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(The Audiophile Man)

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HANA ML LOW OUTPUT CARTRIDGE

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Hana's range of cartridges continues to grow slowly yet steadily. New up? Paul Rigby reviews the ML moving coil complete with a MicroLine stylus

'Brilliant and Gorgeous'. That's what Hana means in Japanese, apparently. I'll leave you to consider the latter but the brand has certainly lived up to the former over recent months and years. I've come across a few of the company's cartridges and have been startled at the high level of sound quality. Not to mention value for money.

This new model arrives at a few pounds under a £1,000 so the build quality and potential sound performance is on the rise, methinks. I was eager to find out if the company might falter in performance terms this time or retain its steady progress.

There are two models in this mini range of 'M' cartridges, one is high output (i.e. the MH) but I plumped for the ML, a low output moving coil cartridge, complete with a MicroLine stylus profile. That's where the 'M' bit of name comes into play.



The chassis is made from black polyoxymethylene (POM). The parent company, Excel uses a particular formulation of POM manufactured by DuPont that sells under the trademarked name Delrin, a material you may have heard of before. I've seen it used in turntable platters, for example (I came across it last when I reviewed the STST Motus II turntable)

The front yoke, center and rear components of the magnetic electro-motive circuit and wires are Cryogenic processed, while high-quality copper wire has been selected for the moving coils.

There are captive threaded nuts for head shell fixing screws, built into the cartridge body which is a blessing because I hate installing cartridges while juggling screws and their attendant screw-nuts and the cartridge body.



Oh, and you may have noticed the gold coloured area at the top of the chassis? That's a gold plated copper resonance plate that is integral with the cartridge body. It's there to reduce vibration.

You can hear more about the background to the design via this show report interview I did at the Bristol 2019 show. I chatted with Hiroshi Ishihara of Youtek Ltd. Japan, the Marketing and World Sales Manager for the Hana brand.

SOUND QUALITY

I began with an original pressing from the great Ethel Ennis and This is Ethel Ennis (RCA) from 1964. Ennis offered a smooth, cultured, romantic delivery and here she was fronting a full orchestra with jazz overtones but also sweeping strings. I played He Loves Me which offered a playful and energetic gently jazz-based orchestral score.



Playing this record with the Hana ML struck a chord, as it were and it directed me to the very top of the dynamic range. The reach of this cartridge was high indeed which meant that there was a tremendous sense of space. I've heard this signature before from Japanese designs. Is it a cultural thing, I wonder? A sort of reaction against the busy and packed cities in that country in which everything and everyone sits cheek by jowl with their neighbour? Do their hi-fi designers exhibit a yearning for space by infusing their cartridges with the stuff? The ML certainly provided it, at any rate, especially around the treble section which not only allowed the cymbals to provide a beautiful sense of character and form – you could hear the nature of this big piece of flat metal when it was hit

– but also the reverb that emerged from the hit itself. That decay was long and fragile which lifted the entire song upwards, giving the music a sense of lightness.



The upper mids, occupied by much of the brass and wind section, was precise in approach. The sense of focus in this area added to the instrument's personality. Sometimes, during loud crescendos, it was transcribed a little aggressively but that's me being ultra-picky, that effect was down to price point and not the inherent design. For a sub-£1,000 design, the ML provided a sublime transcription of both the brass and strings. The latter flowed without effort while the brass, especially when the sax and trombones hit lower frequencies during the later parts of the song, showed a wonderful resonance that reverberated with a reedy character.

Midrange insight was superb too. Early in this song, on the right channel, was a piano. Really though this guy sounded like he was playing in another room and you could only make out he was there at all because the studio door was open and the sound was travelling down the corridor. Subtle, that's what it was. Yet the ML picked up this effect and did so with a mite more character and detail than many more expensive moving coils I've heard of late.

This ability of the ML to lower noise, reach deep into the mix and extract subtle effects naturally without having to force the detail out by pinching the upper frequencies, for example, was one of the major talents of its basic design.

I wondered how it might react with more dynamic fare so reached for T2 and It'll All Work Out in Boomland a slice of early prog rock with varying time signatures and tempos from the track In Circles.

It's very easy for a cartridge to take this raucous piece of high-energy rock, panic and then present the lot to you as a lump of noise. I've heard it done before on numerous occasions. The ML was different. What hit me was the instrumental separation and the calm way that the cartridge applied itself to music.



Hence, I could quite easily hear the lead guitar and drums – they were almost a given in this powerful track. What was noticeable was how the cymbal taps were separated from this vigorous piece of music and how easy it was for the ear to track the taps throughout the entire track.

Oddly enough, though, the major achievement here was the emergence of the bass guitar. The latter which is normally subsumed underneath the maelstrom, becoming a series of low-end tones. Here, though, you could plainly hear the bass guitarist noodling away to himself in the rear of the mix. Having a fine time he was too. You'd never know that fact from some cartridges out there though.

CONCLUSION

Hana has a growing reputation for quality of design. No matter what price point it decides to tackle, it tends to provide a value for money product because it tends to give you more than the competition at that particular point. For the ML that meant a sense of clarity and insight that allowed detail to be picked out from the subtle recesses of the mix. A trick often reserved for rarified high-end designs. That's the quality of the Hana ML.

HANA ML MOVING COIL CARTRIDGE

Price: £995

[NOTE: All Hana cartridges requiring a replacement stylus due to wear or customer damage will be swapped for a brand new identical cartridge at 80% the current retail price less UK carriage costs.]

Web: www.airaudio.co.uk

Tel: 01491 629629

GOOD: midrange insight, dynamic reach, instrumental separation, tonal balance

BAD: nothing

RATING: 9

