

Hana MH and ML moving coil cartridges

by Alan Sircom



If you are into vinyl and haven't been holed up in an Ecuadorian embassy for the last few years, the name 'Hana' will probably not have escaped your attention. A small, Japanese expert brand making high performance moving coil cartridges is always half way to the stuff of legend, but the fact these cartridges do not cost a small fortune helps cement that reputation firmly. We missed out on the first round of goodies (the £389 EL and especially the £599 SL have already developed powerful reputations among the vinyl cognoscenti) but the new top duo – the £995 MH high-output and the £995 ML low-output are something truly special.

We can cover both on the same pages because the two share so much in common. They both sit in a black Delrin body and brass base, feature high-purity copper wire and other metal parts that are cryogenically treated, have nude microline stylus tips on aluminium cantilevers, and both use alnico magnets. They have identical tracking force and compliance demands, and return the same frequency response, output balance, and channel separation. The differences – on paper at least – are that the high output design has a higher output and load impedance than the lower output model. And one has 'ML' on the side and the other has 'MH' on the side.

The reality is the 'MH' model is the one best used with more prosaic phono stages and ones with limited adjustment. On the other hand, if you have either a phono stage that can cope with that kind of low output, or includes a step-up transformer of suitable quality, the ML is the one to go for. If you read a review comparing SL and SH models, you'd pick up the same basic division, and the same conclusion. However, the further up the price points you go, the ►

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- ▶ more the higher-output models become harder to justify; in a £389 cartridge, there’s a strong possibility it will be used with a phono stage that simply has a button to switch between ‘MM’ and ‘MC’, but a £599 and especially a £995 cartridge are more likely to be used with a more adjustable equaliser, and that skews things in favour of the more quicksilver performance of the lower output models. But let’s not damn the higher-output models with faint praise. The MH is awesome, but in the right setting the ML is awesome-r!

In the manner of all Japanese cartridges, the name means something, and that something comes close to ‘Brilliant’ and ‘Beautiful’ in English. This is surprisingly fitting because the M-series is Masao Okada-san’s hitherto greatest expression of those two goals. They are ‘brilliant’ in detail resolution and ‘beautiful’ in tonal balance.

The big story is two-fold. Both the sound and the tracking are excellent. Short of trying to get it to track the stitches in a revolving shoe, if there is a groove cut in a slab of vinyl, these two will play it. OK, so my run-flat copy of the Decca 1812 still warbles and buzzes when it should go ‘boom!’ but that was thanks to generations of music lovers before me, and although the Hanas are a pair of little miracles, raising the dead is a bit past most miracle-workers!

What the two have (and the ML has in spades) is a delicate, almost filigree top-end air coupled to a midrange that is only just on the sweet side of invisible, and a structural, architectural solidity to the bottom end, all of which combine to make a sound that is bolted down in place and yet sounds as light as air. That’s a hard mix to produce, and is usually the preserve of those ‘spoken of in hushed tones’ cartridges.

There is also something truly delightful about the way these cartridges handle voices. Listening to ‘Just a Gigolo’ from Louis Prima’s *The Wildest!* [Pure Pleasure] is always a pleasure, but here the mono recording pushes his powerful voice front and centre. It’s not only a delight to listen to, but the Hana brings out his delight in singing, and the intervening 63 years since the record was originally cut just melt away. This is more than mere vocal articulation; there’s a warmth and vibrancy to his voice that just shines through here. This recording does highlight the one slight flaw in the Hana sound, the one chink in the armour that keeps the big guns at the top; when the band go really wild (about once every three minutes), things can get a bit jittery. But for the money... c’mon!

Tonally, the Hanas are close to the mid-point between the sound of several of the big hitters of the Japanese cartridge world, with much of the romance of a Koetsu, the ‘shimmer’ of a Kiseki or an ZYX, the insight and detail of a Lyra, and the musical boppiness of a Dynavector, and they manage to do all of this without suffering the ‘Jack of all Trades, Master of None’ problem. Yes, all of these cartridges got their stellar reputations for being the best you could get in that field for a reason, but the Hanas give you more than a glimpse of

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: High and Low-output moving-coil cartridge

Stylus: Nude Microline tip

Cantilever: Aluminium

Magnet: Alnico

Output Level (@1kHz): 2mV (MH)
10.4mV (ML)

Internal Impedance (@1kHz):
130Ω (MH), 8Ω (ML)

Suggested load impedance:
47kΩ (MH), >100Ω (ML)

Trackability: 70μ/2g

Compliance: 10 x 10⁻⁶ cm/dyne

Frequency Response: 12Hz–45kHz

Mass: 9.5g

Tracking Force: 2g

Price: £995 (MH or ML)

Manufactured by:

Excel Sound Corporation

URL: excelsound.jp

Distributed by: Air Audio Distribution

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what the true masters have to offer, without the financial outlay. And yet, at no time does this sound like scraps from the very top table. The Hana ML in particular and the MH trailing close behind are every inch high-end super cartridges, only without the high prices.

What separates these Hana cartridges from the top echelon of Japanese jewel cartridges is casing. POM (Delrin) is an entirely right material for a cartridge body, but it isn’t a piece of jade or obsidian. The box it comes in is a nice black box that doesn’t smell of sandalwood. If it had these things, I’d be praising the considerably more expensive Hana ML for its remarkable performance. As it stands, this is the best £3,000–£4,000 cartridge you can buy... for £995. +