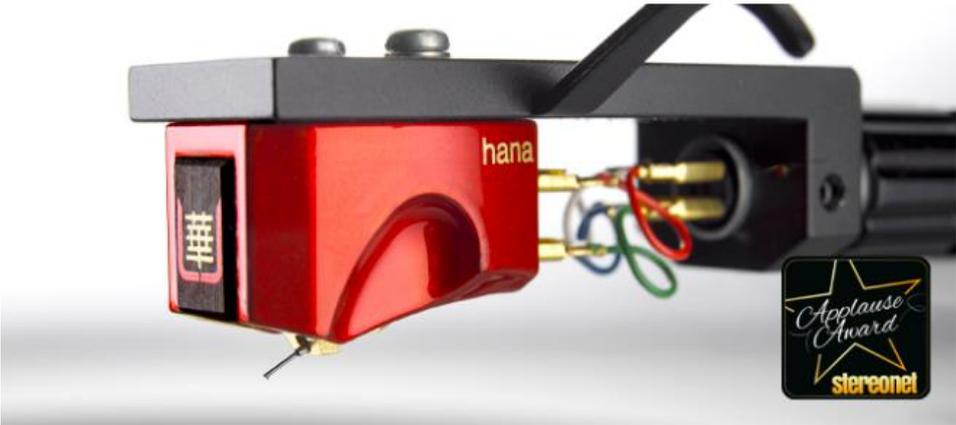




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Hana Umami Red MC Phono Cartridge Review

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David Price takes this intriguing new high-end moving coil cartridge for a spin...

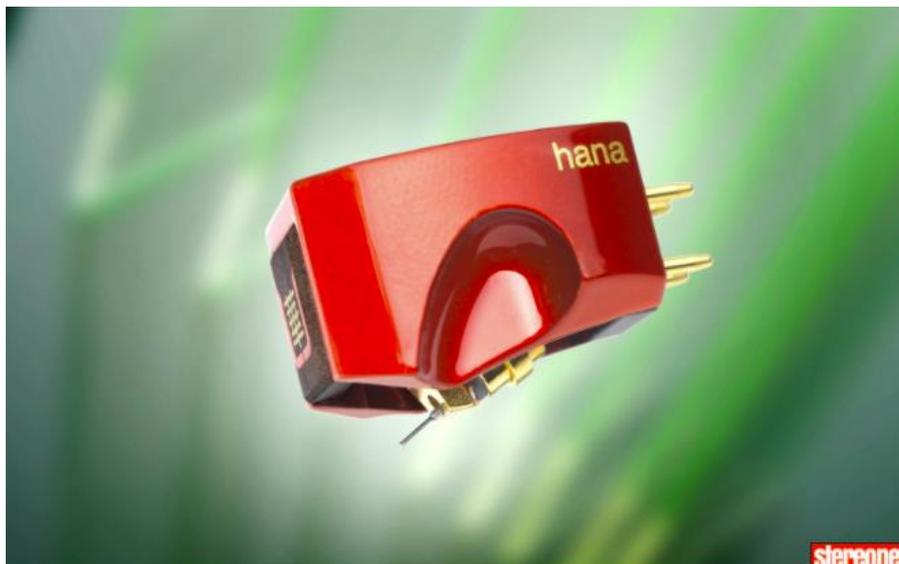
Hana
Umami Red MC Phono Cartridge
£3,399



Is it any surprise that some of the world's finest phono cartridges have hailed from Japan? Having previously lived in Tokyo for a number of years, I think it's fair to say that the country has a passion for miniaturisation, almost to the point of obsession. From Meiji-era cloisonné enamel to nineteen seventies Seiko quartz watches, a fascination with compactness runs deep in the country's collective psyche.

Seasoned analogue addicts are well aware of this. Audio-technica, Dynavector, Kiseki, Koetsu, Lyra, Nagaoka and Supex have all produced excellent pick-up cartridges over the years, and to this elite group, we can add the Excel Sound Corporation. Originally formed in 1970 in Yokohama, a little south of Tokyo, the company was an OEM supplier of cartridges to many manufacturers back in the day.

As Compact Disc took over in the nineteen-eighties, it followed the market into audio and video accessories, like some of its fellow Japanese rivals. Yet the vinyl revival finally caused Excel to get back into pick-up cartridges, and production was restarted in 2015. The Hana brand was introduced, this time to make high end moving coils, with the company's owner Masao Okada heading up the design team. The Hana Umami Red you see here is the company's flagship product.



UP CLOSE

Each example is entirely hand-assembled, Okada-san tells me:

« The required training time for a builder is between five and ten years, while two of our craftsmen have worked in Excel Sound for thirty to forty years. In general, eight pieces are made per day, not including additional processes such as finishing, cleaning and packaging, plus the sequential work of coil winding, soldering, adjustment and final inspection. »

It may appear to be very much in the vein of traditional high-end Japanese cartridges, but there's a twist – it's a half-open design, with its generator outside in the open air. It's not quite a Lyra lookalike but is closer to such a thing than a Koetsu. A Duralumin (A7075 aluminium alloy) 'shroud' surrounds it, rather than sealing the generator inside the body.

In the typically understated words of Okada-san, “it is to suppress unnecessary body resonance”. Naked cartridges are exceedingly easy to damage and suffer from the ingress of dirt and dust, but – at least theoretically – they avoid the colouration that ensues from wrapping an ultra-sensitive pick-up inside a metal, wood or plastic box. The shroud has a multi-layered Urushi lacquer finish, and there’s an ebony wood inlay that provides further damping. The overall effect is rather lovely.

The generator is based around a samarium/cobalt magnet “to get lower inner impedance and higher output power.” It sports a square plate Permalloy armature, hand-wound with 30-micron copper wire. Its pole piece, front and rear yokes and the gold output pins are deep cryogenically treated. Output is quoted at 0.4mv/1kHz, which is reasonable by modern standards but nothing special. Internal impedance is put at 6 ohms.

At this price, you’d expect a boron cantilever, and that’s what you get – it’s considerably stiffer and lighter than the aluminium types seen on cheaper cartridges, and for me is one vital mark of a serious design. Another is the stylus profile; this Hana gets a nude Microline diamond which is justifiably popular at this end of the market, supplied by the Adamant Namiki Precision Jewel company.

The oblong body makes fitting easier than some – not least because it’s easy to reference to an alignment protractor – and there’s an excellent stylus guard to keep your blood pressure down. Two captive screw threads are what let you affix it to your tonearm’s headshell, and they’re a bit shallow, so you’ll have to take care not to jigger them.

Overall weight is 10.5g, which is again nothing to write home about. The company recommends a tracking force of 2 grams. Hana quotes a frequency response of 15 to 50,000Hz and a compliance figure of 10×10^{-6} cm/dyne (100Hz) which is on the low side, making it suitable for tonearms of medium to high effective mass (Rega, SME, etc.). For this review, it went into an SME Series V arm on a Technics SP-15, and the stock tonearm of a Sony PS-8750.



THE LISTENING

To my ears, at least, the Umami Red is a quintessentially modern 'Japanese high end' cartridge. By this, I mean it has a clean, precise, etched sound that's ever so slightly well lit up top, allied to oodles of detail and superb tracking. Its midband is explicitly ordered and forensic, throwing out vast amounts of information from the groove. Bass is tight, propulsive and energetic – sinewy even – leaving no room for overhang.

For example, cue up some classic disco from Change, and A Lover's Holiday. This is a tightly syncopated dance track from 1980 with a strong beat backed by gliding strings and snappy female vocals – quite akin to Chic. It's also got a lovely piano running through much of the song, giving body and continuity. The Umami Red instantly told me that this isn't one of the finest recordings in my collection, but didn't reduce the listening experience to a deconstruction of all its faults. Indeed it did the opposite, throwing out loads of background detail and stringing it together in an enjoyably musical way.

Having done the rounds of teenage parties back in the day, there's quite a lot of groove damage to this record, but the Hana didn't fixate on this. Instead, it seemed to let the listener hear past the constant low-level snap, crackle and pop and dig deep into the groove to tell me all about the lustrous harmonics on the piano, the purity of the female vocals – along with their reverb tails – and the snappy, scratchy rhythm guitar sound. I loved the timbre that the Umami Red brought to the strings, too.

That's not to say this is a warm and sweet device, as per an old Supex SD900 from forty years ago. Actually, it's quite the reverse; that big wide red body actually masks what must be a thoroughly modern generator underneath. A slice of late-period prog rock from Manfred Mann's Earthband, and Davy's On The Road Again, rather confirmed my suspicions. This is a live recording and decent enough but quite tonally dry.



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The Hana did little to sweeten it up, preferring instead to give a neutral, matter-of-fact rendition. That's not to say it was boring though, as this cartridge proved itself to be great with rhythms and

dynamics. When the song moved into its middle eight, the band really cranks things up, and the Umami Red conveyed this superbly; the extra grit in the singer's voice, the pumped up guitar and harder drum kit hits all came through as clear as day.

The result was an unsentimental reading of this song, but still a really satisfying one. This cartridge has so much insight that it cuts to the heart of any recording it's asked to play, yet is never analytical and always seems to be enjoying itself. It's also done in an effortless way – major dynamic swings are delivered in a relaxed, unforced fashion. It's this confidence and poise that really marks the cartridge out as special. Indeed, I'd say this is a defining characteristic – the Umami Red is a gifted performer who doesn't need to try hard.

I think its excellent tracking plays a big part here. Even though there appears to be a subtle lift in the cartridge's upper treble, the stylus always seems anchored to the groove and the sound of cymbals, for example, is always delicately carried. There was no nervousness, skittishness or sibilance as it negotiated a well worn original mono pressing of The Beatles' A Hard Day's Night – bought by my mother in July 1964, borrowed by me about twenty years later, and never given back.

My Japanese pressing of YMO's BGM is another analogue obstacle course, but for different reasons. Beautifully recorded and pressed, it can amaze through the right system but seldom does. Music Plans was cued up, and the Hana sounded majestic. It carried the heavy synthesised bassline and bass drum sounds with great impact and insight, and the heavily processed vocal line. Rhythmically the music floated along unperturbed by the heavy percussion that throws many lesser cartridges off the scent. At the same time, stereo soundstaging was excellent; if not quite the widest I've heard it, individual strands of the mix were located with laser-like precision, as if they'd been nailed to the rear wall of my listening room.



THE VERDICT

High end moving coils all have their own signature sound, and whether you like it or not is, of course, subjective. What's not up for debate, I think, is the performance level of Hana's Umami Red. It's up there with the best I've heard at the price in terms of absolute ability. For example, Ortofon's similarly priced MC Winfeld Ti is probably its closest rival. It offers a slightly silkier presentation with prodigious detail – yet it doesn't have the musicality and momentum of the Japanese contender. As such, this is an essential audition if you're in the market for a top-tier moving coil.

