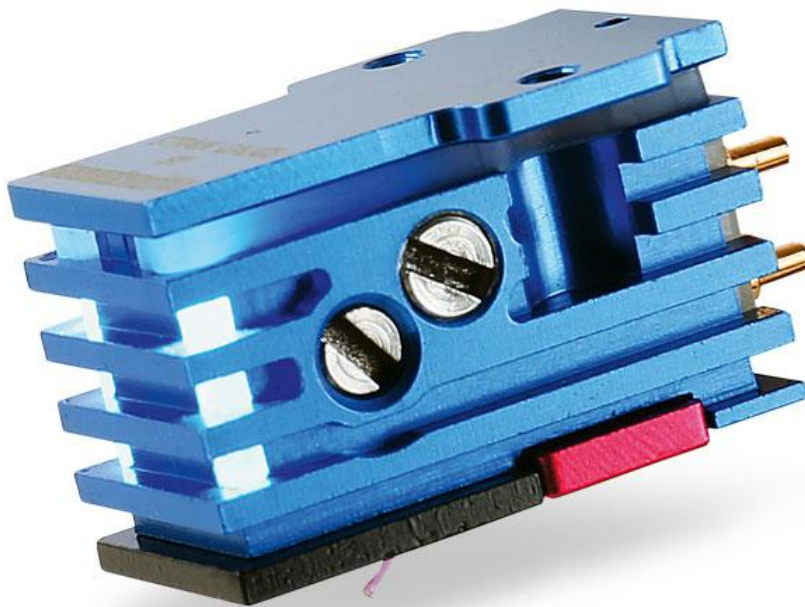


 TURNTABLES, ARMS & CARTRIDGES

## Soundsmith SG/SG-230 Cartridge

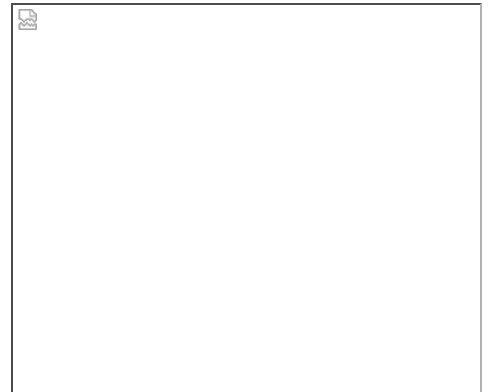
Review: Ken Kessler, Lab: Paul Miller | Jun 21, 2021

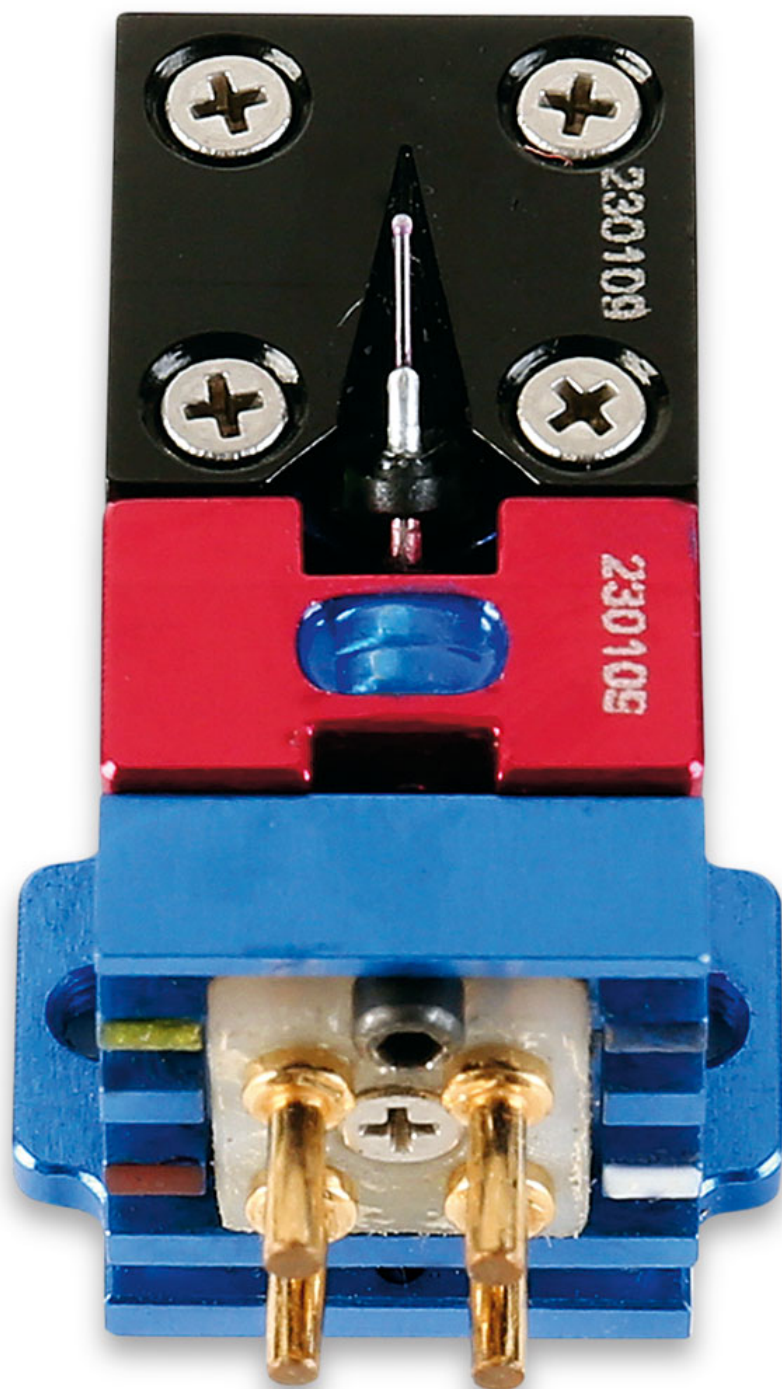


*Singular driving force behind the revival of the strain gauge generator system first seen in phono pick-ups from the '60-70s, Soundsmith's latest offering is nothing if not flexible*

Hardly scientific, I know, but I am predisposed toward components that cause binge-listening. Not knowing what to expect of the Soundsmith Strain Gauge cartridge and the accompanying SG-230 preamp/energiser at a pound shy of £16,000, I will declare my surprise upon discovering that it was so engaging, I listened to 14 LPs in a row in their entirety. I repeat: fourteen.

Yes, it's that kind of a device, but getting to the stage where it wowed me into submission was tortuous, as you will see. I had only ever heard the two pre-Soundsmith strain gauge cartridges of which I am aware in the distant past, including a Sao Win design in a system in California some 35 years ago, and brief exposure to the UK-made Euphonics Miniconic from the late-1960s. Audio memory ain't that great, so I had no preconceptions about Soundsmith's realisation of this technique.





### **Choice Of Six**

SoundSmith Founder, CEO and Chief Engineer Peter Ledermann has deep high-end audio roots, having worked for the now-legendary speaker manufacturer Bozak, detoured to IBM, made cartridges for Bang & Olufsen and other activities, while embracing strain gauge cartridges along the way. It's now 20 years since Ledermann unveiled his Strain Gauge cartridge at CES in 2001, and I am embarrassed to admit that it has taken me that long to hear one in my own system.

First, a bit about the lineup and nomenclature, which is your initial taste of the complexity. In addition to a complete range of fixed-coil cartridges,

including one with a cactus needle cantilever (!), the Strain Gauge cartridge (aka 'SG') has its own, dedicated section on the company's website. By virtue of its user-replaceable stylus assembly, the SG can be purchased a number of ways. Of the six different cantilever/stylus assemblies available, the configuration here is the one-from-the-top set-up – the so-called SGS-5 with ruby cantilever and nude line contact stylus.



Back to the nomenclature: SG-230 is not the model of the cartridge, but of the energiser (or 'bridge') and full-function line preamp supplied with the review sample. If you want to purchase an SG cartridge without a full preamp, there is the SG-200, or you can purchase the SG-210, identical to the SG-200 but with a volume control.

In addition to the SG circuitry, the SG-230 provides four line inputs, with remote control for input selection, volume and muting. As this review is about the cartridge rather than the SG-230 per se, I fed its fixed outputs into my regular preamplifier.

That said, the SG-230 is a superlative control centre, ghostly quiet and versatile. SoundSmith supplies a host of connectors and out of necessity, an operating manual that is hi-fi's answer to Proust's Remembrance Of Things Past. Anyone buying this package should read the full set of instructions before unpacking to avoid accidents. Among the supplied items are two separate 24V 'wall wart' power supplies. These, however, do not connect directly to the SG-230 but via a small black box labelled WWE-24X2 (a PSU filter, I presume), which then connects to the SG-230 with two wires fitted with ferrite rings. That's just the rigmarole for getting power to the unit.



## Into The Blue

To derive a balanced output from the SG-230 SoundSmith supplies split-

phase RCA sockets which convert to XLRs with the supplied RCA-to-XLR adapters. The SG-230's output can also be configured to allow 'easy bridging of two stereo amplifiers into double power monoblocks, subwoofer driving, bi-amping or sourcing into a secondary system'. You'll also need to acquaint yourself with the SG-230's user-adjustable auto-mute system, but once set up, simply turning the rotary source selector to the Strain Gauge input energises the cartridge – you know it's 'on' when the blue LEDs located on the front of the cartridge light up.

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COMPANY INFO

Soundsmith  
Peekskill, New York, USA  
Supplied by: Signature Audio Systems  
07738 007776  
www.sound-smith.com



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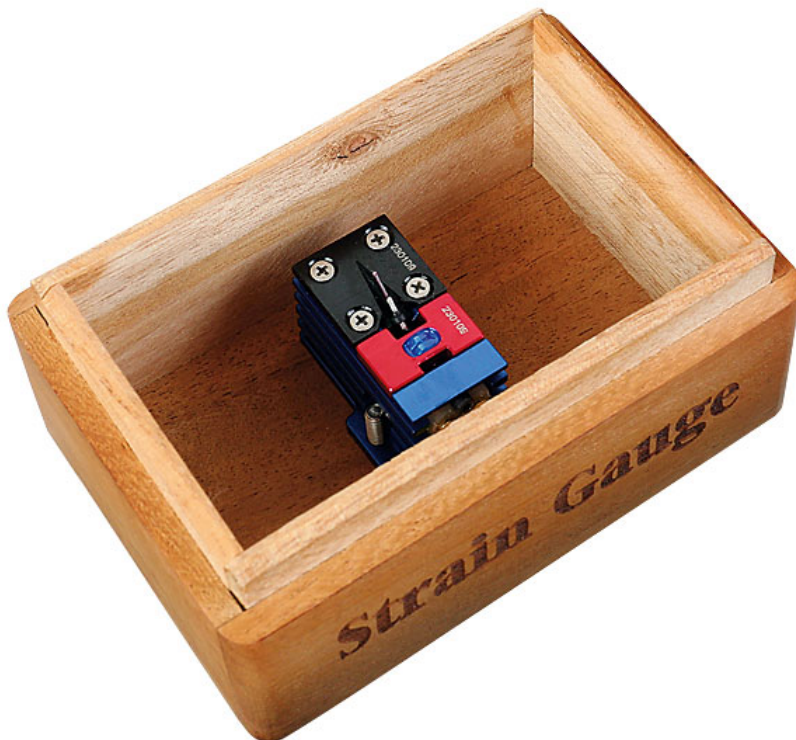
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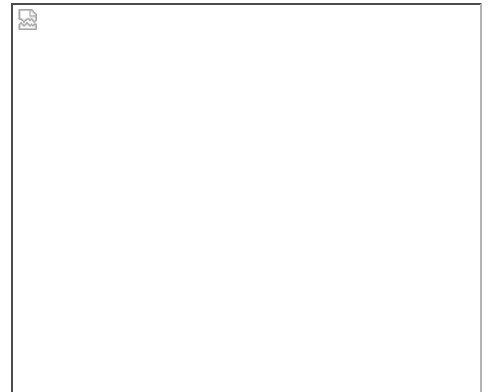
Although the cartridge has parallel sides to aid set-up, the long, exposed cantilever is hidden from view. Nervous types will not enjoy fitting this to arm or headshell. The instructions are super-detailed regarding VTA, etc, and cleaning the stylus (with Blu Tack) is something of a ritual, but it sounded astounding at its recommended 2.3g tracking force, without casting runes or reading the Tarot cards.

### **Game Changer**

All of you have experienced that instant revelatory moment in hi-fi because it occurred the first time you switched on your first-ever sound system. As we grow older, possibly jaded, certainly more experienced and with higher expectations, such occasions happen less frequently. The Soundsmith SG is thus 'momentous'.



From the opening notes of Jethro Tull's Aqualung [Mobile Fidelity MFSL1-061], I realised that I was in the presence of something as game-changing as the DS Audio Grand Master [HFN Feb '21]. Despite the title track soon being relegated to the 'Cancelled' category along with Dr Seuss



owing to its salacious nature, I wallowed in the sheer threat of the number.

What nailed me to the hot seat was, in particular, the flute, because I hear one in person every day. Mrs K has nothing in common with Ian Anderson, and while she doesn't do that breathy thing he employs like an instrument unto itself, I do know the sound of a real flute up close and personal. The Soundsmith SG/SG-230 extracts every windy moment, with just the right amount of whistle and rasp.

As for the snarling vocals, it sent me back a half-century, when I saw the band live in the USA. Anderson's voice is as distinctive as his flutery, so this cartridge plays right into the hands of those who argue that a sound system can convey character. As this album is a concept of sorts about a disreputable soul, and menace permeates almost the entire LP, I was being primed for 'Locomotive Breath'. And I was not disappointed.

Schizophrenically, the Soundsmith SG is both a precision tool, a sonic scalpel, yet at the same time it is capable of pure thuggery. The track 'Locomotive Breath', as the iron horse in the title warns, has to make you cower and it highlighted one of the cartridge's many, almost-peerless strengths: it has bass so solid, powerful and deep I found myself admiring the speakers for being able to handle it. Call it 'heavy', call it 'prog rock' – whatever genre claims Tull as its own, the SG/SG-230 understands the need here to convey the sense of a juggernaut about to roll over the listener.

### Key Notes

From brutality to finesse is a chasm worth crossing if one is to learn of a component's versatility and, it must be stressed, its universality as far as musical types are concerned. As far removed from Aqualung as I could get was Laura Nyro's Christmas And The Beads Of Sweat [Pure Pleasure PPAN KC30259]. Ace musicians, including half of The Rascals, an emotive voice from a masterful singer-songwriter, A-list session players – this LP exhibits delicacy in direct proportion to Tull's fist in the face.

Remarkable is the only way I can describe the ascent of Nyro's vocal on 'Brown Earth' from frail to full, with her clarity and liquidity sounding so natural that it could have been a master tape. Better still was the sound of the piano, so convincing that I couldn't resist tapping out a few notes on the upright next to my desk, just to experience the timbre. This cartridge is clean and uncoloured, such that I was reminded of





another in this elevated category.



### **Absolute Sound**

Like the DS Audio Grand Master, the SG/SG-230 has background silences to suggest a CD is playing. There are wonderfully quiet passages in Nyro's work that can be sullied by the low-level grunge of even the best MCs when heard through high-resolution systems. This Strain Gauge pick-up is hum-free, and this liberates the music in ways that affect transparency, 'air', soundstage dimensions and other elements of the sound that benefit from a low noise floor and wide dynamic contrasts.

On to the jaunty 'When I Was A Freeport And You Were The Main Drag', the brass was rich and full, the piano suitably tinkly, the soundstage stretched across the room. Best of all, the SG/SG-230 had a way of placing the instruments in a 3D array that avoided any of that 'cut-outs' effect, a seamless spread which attested to consistency, everything of a whole with no exaggeration.

It was forcing me to fire up its rivals, just to make sure that I was not attributing greatness to it because of the novelty value. I had already learned that it tracked like certain legendary moving-magnets best suited to test LPs. It was unflustered and unruffled by inner-groove activity. It kept making me think of the DS Audio Grand Master and the TechDAS TDC01 Ti [HFN Sep '14].

As all these cartridges were already set up and easy to access, I slipped The Turtles' Save The Turtles [FloEdCo MFO48002] onto the turntable and cued up 'Happy Together'. It was like sampling a trio of vintages of the same wine, so close were all three – which is as it should be if there truly is such a thing as an 'absolute sound' as posited by the late Harry Pearson. A sharp, bright, upbeat tune, it features crisp drumming and loads of punch. The differences were as negligible as I hoped. The Strain Gauge pick-up and the DS Grand Master were quieter than the TechDAS TDC01 Ti, which in turn was slightly warmer. The SG/SG-230 was the most open-sounding and detailed, the DS Grand Master slightly richer. I could live happily with any one of them – but would hate to have to choose.

### **Hi-Fi News Verdict**

A wild departure from the MM/MC norm, Soundsmith's SG joins a select group including TechDAS' TDC01 Ti, top Koetsus and others of that ilk, as well as the equally-unusual DS Audio designs. Their prices may cause alarm, but performance at this level is inarguably sublime. In the SG-plus-SG-230 we have a cartridge not just to cosset your ears but to challenge your intellect. For music lovers, it is life-enhancing.

NEXT: Taking The Strain »



COMPANY INFO

Soundsmith  
Peekskill, New York, USA  
Supplied by: Signature Audio Systems  
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www.sound-smith.com



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