

Hana Umami Red Cartridge

Review: Adam Smith, Lab: Paul Miller | Jan 11, 2021



From Japan comes an exquisitely finished flagship MC cartridge that's cooking on gas when it comes to serving up full-flavoured sound. Is value for money on the menu too?

By naming the flagship MC in its Hana pick-up range the Umami Red, Japanese cartridge maker Excel Sound has played a clever stroke. Glance at the £3399 cartridge's exquisitely lacquered body and there are no prizes for guessing why the name includes the word 'Red'. But 'Umami'? In Japanese, 'umami' is one of five tastes, along with sweetness, sourness, bitterness and saltiness. It has been variously translated as 'delicious' and 'savoury', but umami is said to be quite difficult to detect on its own. Rather, it combines with other flavours to give a result that's far greater than the sum of all parts.

Chef's Special

The recipe behind the Umami Red is as complex as an exotic chef's special. A semi-open design, it has at its heart an elegant-looking open generator, carefully clothed in an external body, but not fully encapsulated by it. The cartridge is manufactured in Excel Sound's Japanese factory, the assembly

process a combination of automation and handcrafting. Automation is used where repeatability and speed are necessary, but the more intricate operations are still carried out manually by trained craftsmen.

As for the generator, this is based around a samarium-cobalt magnet and a square Permalloy armature. The generator's pole piece is cryogenically treated, as are the front and rear yokes along with the 24-carat gold-plated output pins. The company claims this process alters the crystal structure of the various alloys advantageously, continuing the culinary analogies by likening it to 'molecular gastronomy'.



Powder 'N' Polish

High-purity copper wire is used for the generator coils and the number of turns is reflected in a coil impedance of 6ohm. Using the general 'rule of ten' multiplication factor for phono stage matching suggests an ideal cartridge load of 60ohm or greater. This, along with the relatively generous output of 0.4mV, means the Umami Red should work happily into the vast majority of MC phono inputs.

The business end of the Umami Red comprises a solid boron cantilever tipped with a nude 'microline' diamond. Hana says this is cut and polished to mimic the shape of the stylus on the head of a vinyl cutting lathe. The idea is to offer the best fit into the record groove, extracting all the detail, with minimum noise and record wear.

The elegant and stylish body that clothes the Umami Red is no less a work of art. The body itself is made from A7075 aluminium alloy – a modern version of the material originally known as duralumin, which was developed for use in the aircraft industry. Alloys in this category are easily moulded into the shape required while retaining good strength, despite their light weight. In this instance, the gentle curve of the outer body edges is referred to as an Auricle body design by Hana, suggesting the outer shape of the human ear.



The body itself is then coated with an Urushi lacquer finish – a Japanese traditional art that stretches back many centuries. In the case of the Umami Red, the work begins with a black Urushi-painted undercoat, followed by another layer that adds the red colour in a process that makes use of fine silver powder. To top this off, the Hana name is printed using a fine gold powder and completed with a final protective lacquer coat. This is then comprehensively buffed for a perfect finish and shine. The overall effect is nothing short of stunning, so much so that my installation of the cartridge was delayed as I spent far too long simply admiring the flawless craftsmanship...

Fitment is aided immensely by two captive screw threads built into the top of the cartridge body. This will come as a relief to an audiophile nervous about damaging the body finish with the slip of a bolt and sharp, hexagonal nut. Do be aware, though, that these threaded holes are not especially deep, so short screws are a must. The cartridge is presented in a simple but elegant wooden box that also includes an instruction leaflet and stylus cleaning brush.

The Umami Red tips the scales at 10.5g and has a recommended tracking force of precisely 2g, with no range given. I experimented with different forces only to find that 2g was indeed its sweet spot. Furthermore, the Umami Red also seems very sensitive to azimuth adjustment, so do take the time to set it up correctly – if it doesn't have a big, enveloping soundstage then something's not quite right.

Love At First Bite

With the Umami Red fitted to an SME 309 arm [HFN Sep '19] on my Michell Gyro SE turntable, my mouth almost watered as I anticipated the sonic delights to come. Would I end the evening leaning back with a contented sigh or be searching for the number of a late-night food delivery service due to

lack of fulfilment? I needn't have worried as the Umami Red is a compelling companion and, just like the first bite of a fine meal, had me wanting more.

This cartridge slips neatly into the high-end pick-up scene, striking an excellent balance between the rose-tinted lushness of some 'traditional' MCs and the cooler analysis of high-tech groove diggers, blending the depth and detail of the latter with a touch more warmth. Moreover, it succeeds in eliciting crisp detail without the slight hardness that can beset the performance of brighter, typically more brittle-sounding pick-ups. Heck, it even has the feisty joie de vivre of the good old Denon DL-103, whose recommended tracking force of 2.5-2.8g some mistakenly fear will lead to premature record wear.

In fact, the Hana Umami Red is not only a jack of all trades, it's a master of most of them. It has an unerring ability to cut through to the heart of a recording and find the very best lurking within. Aided by an ability to track securely, the result is clarity, detail and depth, plus – above all – the boogie factor in spades.

Spin 'Summer Girl' from Haim's Women In Music Pt III [Polydor 0250813817], and the Umami Red captures the thump of the drums with aplomb, punching them out with authority. Danielle Haim's vocal is positioned beautifully centre-stage and projected superbly into the room, really putting the listener at the heart of the action. Then comes the saxophone solo at the end, which arrives blessed with just the right amount of rasp to sound realistic.



So far so good, then, but the real surprise is in the way the Umami Red can dig out the bass line from deep down within a track. In this instance, the repeated sliding notes from the upright bass came through with impressive weight, but the aspect that tickled me most was the delicious squeak caused by Este Haim's hand every time she lifted it off the strings. It's this style of delivery that reminds us how some pick-ups will forensically dissect the vinyl yet still lose sight of the overall musical message along the way. Not the Umami Red. It is able to lay an entire mix bare while never forgetting that its purpose is to convey all the joy of the music at hand.

Food For Thought

What's more, it achieves all this with a pleasing ability to fill the soundstage between the loudspeakers with precision. Its sense of front-to-back perspective is arguably as good as it gets at the price, and ensures vinyl is a true 3D experience.

When it comes to the low end, the Umami Red digs deeply and with confidence. Bass lines are picked up on, brought to the fore and presented with a flourish. Now, that said, there are still times when this cartridge can be a little over-zealous when it comes to the really low stuff, particularly with electronic music. Allward's 'Slowburst' from Chromatophore's Volume 1 EP [Chromatophore CHR 001] boasts some deliciously deep synthesiser action and, while the Umami Red never sounded out of its depth, my regular Clearaudio MC Essence [HFN Aug '17] was just a little bit tighter and more controlled in this area.

However, what was in no doubt was the precision and clarity the Umami Red imparted on the rest of the track. Those deep bass notes are overlaid with some seriously manic electronic percussion and this cartridge gripped hold of them with impressive tenacity. Aided by a good level of air and a pleasing lightness of touch at the top end, the Umami Red was as crisp and open as I could have wished for, but without any artificial sense of upper treble boost.



Rip-Roaring Stuff

One result of this presentation was that during my time with the Umami Red I found myself drawn to recordings featuring more natural instruments. The unwavering level of detail it offers just seemed to

suit acoustic music perfectly. Now, don't get me wrong, this pick-up can rock out with the best of them, as proven by a blast of 'Motorcycle Emptiness', a 12in single by The Manic Street Preachers [Columbia 658083 6]. This track thunders along, driven by a solid bass line and some punchy drum work. The slight break in singer James Dean Bradfield's voice was spot on, and the electric guitar had just the right amount of edge to it during the solo. All rip-roaring stuff.

Yet it is with acoustic material that the cartridge really comes into its own. 'Tarantella' from Antonio Forcione's Touch Wood LP [Naim Records LP 097] was a delight, the interplay of acoustic guitars and cello a masterclass in how the textures of instruments and their positioning should be conveyed.

And one thing I kept coming back to on a wide variety of tracks that featured an acoustic guitar was the way in which, when the instrument was strummed, the Umami Red managed to capture each string's individual note, no matter how quickly the pick passed over it. I've heard very few cartridges manage this level of insight before, and it never loses its appeal.

Hi-Fi News Verdict

The Hana Umami Red has an ease and effortlessness to the way it approaches music-making that deserves to be heard. It is beautifully detailed and can be particularly enthralling when it comes to acoustic fare, which only serves to make it all the more compelling as a musical companion. And it will rock out too. Umami? Most definitely. At times I was even tempted to describe it as Saiko (stunning).