

My findings with the Sowter type 1090 Moving Magnet Transformers.

After running them in for 30 plus hours I can confidently say the “experiment” turned out very well indeed.

Coupling the MM step-ups to my Grado Sonata Reference and vintage Stanton 881 Mk II-S cartridges on one end and my Kondo M7 based phono preamp on the other end was straightforward. No compatibility issues whatsoever. Not even with the Stanton whose 900 Ohms DC resistance is nearly double that of the Grado's 475 Ohms.

The Sowter is eminently capable of demonstrating the differences in character between these two fine cartridges. The Grado being the overall smoother performer with the seductive midrange and slightly laid-back presentation. The Stanton on the other hand being more dynamic, more extended, having tremendous drive, better bass definition and high-frequency extension. The Sowter step-ups presented both of them in the best light.

I did not experience any roll-off at the frequency extremes due to impedance (mis)matching. To the contrary. I found especially bass performance very good, even better than without the step-ups in the signal path. Very good extension, excellent definition and an overall super-smooth presentation throughout the midrange. Furthermore, ambience on recordings was very well retrieved. This was especially noticed with “old-style” classical and jazz recordings from the mid-fifties to mid-sixties, where simple microphone techniques are used and multi-tracking is absent. Where programme material allowed, room/hall ambience, especially depth perception, was truly outstanding.

I wonder if the above described benefits are due to loading the MM cartridge with a transformer rather than a 47K resistor. Maybe this effect is similar to a signal seeing a grid choke versus being loaded with a 100K input resistor in the first stage of a tube amp. Female voices, whether it is Maria Callas, Kathleen Ferrier or Billie Holiday, showed their distinctive timbres. Massed strings (Händel's Concerti Grossi, for example) retained all their high-frequency energy. Or just listen to the warm, giant sound of Ben Webster's saxophone on the album Soulville. Marvelous stuff!

Apart from the sonic benefits there is of course the added bonus of having 6dB more gain *before* going to the next (active) stage. This effectively doubles the output of the cartridge and simultaneously lowers the noise floor. The Grado has a rated output of 4.5 mV which is boosted by the step-up to 9mV. The Stanton goes from an already very healthy 6.5 mV to a whopping 13mV!

Needless to say, S/N figures, mainly in the quieter passages of classical recordings, are no longer an issue, even with the moderate 37dB gain of my phono preamp.

Finally, I can also see these step-ups being used as the ideal complement to high-output Moving Coil cartridges in the 2.0 to 2.5mV range that could do with a welcome boost in output before being fed to active phono preamps that have modest gain in the range of 30-35dB.

Kees van de Wiel 15/10/08

Associated equipment in listening evaluations Sowter 1090 MM Cartridge Transformers.

Phono preamp:
Kondo M7-based 6072 tube phonostage

Linestage:
Audio Note-based linestage with uprated power supply and double c-core amorphous OPT's.

Power amps:
10 Watt class-A Push-Pull with 6B4G triodes; interstage coupled; Sowter type 1046S OPT's.
Quad II.

Speakers:
Spendor S-100 with custom-build Cicable outboard X-overs.
Quad ESL63

Turntables:
Lenco L-75 idler wheel drive motor-unit with custom build plinth, ADC ALT-1 tonearm and Grado Sonata Reference cartridge.
Denon DP-100M turntable/arm combo with Stanton 881 MkII-S cartridge.

