

I get asked the “What cartridge should I get that sounds great and doesn’t cost crazy money?” all the time. That’s such a relative term, “crazy money,” and it’s usually very different for me than it is for others because swimming around in the high-end audio pool, you get used to the water.

Denon’s DL-103r at just under \$400 has always been my great sound/minimal expenditure choice, but it has limitations. First, the Denon only has an output of .25mv, meaning you need a pretty good phono stage with a lot of gain to take full advantage of it; this defeats the purpose of a budget cartridge. Second, the Denon has some limitations. It’s not a fantastic tracker, and the overall, mellow sound will draw you in, but you might get bored with that sooner than you think. A high mass arm is vital to get the most out of the Denon, not so much with the SL.

Enter the Hana SL

Admittedly good at spending other people’s money, I suggest the Hana SL. At \$750, I submit that this cartridge is more than twice the Denon in every way. Its Shibata stylus gets further into the grooves than the conical stylus of the 103, and thanks to a much higher .5mv output, compatible with a much wider range of tonearms too. The Hana’s higher compliance (combined with the Shibata stylus profile) means better trackability and low-level detail retrieval. All of this results in a big, wide and deep three-dimensional soundstage, which I’m thinking you’re going to love.

A couple of quick caveats. The SL body is not threaded so you will need mounting screws with nuts to make it work. Those who haven’t mounted a lot of cartridges in their day, proceed slowly and purposefully, as you will have to remove the stylus guard to get this done. Next, take some extra care with the setup, optimizing all parameters as best you can. Using the full Analog Magik suite of tools, it was relatively easy to dial the SL in to perfection, though the screw/nut mounting makes this process a bit more of a dance than it would be if the body had threaded inserts. But you can’t have everything for \$750.

Should you not possess highly sophisticated tools, you can get the SL awfully close by ear, but again, your patience will be tested. If the presentation becomes too lush, nudge the settings until everything begins to get harsh, then back off, ever so little. Or vice versa, if you’re coming from the other direction. The more room in your patience buffer, the better you

will get the Hana SL to sound – and it is capable of tremendous performance, so proceed with calm, caution, and a clear head. Tracking force is claimed to be 2 grams, and we had excellent results at that setting.

Hana suggests loading at 400 ohms, but I had good luck between 100 and 400, depending on the phono stage. Initial listening was done via the Artisan Fidelity Garrard 301 and 12" Audio Creative GrooveMaster II tonearm, with the Pass Labs XS Phono as a conduit to the rest of my reference system.

Chameleon-like

The Garrard already has a big, beefy sound, and initially, I feared that this all might be way too much of a good thing. However, the combination is one of the most musical I've heard. Trying different table/arm combinations (AVID/SME, Technics SL-1200G, SoulLines/SME, and Luxman PD-517) all were equally workable, so I'm comfortable suggesting this cartridge with nearly anything you might have. The final half of my listening was done using the SL mounted in the Luxman PD-517 that we've recently reviewed and acquired along with the Boulder 508 phono stage.

Experimentation with the Rega FONO MC (\$499) and the Channel Islands phono (\$999) were both excellent combinations, with both of these solid-state phono stages having enough gain and a very low noise floor to do justice to the SL.

It's worth noting here, that though you don't have to spend megabucks on a table and phono stage to enjoy the SL, this cartridge is resolving enough, that even in the context of a five-figure table/phono stage, it is highly enjoyable. This is a cartridge that you can definitely grow far with, should your passion for analog become stronger.

Crank it up

Setting the stylus down on the Johnny Winter classic, "Memory Pain" is a revelation. Winter's powerful growl comes through loud and clear, while his guitar maintains momentum, and the bass line is solidly anchored. The liner notes instruct you to "play it loud," and the SL does this recording justice, keeping it all together – something the budget cartridges can't. Playing this track on a lesser cartridge just sounds like an MP3 in comparison.

An equally big dose of fun is had tracking through Jerry Garcia and Howard Wales Side Trips, Vol. One. Side B's "Space Funk" is as much expansive as it is delicate, and the SL allows all of the improvisation to spread out between the speakers, as you would expect with a recording like this, capturing every bit of nuance.

Blazing through some heavy rock from Robin Trower and Greta Van Fleet, to make sure both new and old school are equally represented, the SL again proves that it can track with the best of them. Delivering layered vocals and guitar with ease, the SL is a welcome companion through whatever musical neighborhood I feel like visiting.

Closing with something wacky, an old copy of Fela Kuti and The Africa 70 with Ginger Baker, again shows how much music this cartridge can pull out of an old, tired LP. This is a cartridge that will do justice to everything you listen to – the SL ticks all the boxes.

Final thoughts

A common argument on the internet is just exactly where the point of diminishing returns is, with any component, and sometimes with hifi in general. Should you have a system worthy of something like a Goldfinger, Atlas, Koetsu Jade, or one of the other mega cartridges, you know what you've got. But for the 95% of you that don't, and agonize over how far to upgrade, I'd suggest the Hana SL without question and take the time required to set it up carefully.

Perhaps the SL is not the ultimate point of diminishing returns, but (at least for me, personally) it represents the point where analog playback indeed becomes engaging, holding you on the couch record after record, until the wee hours of the morning. The digital guys have been doing their homework, and the budget DACs have gotten a lot better, gaining a lot of ground on the similarly priced turntable/cartridge combinations. But the Hana SL opens the doors of perception to another world if you're willing to take the journey.

Hopefully I won't be eating these words when we receive the new Hana cartridge, priced around \$1,500, but for now, this really is the cartridge to beat for me. There are different flavors available around the \$1,000 mark, and they all offer a different presentation, with a few of them offering better performance than the Hana SL in a single parameter. But regarding an all-around, highly musical, excellent tracking and dynamic moving coil cartridge, this is a lovely choice.

So much so, that we award the Hana SL TONEAudio's Product of the Year award in the budget analog category.