



Soundsmith Otello £459

As the only fixed-coil cartridge in the group, the US-designed Otello does things its own way



LIGHT TOUCH

The Soundsmith tips the scales at a fraction under 7g, which puts it towards the middle of the group. This, combined with fairly sensible dimensions and only a slightly long forward overhang, means that the Otello is easy to fit to most tonearms. The only mild oddities are the use of Philips screw heads for mounting and the light recommended tracking force of between 1.3 and 1.6g.

The fixed-coil design prevents it from having an interchangeable stylus, but in the brand's home USA market Soundsmith claims that any rebuild cost will be around 20 percent of the purchase price. Even if this price goes up a little for its UK customers, this could still prove to be the most cost-effective cartridge in the group to run over the long term, so long as you can live without it during the rebuilds.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Soundsmith Otello

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Fixed-coil cartridge

WEIGHT
6.8g

FEATURES
● Plastic and aluminium body
● Aluminium cantilever with titanium shank
● Bonded elliptical stylus

DISTRIBUTOR
Elite Audio Distribution

TELEPHONE
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WEBSITE
sound-smith.com

Representing the entry point to the Soundsmith range of cartridges, the US-based company is known for its more specialist designs. As such, the Otello is different to any other contender in the group and uses coils like a moving-coil design, but here the coil is stationary in the body – hence the fixed-coil description. The end of the cantilever has a flux generator that moves relative to the coil to give the signal output. The other end of the aluminium cantilever is the only one in the test to use a bonded stylus, in this case an elliptical type with a titanium shank.

This arrangement achieves a claimed output of 2.12mV, which is the lowest in the test, and one that might prove a challenge in setups where gain is limited, but should still work fine with most moving-magnet phono stage designs. Soundsmith says that the advantages of the fixed-coil system are a considerable reduction in mass, which helps to improve tracking ability and reduce inertia.

Possibly as a result of these unique internals, the Otello is an unusual shape with a relatively long and thin body and a wide upper 'bridge' where the mounting points are. While the design looks a little curious, it doesn't make it any harder to mount to our headshell (see boxout). Build quality is good and the cartridge feels solid and well thought out. The packaging is a little on the artisan side, but there are no fitting tools provided – bar the screws themselves. The stylus guard is a very good design that completely encases the more vulnerable areas of the cartridge.

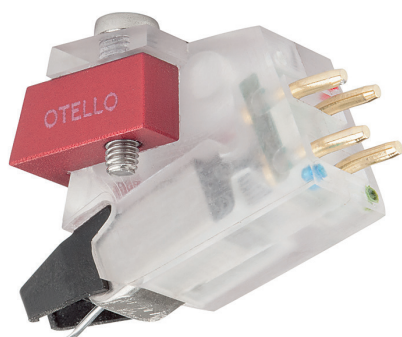
Sound quality

With the Soundsmith running into the same moving-magnet settings on the Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage as the other cartridges in the group, the volume setting on the amp needs to be set rather higher, but the Otello rewards with a very fine performance. The way it handles *Humility* focuses on the tonality and energy of the performance and is very engaging. Washington's lead saxophone is well rendered and has real punch to it.

If you need this energy reined in, such as with the more delicate *Pretty Good Year*, the Soundsmith does a good job of avoiding forcing the piece while still delivering a sense of life and vitality to the piano and vocals that draws you into the performance. The way that the Otello renders this information is quite 'nearfield' in that some of the air and space that other cartridges manage to bring to the performance isn't quite as present

here, but any reduction in absolute scale never comes at the expense of the positioning of performers in the soundstage or dynamics.

Just as importantly, this sense of energy translates into the ability to have fun too. The Otello powers through *Hollywood Nights* with an assurance and sense of drive that makes for a very entertaining performance. The instruments come out of the mix in a pleasingly three dimensional way and are topped off with an excellent rendition of Bob Seger's vocals. The claim of reduced inertia from this fixed-coil cartridge system seems to translate into a coherent and lively rhythmic performance. The only slight Achilles' heel is that the bass response of the Otello, while extremely quick and detailed, isn't the deepest here. This leaves *Love Dance* sounding a little less potent than is the case with some of the other cartridge designs ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Energetic performance with good detail; cost effective long-term running costs
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Slightly limited bass response
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: Consistently entertaining sound with great sense of musical satisfaction
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL

