



Every product listed here has been formally reviewed in *Stereophile*. Everything on the list, regardless of rating, is genuinely recommendable.

Within each category, products are listed by class; within each class, they're in alphabetical order, followed by their price, a short synopsis, and a note indicating the issues of *Stereophile* in which the review and any subsequent follow-up reports appeared. "Vol.44 No.2" indicates our February 2021 issue, for example.

Stereophile's Recommended Components list is concerned mainly with products available in the US through the usual hi-fi retail outlets, although products sold online also qualify. Companies that sell only through dealers must have well-established dealer networks. Companies that sell only online must demonstrate the capacity for satisfactory customer

support, preferably domestic. A no-risk at-home audition is preferred.

We recommend you read our Recommended Components synopses to decide what products you're interested in, then read each product's review carefully before you seriously contemplate a purchase. Many salient characteristics, peculiarities, and caveats appear in the review that

cannot be included in the circa 200-word synopsis. Almost all reviews of current products are available online at stereophile.com; look for WWW in parentheses at the end of the synopsis, after the issue number. Back issues of the magazine can be ordered from the website. The editors regret that we cannot supply copies of individual reviews.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS

The listing is compiled after consultation with *Stereophile's* reviewing staff and editors—including, notably, Technical Editor John Atkinson. Our ratings take into account not only what we heard during the review period but also continued experience with the product (if any) after the formal review has been published. Defects discovered after auditioning may cause a product to be downgraded or removed.

Class ratings are based entirely on performance—but that includes performance on the test bench. Products are downrated to the extent that their deficiencies interfere with the full realization of the program material and the pleasure of the listener, except that obvious limitations, such as limited bass extension in a mini-monitor, are assumed. We do not expect every component to aspire to attain the best measurements possible; that would incentivize conformity, boredom, and metric-gaming. Measurements indicating poor engineering or revealing potentially audible defects may cause us to lower our rating. The reviewer's sonic experience, though, is the most important factor.

Class ratings are based on performance, but different reviewers value different aspects of performance, so it's best not to expect thematic and methodological consistency. You'll find high-tech amplifiers with vanishingly low noise and distortion listed alongside old-school tube amps; what they share is the ability to provoke musical bliss in their respective reviewers. Recommendations, then, are most useful to those who share, or at least are aware of, the reviewer's tastes.

The best use of this list, and the original reviews, is to help you decide what to audition. Never turn down an opportunity to audition a component, especially in your own system.

The prices indicated were current when the listing was compiled (January 2021). We cannot guarantee that they will be the same when you read this.

There is a near-universal consensus that at some point in the upward climb of product prices, severely diminishing returns (performance vs price) set in. However, there is no agreement as to the price level at which that happens. Where we have

GRAMOPHONE DREAMS

BY HERB REICHERT

Hana Umami Red, plus Nova III and Bigger Ben

At the end of Gramophone Dreams #46, I was lost in the pristine beauty of Decware's 25th Anniversary Zen Triode amplifier driving the DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/93 speakers. That was an extremely enjoyable system, and I was hoping to keep it intact for another month. My plan was simply to morph into my long-postponed opus on tube rolling using the Zen Triode as well as AmpsandSound's Bigger Ben headphone and loudspeaker amp. Both are single-ended triode, no-feedback designs and therefore perfectly suited for tube-swapping comparisons.

Then, on December 17, at 6:37a.m., I was on the bed meditating, in the lotus position, when it hit me: *I can't* do tube rolling yet. I must first cover Hana's new flagship moving coil cartridge, the Umami Red, while it is still *new* news.

Ten minutes later, I realized that the fairest plan would be to review the fancy Hana, which is distributed in the US by Musical Surroundings, with that company's own Nova III solid state phono stage. The Nova III is not quite

new news, but readers should know about it.

Then, in full, "first things first" mode, I also realized that before I do the tube-rolling experiments I must first review the Justin Weber-designed Bigger Ben amplifier. That way, I can use it as a reference, and readers will know what I'm talking about.

After having a coffee, I put my headband magnifier on and installed the Urushi-lacquered Hana Umami Red on Thomas Schick's 10.5" tonearm, which was attached to the two-motor Dr. Feickert Analogue Blackbird turntable. To get a quick feel for the Umami's character, I connected the table to my longest-term reference phono stage, the \$3000 Parasound Halo JC3+.

HANA UMAMI RED: THE FIFTH FLAVOR

I first heard the word umami years ago while buying ingredients for miso soup. The woman at Sunrise Japanese market (on Broome Street in New York City) said that in addition to miso paste, I needed Hondashi. I flinched when she told me it was bonito extract and MSG, but she insisted I use it, saying it was "the fifth flavor": not sweet, sour, salty, or bitter, but something else.

She was right about its importance. Hondashi added a hearty complexity to this simple umami broth's flavor. Remembering that made me curious why Hana chose that name for its all-out, \$3950 phono cartridge.

I asked Garth Leerer at Musical Surroundings, Hana's US distributor, who named the cartridge.

"We were all brainstorming, and we wanted a *name* instead of just a model such as ML," he said. "Then, as I walked into my neighborhood Japanese store, which is called Umami Mart, I realized that Umami is the perfect name, as it means both a new, intense flavor and a synergy of parts creating a greater whole.

"I pitched my idea to Okada-san of Excel and Hiroshi-san of Hana-Youtek.



After some initial concern that 'Umami' might be associated with the name of a Japanese burger joint (Umami Burger), they agreed to move forward with the name," Leerer told me.

For more than four decades, I've been telling anyone who'd listen, "Everything sounds like what it is made of," and "Audio design is more like cooking than engineering." Some people laugh.

Obviously, power supply design, circuit design, and the choice of active devices and their associated operating parameters are key aspects of the electrical recipe that establishes the core sound of all audio amplification. Less understood and only marginally quantified are the physical/material aspects of choosing the best parts with which to execute a design.

To understand why "everything

sounds like what it is made of," it is useful to imagine audio signals as pulsing electromagnetic waves that impact every part of each audio component like a drumstick tapping a porcelain teacup, brass bell, or foam pillow. When the signal waves "hit" the transformers, resistors, capacitors, and the box they are in, everything shakes, spawning disharmonious tones that

merge, at some low magnitude, with the passing audio signal.¹

The most obvious example of what I am describing is the record player. Turntables, tonearms, and cartridges are nothing if not rattling contraptions where delicate signal waves merge, willy-nilly, with rogue mechanical and electromagnetic waves. Change the platter or tonearm materials, or the cartridge cantilever material, and the sound changes with it.

A moving coil phono cartridge has only about a dozen parts, but the density, resonant nature, and functioning

¹ My scientific side balks at this: Electric fields and currents interact with matter in very particular ways—they don't bump into (eg) capacitors as if they were teacups—and the characteristic sounds of materials are determined by resonant frequencies that are quite easy to measure if they're present. Yet, I believe that on a subjective level, Herb's insight is valid and—well—insightful.—Editor

of each part has a relatively strong and usually predictable effect on the sound character of the finished product. That is why designing a moving coil cartridge might be considered a master chef's occupation.

I am certain the Hana-Excel people understand this much better than I do.

Hana and Excel

Since its founding by Masao Okada in 1970, Tokyo-based Excel Sound Corporation has specialized in making moving magnet and moving coil cartridges for numerous brands. Then one day about 5 years ago, Hiroshi Ishihara, currently of Hana-Youtek Ltd. of Japan, commissioned a new line of moderately priced moving coil cartridges called Hana by Excel. I reported on Hana's first creation, the \$475 EL, because I liked the homespun organic flavor of its elliptical stylus, aluminum cantilever, and alnico magnets.² I applauded Hana's \$750 SL Mono and Stereo cartridges for using the Shibata-stylus ingredient to thicken the SL's presentation with dense detail. But ...

Until now, the Hana recipe that appealed to me most was for the \$1200 ML. The ML retained the EL's and

SL's aluminum-pipe cantilever but installed a Microline stylus—hence the ML moniker—and exchanged the EL's/SL's plastic body for an injection-molded Delrin body topped with a brass cap fitted with threaded brass inserts for mounting without nuts. Just as the venerable Denon DL-103 moving coil benefits from exchanging its slack, "neh"-sounding plastic body for the denser, more focused sound of an aluminum body (as in Zu Audio's DL-103), so did Hana's ML benefit from a change in body material.

The recipe for Hana's new all-out Umami Red consists of a nude Microline diamond mounted on a boron cantilever with its high-purity copper coils wrapped on a square permalloy armature centered in the flux-field of an iron pole piece and a sinterium cobalt magnet. This magnetic circuit is attached to the "ear-shaped" section of the gloss-red Urushi-lacquered Duralumin A7075 alloy body that features an ebony wood inlay. The cartridge weighs 10.5gm, and its coil impedance is 6 ohms/1kHz with an output of 0.4mV. Recommended load impedance is >60 ohms, and suggested VTF is 2gm. Dynamic compliance is speci-

fied as 10×10^{-6} cm/dyne at 100Hz.

Listening

The first thing I noticed with the Hana Umami Red feeding the Parasound Halo JC3+ (at 80 ohms loading, Garth Leerer's recommendation) was the *intensity* with which it brought Lead Belly (Huddie Ledbetter) to life in his humanity-flexing June 1949 performance at the University of Texas, Austin (1973 LP, Playboy Records PB 119). I can only describe this intensity as a wide-angle, nonrefractive clarity that made me constantly aware of the auditorium space, the feel of the audience, and, most of all, Huddie performing with his whole heart and full battery of talents just six months before his death.

The Umami revealed Lead Belly, with microphones on his voice and guitar, facing the audience with a crisp, almost-really-there presence. The sound was so vivid, I imagined I saw musicologist-recording Alan Lomax standing below the stage with his Ampex.³ Vocal intelligibility was markedly better than with the Zu Denon DL-103 Mk2, the Ortofon 2M Black, or the \$1200 Hana ML. Through the

There's more there there.



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Parasound JC 3+, the Umami MC generated a clean window with a deep, quiet view into the recording, which, amazingly, sounded like analog tape.

It is important that you fully understand the meaning of my last sentence. When a phonographic cartridge makes a pure-analog LP sound “like analog tape,” it must be recovering enough low-level information to trigger that recognition in the listener. There is no higher compliment than to say a phono cartridge makes an LP sound like what its master source is made *from*.

I would compare the most typical differences between the sound of one audio component and another to sharpness and contrast in photography. On this Lead Belly record, the Umami Red displayed sharper, more precisely focused images than the much less expensive Hana ML. More surprisingly, the Umami’s natural-feeling contrast levels, grain-free clarity, and lifelike solidity reminded me a lot of what I experience with My Sonic Lab’s Ultra Eminent Ex (\$6995), which also uses a lacquered Duralumin A7075 alloy body, a line-contact stylus, and a boron cantilever. Both cartridges have a similar weight, output, and compli-

ance. And both make pure analog LPs sound like master tapes.

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS NOVA III

I reviewed Hana’s \$750 SL cartridge in Gramophone Dreams #24 using Musical Surroundings’ overachieving \$750 Phonomena II+ phono stage.² It seems only fair to audition this new, higher-achieving Hana with MS’s higher-priced (\$1500) Michael Yee–designed Nova III phono stage.

In that GD24 story, I mentioned my low regard for wall warts and how I believe switching power supplies yield no sonic benefits. Therefore, I reviewed the Phonomena II+ with MS’s (optional) \$650 Linear Charging Power Supply (LCPS). The MS Nova III also came with a wall wart, so once again I used the LCPS for my auditions.

But before sampling the Umami, to get a feel for the Nova III’s ultimate potential, I began my auditions with my BFF reference cartridge: the \$8995 Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum moving coil, loaded at 100 ohms.

I needed a recording that would show enough rear-stage detail, piano note reverb tails, and voluminous hall sounds to let me gauge the Nova III’s

impact on my beloved Koetsu. I used nothing less than the finest pure analog (all vacuum tube) recording in my collection: *Saudades* (LP, Water Lily Acoustics WLA-CS-16), produced by Richard Vandersteen (of Vandersteen Audio) and recorded at the First Presbyterian Church in Santa Barbara, California. Kavichandran Alexander captured the performance with microphones, mike preamps, tape heads, studio monitors, and cutting-head amplifiers designed by the late Tim de Paravicini (of EAR Yoshino), who also provided final mastering.

Listening for how lifelike Dom Um Romão’s berimbau, Chico Freeman’s saxophone, and Izio Gross’s piano can sound is always my best test for cartridge and phono stage verity.

As with the Phonomena II+, the Nova III exceeded my expectations for a moderately priced solid state phono stage. The Nova III allowed *Saudades*’ dark, anxious moods to penetrate my

² See stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-11.

³ See americanbluesscene.com/blues-law-lead-belly-vs-lomax.

⁴ See stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-24-hana-musical-surroundings.

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room. It showed me how Freeman's saxophone sounds infused the church's whole, voluminous space. The Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum and Nova III phono stage reproduced what felt like every candle of luminance captured on this overtly atmospheric recording. It was a pleasure to observe how the Nova III plus Koetsu revealed the perfection of Kavi Alexander's microphone placement as well as Tim de Paravicini's unique audio sorcery. My only



disappointment was the Nova III's tendency toward partially grayed, less-

than-fully-saturated tones.

With the Nova III, the Hana Umami generated intricate, cleanly described musical forms. Images had bones, as if they were supported by almost-visible armatures. When I compared the cartridges, the Urushi-lacquered Duralumin-bodied Umami Red was not nearly as tone-colorful or luxuriously textured as the similarly priced (\$3995) Koetsu Rosewood Standard I reviewed in Gramophone Dreams #21.⁵

But the Umami was more fit, athletic, and keenly focused than the unlacquered, rosewood-bodied Koetsu.

A BIGGER BEN

The humans I admire most are the makers: those who physically make things with their hands, whether it's paper doilies, loaves of bread, or steel bridges. I venerate makers because the sacred rituals of fashioning objects force makers to understand the spiritual, cultural, and economic value of their work. That is why I chose to be a maker, not a merchant or a scholar.

When I encounter other makers, I feel an immediate kinship, accompanied by a need to investigate the workings of their mind. Ampsandsound's creator Justin Weber is one of those people. He is one of the most inspired, natural-born builder-mechanics I've met. I admire him because he is an unusually sincere, humble human who creates some of the finest loudspeaker and headphone amplifiers I've encountered. Between design gigs, he works full-time as a social worker specializing in psychiatric and medical social work.

A couple of years back, I spent a few months enjoying Ampsandsound's Mogwai KT88 headphone/speaker amplifier, but my first *official* experience with a Justin Weber-designed amplifier was my Gramophone Dreams #35 review of ZMF Audio's \$2000 Pendant headphone amp, which Weber designed and built for ZMF.⁶ In that report, I concluded, "The Pendant seemed like the best all-purpose headphone amplifier I have used since I died and flew to heaven reviewing the \$5899 Woo Audio WA5."

I am now living with Ampsandsound's \$4950 Bigger Ben, a single-ended, triode-wired, no-negative-feedback tube amplifier designed to drive

both loudspeakers and headphones. The Bigger Ben is intended to improve on the Mogwai by making everything *bigger*: bigger capacitors, bigger transformers, a bigger choke. According to its designer, the Bigger Ben can generate approximately 8Wpc into 8 ohms and 5Wpc into 32 ohms (when equipped with a solid state rectifier and KT88 output tubes). There's just one input via a pair of RCA connectors. Volume is controlled by a stepped attenuator.

My review sample arrived in a large Pelican flight case. It came equipped with Russian-manufactured Tung-Sol-branded 6L6GC output tubes, JJ Electronic 6SL7 input tubes, and a Russian-made Electro-Harmonix 5U4GB rectifier. The Bigger Ben's single-ended (RCA) inputs are transformer-coupled, offering a 10k ohm input impedance. The power supply is filtered by a massive choke. The power and output transformers are "bigger" than the Mogwai's and over-spec'd compared to what would normally be used to support the currents and voltages of the Bigger Ben's circuit. Users can choose between an octal solid state rectifier plug-in or a variety of tube rectifiers.

The Bigger Ben's output transformer secondaries are tapped at 8 ohms for speaker cable outputs, and along the amplifier's left side are five 1/4" headphone jacks labeled Low Z, 16 ohms, 32 ohms, 100 ohms, and High Z.

According to Justin Weber (via email), "Low Z accesses the output transformer's 8 ohm tap. A switch at the amplifier's rear allows users to choose between using that winding for

headphones or speakers. HiFiMan's HE6s and Dan Clark Audio Ethers work well via the Low Z. The High Z is a 300 ohm tap, which pairs super well with ZMF's Eikons through Vérité or Sennheiser's HD600/HD800s, as well as Beyerdynamic's 600 ohm DT 880."

In my previous experiences, Ampsandsound's 5Wpc KT88 Mogwai and ZMF's 3Wpc Pendant amplifiers exhibited *no* SPL limitations driving the 97dB/W/m, 16 ohm Zu Audio Soul Supreme speakers designed by Sean Casey. All genres of music flowed easily and dynamically from the Zu's 10.5" full-range pulp-cone drivers. Those amplifiers are long gone, but during these current auditions, I thought the 6L6GC-tubed Bigger Ben powered the Soul Supremes to greater levels of transient and timbral exactitude than either Mogwai or Pendant—or most any other amp I've tried. The 6L6GC "Ben/Zu" combo specialized in highly tactile, microdetailed sound.

That same sense of dynamic, highly textured precision dominated my impressions of the 6L6GC Bigger Ben powering my DeVore Orangutan O/93s. I noticed no clipping or skewing of tone. With the O/93s, I compared the Ben to the First Watt F8 and Elekit TU-8600 and found it every bit as natural and engaging—as "live happily forever" satisfying—as those amplifiers.

I was more surprised by how easily

⁵ See stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-21-emt-koetsu-miyajima.

⁶ See stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-35-zmf-hagerman-headphones-headphone-amplifiers.


 GRAMOPHONE DREAMS

the lower-watt Bigger Ben powered the low-sensitivity (83dB/2.83V/m), high-impedance (15 ohms) Falcon LS3/5a (Gold Badge Edition) speakers. With 6L6GC tubes and a strong tailwind, the Ben *might* put out 3Wpc—a far cry from the gigawatt Parasound A 21+ I'd been using to power them just before.

I substituted the KT88 tubes for the 6L6s, still driving the Falcons. I played bluegrass, jazz, ska, and Mahler, at levels averaging 80dB with 90dB peaks (at 2m). I never once felt a need for more power. What I *did* feel was a special joy at discovering another tube amplifier that brought life and musical excitement to those venerable BBC monitors.

The Bigger Ben's circuit uses zero feedback, which permitted the JJ KT88s to show off their superclear third-harmonic character. In contrast, the 6L6GCs sounded second-harmonic misty. Drums and piano sounded softer. But I did not care, because the 6L6GCs extracted so much tiny-sprouts-in-a-forest detail they filled in all the KT88's empty spaces with infinite little things I hadn't noticed before.

The Ampsandsound Bigger Ben has a radiant quality—as if the sound were illuminated from within—that can be difficult to notice when playing highly processed, multitrack studio recordings. But that quality plays a leading role in pleasurable two-channel field recordings such as *Pallavi: South Indian Flute Music* (1973 LP, Nonesuch Explorer Series H-72052), engineered and mastered by Bob Ludwig (Sterling Sound Inc.). T. Viswanathan and L. Shankar are sitting onstage, playing flute and violin, respectively, in an arc with T. Ranganathan on mridangam and K. Ramiah on tambura. I listened through HiFiMan's 60 ohm, 83dB/mW, openback, planar-magnetic Susvara headphones connected to the Bigger Ben's 32 ohm output, KT88 tubes driving. The Hana Umami was driving the Musical Surroundings Nova III, loaded at 100 ohms.

I wish you could hear what I heard. It was almost scary. Audio accuracy is like pornography: difficult to define, but you sure as hell know it when you hear it. With the Ben/Susvara combo, I heard accuracy, and it was unforget-



table.

Of course, through headphones, the image mapping was less satisfying than it was through the LS3/5a monitors. Nevertheless, my mind was right there in front of every stage microphone. The actual, physical *density* and intensity of each voice or instrument was as jaw-droppingly *real* as I have ever heard from an audio system. Drums sounded startlingly—nay, almost completely—lifelike. The Ben's KT88s made percussion come alive.

Switching back to the 6L6GCs, still driving the Susvaras, my heart melted when I heard Anoushka Shankar's voice introducing her *Live at Carnegie Hall* appearance (16/44.1 FLAC Warner Classics/Qobuz). Until then, I'd only *thought* I was in love. Timbral nuance, inner-inner detail, and rhythmic fluidity permeated the Bigger Ben/Susvara presentation of this live recording.

Bigger Ben vs Z10e

I find this new category of integrated headphone/speaker amplifiers very appealing. However, I like it most when the amplifier allows me to switch between at least two line-level sources. Ampsandsound's Bigger Ben does not. I like it even more when the integrated amplifier comes with a remote volume control; the Bigger Ben does not.

That is why my favorite product in this category has been Linear Tube Audio's \$6950 Z10e integrated headphone and speaker amplifier (see Gramophone Dreams #36).⁷ Designed by David Berning, the Z10e has three line-level inputs, a remote control, and a powered output for electrostatic headphones. It is specified to deliver 12Wpc into 8 ohms and up to 3Wpc into 32 ohms. It drives all headphones, plus my DeVore, Zu, and

Falcon speakers, with spark and vigor. But the Z10e sounded quite different than Ampsandsound's Bigger Ben.

Both amplifiers excelled at driving ZMF's 300 ohm Vérité closed-backs. But the class-AB push-pull Z10e seemed more focused and brightly lit through the midrange. With the Z10e, Anoushka Shankar's Carnegie Hall performance felt like more of a grand, full-tilt *tour de force* (which it was) than it did with the Bigger Ben. The Z10e

emphasized the urgency of rhythms. The Bigger Ben (with KT88s) emphasized the body and harmonics of the instruments and the sensual humanity of Shankar's voice. With the Ben, the Carnegie stage floor played an active, soundboard-like part in Shankar's performance.

The Ben showed more physicality. The Z10e showed more of the "air" above the stage. Both amps showcased a stark-but-enticing you-are-there clarity.

January 10, 2021

These are strange "Herb hides in the bunker" times. Nevertheless, I find myself feeling more grateful than ever. I have health and heat and sufficient gruel. And as you can see, I've been incredibly fortunate when it comes to music, amps, and speakers. I hope you all are equally blessed. May 2021 be a good year for peace, fellowship, and dream-filled listening. ■

⁷ See stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-36-linear-tube-audio-z10e-integrated-amplifier.

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