute that the arm is in any way 'crash and boom' – far from it. As suggested, the midrange is delightfully silky with plenty of detail, and with not a harsh note to be heard.

Vocal performances were an absolute delight. Kacey Musgraves' 'Present Without A Bow' from her *A Very Kacey Christmas* LP [Mercury Records 80025469-01] was a joy to hear, even if Christmas was but a distant memory! The SA-1.2 captured every vocal inflection beautifully, and positioned the singer smartly centre-stage. A slight leaning towards tonal warmth in the arm's presentation also helped to add a pleasing sense of atmosphere.

This warmth carried over into the SA-1.2's treble performance, which might have lacked the last ounce of crystal clarity offered by the best at the price but was neither dull nor overly smooth. In an enjoyable way it gradually draws you in.

The hi-hats in the background of 'Up On The Hill' from The Fun Lovin' Criminals' *100% Colombian* [Capitol 7243 4 97056 16] were just a little further back in the mix than I am used to but were by no means masked – they still bore their customary metallic ring and were cleanly reproduced.

Most impressive of all, however, was the SA-1.2's bass. The further work on the arm's construction and bearing design has clearly paid off, as it is sure-footed and solid at the bottom end. Bass lines sounded confident and jaunty when appropriate, while the reproduction of acoustic basses also had a lovely resonance to it – the sort of effect

ABOVE: Plan view shows the sliding tracking force weight and, projecting from the arm platform, the bias adjust (via nylon thread and internal spring)

that gives a pleasing sense of realism to music reproduction.

In absolute terms, I would say that my regular SME 309 is just a little bit tighter when it comes to low-end performance, but the Abis was no slouch. In no way did I feel short-changed when listening to the pounding bass line from Age Of Entropy's 'Dream Of Love' 12in single [Ten Pin Records TEN-003] – the SA-1.2 gripped the rhythm with impressive tenacity.

SWAPPING PARTS

With a change of cartridge to an Ortofon Rondo Red, the tonearm continued to impress, although there was a hint that it was not quite getting the best from this moving-coil. However, swapping the headshell for a lighter type – lowering the arm's effective mass – did help, indicating that the SA-1.2 is eminently adaptable in terms of partnering cartridges. As I've said, there's a wide range of headshells to fit its mounting collar and allow for easy fine-tuning. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

I'm not sure why the Japanese manufacturer of the Abis SA-1.2 wishes to remain anonymous as, if this were my product, I'd want people to know! The arm offers a distinct perspective in terms of its design and while it's typically aimed at users with low compliance cartridges, has good compatibility beyond this. The result is an arm that's an absolute delight in form, function and perceived sound quality.

Sound Quality: 83%

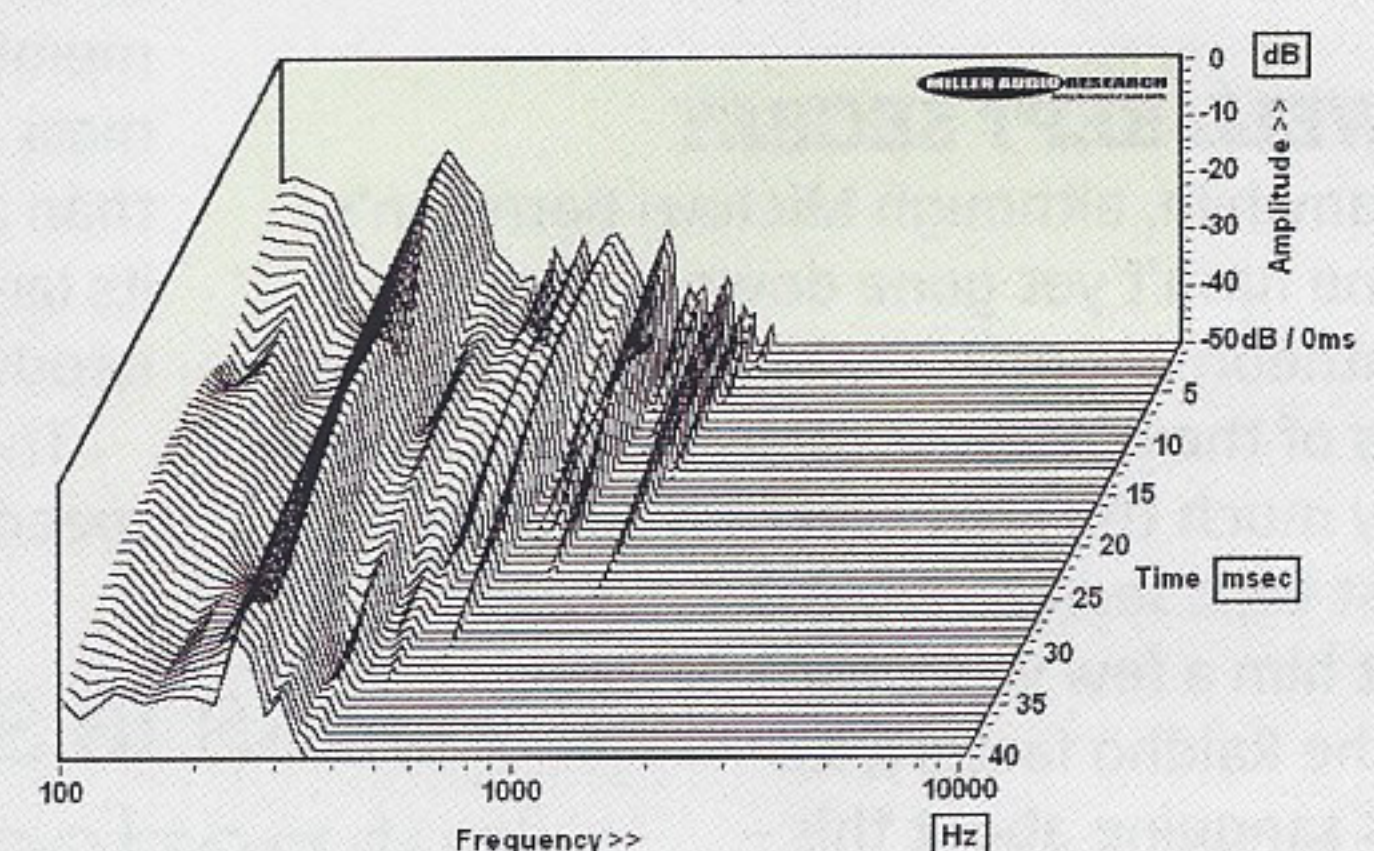


LAB REPORT

ABIS SA-1.2

Although the Abis SA-1.2 bears a superficial resemblance to the classic Dynavector DV-505/507 tonearms [HFN Oct '10] with their offset vestigial 'mini-arm' and headshell, the SA-1.2's fixed geometry and conventional rear-mounted vertical/horizontal bearings lends it a more conventional performance. High mass and a wide, rectangular-section main tube are common themes of both arms but while the Dynavector has a mix of high horizontal with low vertical effective mass (60g/<10g), the SA-1.2 offers a high but slightly more uniform 26g/19g effective mass. Necessarily, it will accommodate low compliance (<15cu) moving-coils with high (10g+) bodyshells although no additional damping is offered. The arm is also compact for its mass and offers a 9.5in (241mm) effective length with a 16mm offset. The gravity-loaded radial bearings are impressively free of play and offer low friction – just 20mg in the horizontal plane.

The resonant behaviour of this arm is predictably more complex than a standard one-piece design with the main wand's principal mode appearing, diffusely, around 120Hz and with what is probably a stronger harmonic at 240Hz revealed more clearly on the cumulative decay spectrum, below. The series of modes at 330Hz, 400Hz, 460Hz, 540Hz and 740Hz are likely related to the mid-tube tracking force assembly, the headshell and other appendages. PM



ABOVE: Cumulative resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing housing, pillar and arm vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Bearing / bias type	Gimbal / thread and spring
Effective mass (vertical/lateral) / length	19g/26g / 241mm
Offset angle / overhang	22.3° / 16mm
Friction (vertical/lateral)	<10mg / 20mg
Downforce accuracy (at 2g)	-5%
Cartridge weight/compliance range	10-35g / 5-15cu
Mounting Type / total weight	Three-point collar / 765g