



Hana ML

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There are a few cartridge companies that have mastered their microscopic art so well that they not only produce moving coils and moving magnet designs under their own name but do so for other brands as well. This so-called OEM (original equipment manufacturer) model exists elsewhere in hi-fi of course but rarely does it apply to an entire product, rather a speaker builder buys drivers from a specialist and cabinets from another. With cartridges you do have cantilever suppliers for a range of brands but the fiddly business of mounting those parts along with the coils and magnets into a body that can be fixed to a tonearm's headshell is a niche.

The Excel Corp have been making moving coils in Japan for undisclosed brands for 50 years but in 2015 decided to branch out and create their own marque for which they chose the name Hana, according to the spiel this means 'brilliant and gorgeous'. I guess if you're going to blow your own trumpet you might as well do it enthusiastically. Their EL, SL, SH, and SL models have proved very popular with our own René van Es getting enthusiastic about the SL and EH a few years ago. These model names relate to the stylus type, so E is elliptical and S Shibata and the output being more obviously 'H'igh and 'L'ow.

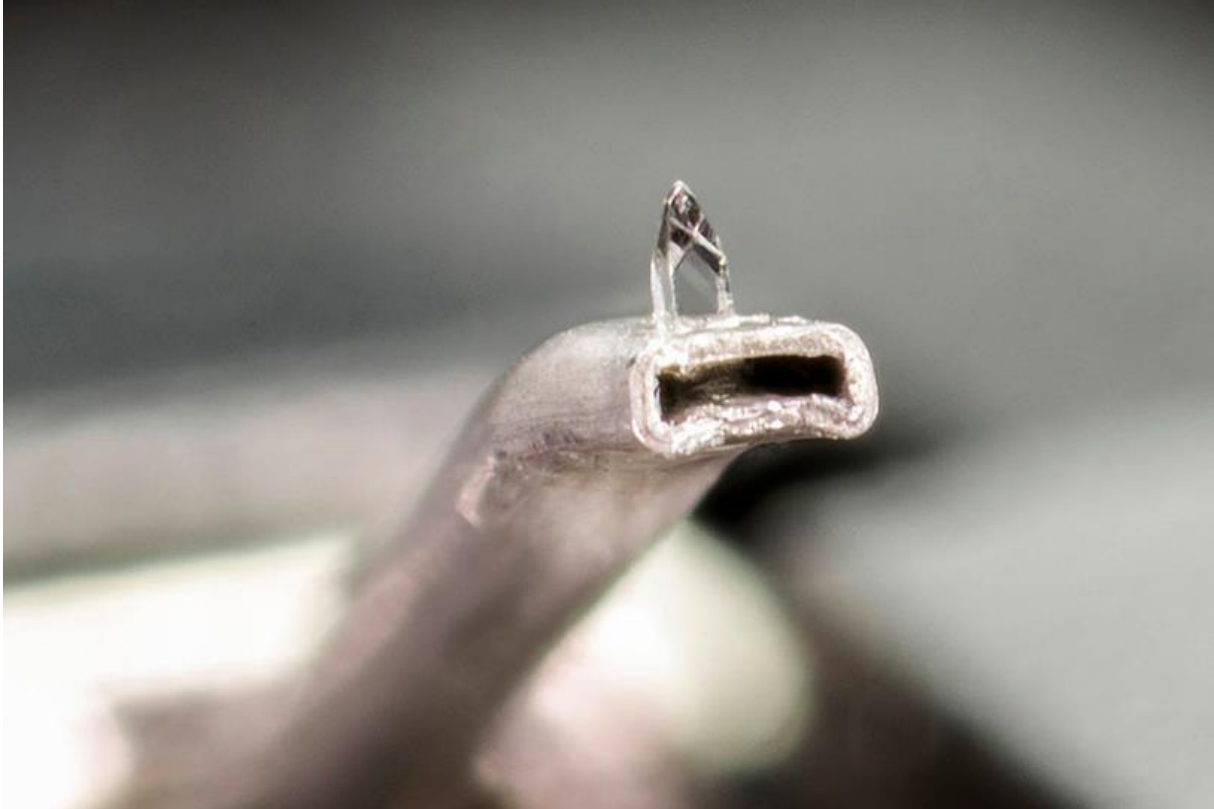


The Hana ML has a micro-line tip profile and a low output, this tip shape is said to more closely match that on the cutting head of a vinyl mastering lathe and therefore should offer greater accuracy of detail retrieval. The shape does make it more fussy about alignment however, and the absence of flat sides on the ML don't help in this regard. Unlike the plastic bodies of Hana's more affordable models the ML (and MH for that matter) has an injection moulded Delrin body. This is an engineering plastic that is sometimes used for turntable platters and has excellent damping qualities. It's topped by a brass plate which provides constrained layer damping and brings the weight up to 9.5 grams, making it easier to match with respect to tonearms. The presence of threaded inserts greatly aids installation and allows sufficient tightening of the mounting bolts.

The M series Hana cartridges are cryogenically treated all the way from the cantilever through high purity copper coils and out to the connecting pins, they also have Alnico magnets, luxuries not found in their more affordable counterparts. The ML tracks at 2g and offers a 0.4mV output which should be sufficient for any MC stage but would require a step-up transformer if used with an MM phono amp.

It's a little ironic that I should end up reviewing the Hana cartridge that's heavier than the rest, my Rega P10 turntable is well suited to lighter weight cartridges such as the 5g S and E series models, but this MC did a great job nonetheless bringing a warmth to the sound that made for some highly enjoyable listening. It sounds tight, solid and three dimensional with strong immediacy on the P10.

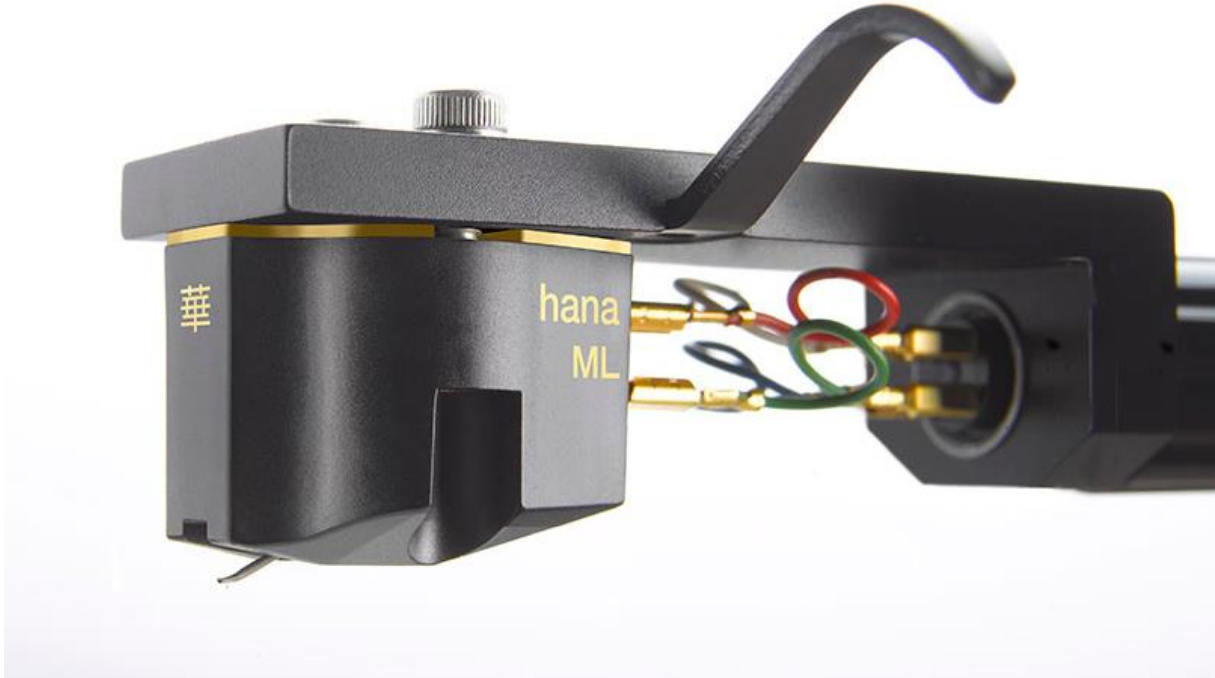
The balance is richer than with Rega's fast and lean MCs which makes for a warmer presentation but not to the extent that everything sounds thick, it reflects the balance of each record with ease bringing out the scale in the first Funkadelic album and opening up the vocals so that you can understand (almost) all the words. Bass is well served too with lots of texture and shape to enjoy.



Mississippi John Hurt's music is laid back and beautiful, his understated guitar playing being all the more impressive for the ease with which it's delivered by this cartridge. At the other end of the spectrum Jimi Hendrix on *Axis Bold as Love* is as blistering as ever, an older pressing of this sounding distinctly superior to an audiophile remastering partly because the level it's cut at is lower I suspect. The Hana ML shows you all this and can do audience ambience very nicely revealing that it can pick up the quieter cues in the music as easily as the dominant lines, Napoleon Murphy Brock's voice on Zappa's 'More Trouble Every Day' (Roxy and Elsewhere) is incredible, that man sure could scream. I rediscovered Steely Dan's track 'Kings' (Can't Buy a Thrill) with the Hana, which let me enjoy the fabulous backing vocals, lovely guitar noodling and all round top notch tune smithing of this forgotten gem.

For a bit of contrast I put a Dynavector DV-20X2L on the Rega P10 to see how the Hana would contrast with something well regarded but more affordable (£749), a comparison that made the ML sound more substantial with greater depth of image and stronger in terms of engagement which is an area that the Dynavector excels in, so quite an achievement for the newcomer. That said it could have a bit more definition in the bass, Massive Attack's 'Inertia Creeps' is a deep and powerful record that sounds slightly soft and smooth in the Hana's hands. But that was the only record I played where I could pick a particular shortcoming. Contrasted with a Naim NDX 2 streamer it sounds tonally fuller

and a little mid forward but better timed, which is not a bad result either, this Naim is no slouch in the timing department.



In an attempt to get a better handle on this cartridge I dusted off an SME Model 10 and fitted the ML into its detachable headshell, set downforce, alignment and bias and gave it a spin with Binker and Moses stonking *Alive in the East*. This starts with a drum solo which this cartridge delivered in impressively tactile style, showing all the reverb around the different parts of the kit whilst pinning down the rhythm so that the Moses' playing was totally engaging. This was enough to convince me that this Hana is very much at home in a medium mass arm like the SME where I have heard more refined cartridges but not in this price league. That's where Hana has always been strong, value for money, and that continues to be the case with this model. The fact that it works so well in turntables as diverse as those tried is testament to its adaptability, the fact that in both cases it made the music so compelling is reason enough to put it high on your must hear list for a serious cartridge upgrade.

SPECIFICATIONS:

Type: low output moving coil (MC) cartridge

Frequency response: 12 to 45,000 Hz

Output voltage: 0.4 mV (1 kHz)

Channel separation: 30 dB (1 kHz)

Output balance: <1 dB (1 kHz)

Tracking force: 2g

Coil impedance: 8 ohms

Load resistance: >100 ohms

Compliance: 10×10^{-6} cm/dyne

Stylus: nude microline

Cantilever: aluminium alloy

Weight: 9.5 g

Guarantee: 2 years plus 'new for old' trade in scheme

PRICE:

£995