

Absolute Analog



Hana Umami Red Phono Cartridge

Deliciously Enjoyable

Andre Jennings

Designed by Excel Sound Corporation's Masao Okada-san, the Hana Umami Red phono cartridge has a gorgeous-looking, glossy-red, Urushi-lacquer finish with a front inlay of ebony wood. Beneath all that beauty is a machined A7075 duralumin-alloy chassis in what is called an "Auricle body design." The groove-tracing end of the Umami Red consists of a nude, natural-diamond, microline stylus attached to a solid-boron cantilever. The moving coil is high-purity copper with a 6 ohms impedance and a 0.4mV output. The armature is a square plate of pure iron-based permalloy with a samarium-cobalt magnet. To further refine the cartridge, the front yoke, rear yoke, pole piece, and 24-karat gold-plated terminal pins are all subjected to a "cold annealing" process with cryogenic treatment.

The Umami Red arrived packaged in a glossy black cardboard outer box with the Hana logo on five sides and a serial number on the underside. Inside was a small cardboard container housing three sets of mounting screws (4mm, 5mm, and 6mm) to use with headshells of different thickness. The proper mounting screw can be selected based on the thickness of the headshell combined with the 3mm mounting-depth of the Umami Red's threaded holes. Accompanying the mounting screws were a wood-handled stylus brush, a mounting-screw hex key, and a one-page spec sheet/manual.

For this evaluation, I set up three individual tonearms (SME V, Graham Phantom III, and Basis Vector IV) on the Basis Debut Vacuum. The phonostages used were the Musical Surroundings

Phonomena II+ with external Linear Charging Power Supply, and a custom-designed and modified unit called The Raptor. (The remaining components in the chain are listed in the Associated Equipment sidebar.)

For initial setup, I used the Debut armboard with the mounted SME V. I chose this 'arm first because it doesn't allow offset angle or azimuth adjustment. As a result, the Umami Red was mounted in the SME without those parameters fully optimized. After some time on the SME V, I switched the armboards to either the Graham Phantom III or the Basis Vector IV. One item worth mentioning is that the Graham Phantom III has a headshell thickness of around 5mm. The longest supplied Umami Red mounting screws (6mm) would not fit through the Phantom III armwand and securely attach

the cartridge. However, the Graham 'arm comes with the necessary (8mm) screws in its accessory kit. The Basis Vector IV worked with Umami Red's 6mm mounting screws.

In all cases the Umami Red (tracking at 1.97 grams) met the specifications for channel balance and crosstalk. Stylus rake angle (SRA) was near where I prefer it, with the tonearms level; a final adjustment of 'arm height—a couple of millimeters higher—placed the SRA where the Umami Red sounded best to my ears. Cartridge loading was highly dependent on the phonostage used. I settled on loadings of 59 ohms and above. In my case, the final value was based on the phonostage's ability to manage ultrasonic peaks far outside the audible range, which can wreak havoc on audio signals and, in some cases, overload the electronics in the phono stage. I preferred the Phonomena II+ at 96 ohms, where it seemed to preserve the high frequencies while allowing the sound to retain solidity. The custom Raptor phonostage allowed for much wider loading choices.

The Umami Red has an exceptionally balanced sound. Its tonality is a bit closer to neutral than that of the slightly warmer-sounding Hana SL. The Umami Red has significantly better macro-dynamics, harmonic complexity, and warmth than the Hana ML, while, at the same time, keeping the higher frequencies smoother and more extended. I should note the SME V did not allow the Umami Red to sound as visceral and authoritative as the cartridge did on the Phantom III or Vector IV.

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Specs & Pricing

Type: Moving-coil cartridge
Output level at 1kHz: 0.4mV
Channel balance at 1kHz: 0.5dB
Channel separation at 1kHz: >28dB
Frequency response: 15Hz–50kHz
Tracking ability at 2 grams: 70µm
Stylus type: Microline nude diamond
Cantilever material: Solid boron
Tracking force, recommended: 2.0 grams
Internal impedance: 6 ohms
Recommended load impedance: >60 ohms
Cartridge body material: A7075 duralumin
Cartridge weight: 10.5 grams
Price: \$3950

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS (U.S. Distributor)

5662 Shattuck Ave.
 Oakland, CA 94609
 (510) 547-5006
musicalsurrroundings.com
hanacartridges.com

Associated Equipment

Analog tape: Otari MTR-10 Studio Mastering (1/4" 2-track) tape deck with custom Flux Magnetic Mastering Series repro head and secondary custom tube output stage, Studer A820 Studio Mastering (1/4" 2-track) tape deck (x2), Studer A80VU MKII Studio Mastering (1/4" 2-track) tape deck, Stellavox SP7 (1/4" 2-track) tape deck with ABR large reel adapter, ReVox G-36 (1/4" 4-track) tape deck

Analog vinyl: Basis Audio Debut Vacuum with Synchro-Wave Power Supply, Basis Audio 2800 Vacuum 'tables; Basis Audio SuperArm 9, Basis Audio Vector IV (x2), Graham Phantom III tonearms; Lyra Atlas, Lyra Atlas SL, Lyra Etna, Lyra Etna SL, Lyra Titan-i, van den Hul Colibri XGP, Hana SL cartridges

Phonostage: The Raptor (Custom), Ayre P-5xe, Musical Surroundings Phenomena II+ w/Linear Charging Power Supply

Preamp: Dual Placette Audio active linestage
 Amp: Custom/modified solid-state monoblocks

Speaker: Vandersteen Model 3a Signature with dual 2Wq subwoofers and dual SUB THREE subwoofers using M5-HPB high-pass filter, Vimberg Tonda D

Cables: Assortment of AudioQuest, Shunyata, Tara Labs, Acoustic Research, Cardas, and custom cables

Racks/Accessories: Minus-K BM-1, Neuanse shelf, Maple wood shelf, Symposium Ultra, Aurios Pro, Pneuance Audio, Walker Audio, Klaudio RCM, Kirmuss RCM, VPI RCM, Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic RCM

Playing "What'll I Do" from Linda Ronstadt's *What's New* album [Asylum Records/Elektra 9 60260] reveals how well the Umami Red stays in the groove. The vocal crescendos on this track can get edgy and bright if the stylus has trouble remaining in the groove or if the phonostage overloads. The Umami Red glided through the cut with relative ease, while allowing the macro-dynamic vocal peaks to come through with no noticeable compression. The orchestral soundstaging delivered musical ebb and flow, while the imaging of the band instruments remained distinct, yet part of the whole of the performance.

The Milt Jackson Quartet manages to cover a tasty portion of the audio spectrum on the track titled "Sittin' in the Sandtrap" from the album *Soul Route* [Pablo Records 2310-900]. The track starts with Ray Brown laying down the bassline above Mickey Roker's drums and cymbals. The Umami Red readily exposed the division between the bass and drums but kept the rhythm completely intact. You heard Brown's forceful fingering of the bass with every note. The feathery decay of the cymbals, preceded by the quick transient strike from the drumstick, was traced with ease, while the occasional rim shot completed the cadence. The combined bass and drum sound was unmistakably timed and easy to latch onto. Next, Gene Harris on electric piano and Milt Jackson on vibes make their entrance together. The electric piano and vibes playing the same notes were individually distinguishable with the Umami Red, yet well timed to the point where I could hear Harris' piano come in ahead of Jackson's vibes on individual notes. Across the entire frequency range of the electric piano and the vibes, the Umami Red captured the full spectrum of each instrument's sound. The way Harris and Jackson filled the soundstage with their instruments was mesmerizing, as the system played back the track significantly more realistically than any digital version of this album I've listened to. The Umami Red kept its poise, displayed excellent dynamic acuity, and effortlessly maintained the contagious toe-tapping rhythm of this bop tune.

Before I conclude, I'd like to mention that I compared the Umami Red with 15ips tape playback of Reiner and the CSO's *Scheherazade* [Analog Productions Ultra Tape RRAP 0007 and LP RCA LSC-2446] and was pleasantly entertained by how well the cartridge (with supporting analog front-end) acquitted itself. The Umami Red preserved a respectable amount of the delicacy and detail of the tape setup, capturing a healthy portion of the vast imaging, and holding onto nearly all the instrumental micro- and macro-dynamics (including the reedless woodwind fortes that seemingly upswing out of nowhere, above the orchestra) that the 15ips reel-to-reel tape provides, which made the listening experience highly enjoyable.

Threading the sonic needle nearly perfectly, the Umami Red is, as noted, exceptionally balanced, with upper-tier dynamics, instrumental separation, soundstaging, and realism. If this cartridge is set up properly in a capable system on a quality tonearm and phonostage, many listeners will surrender to its allure.

The word "umami" is said to be a fifth element of taste (beyond sweet, sour, salty, and bitter) that results from a perfect combination of the right ingredients—a form of savory deliciousness. The Umami Red is deliciously enjoyable. Color me impressed. **tas**