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Brilliant and Beautiful

HANA UMAMI RED



Behind the products marked Hanastands stands a Japanese company Excel Sound Corporation, whose roots can be traced back to the year 1970. The driving force of the company Excel is Masao Okada, which has, since 1964, dedicated time to research and development in the area of processing signals from LPs with the help of the technology of high-end moving coil cartridges. It was under the command of Masao Okada that the first coil cartridge named Hana was conceived. It was marked by the easily memorable MC. From then on, the underlying philosophy of the production of the cartridges Hana (in Japanese the term stands for "brilliant" and "beautiful") is to provide audiophiles with the most brilliant and beautiful sound regardless of the expenses.

● Hana Umami Red presented in the article is the top product of the series. Its label "Umami" can be seen as a tough nut for translators, as the classics would say. Umami is not a strictly defined term, but more of a designation. It can be loosely defined as a fifth taste – neither sweet nor sour, neither bitter nor savoury. It is a balanced synergy of all tastes with a tad of something extra – the supersensual aspect. There is a whole philosophy built around Umami – it is an approach characteristic of the Japanese way of thinking. The case is clear, however, from the perspective of technology. Hana Umami Red is a combination of the traditional Japanese techniques of cartridge produc-

tion, the most up-to-date technology used in its development, and a manufactured final completion. The basis of the cartridge is composed of a lacquered Duralumin frame, in which the whole scanning system is embedded. Its basis contains high-purity copper wires and a Permalloy (an alloy of nickel and iron) square plate armature. The copper coils are attached to a solid Boron cantilever and fastened by a pliable Butyl. The system also comprises a Samarium-Cobalt magnet.

The ending of a Boron cantilever is composed of a diamond stylus cut by the Microline technique. The body of the cartridge is embedded in an Ebony wood casket. The final touches to the casket are made in a Japanese technique

Urushi - the foundation for lacquer is a natural oil found in a sap of a tree Sumachu (*Rhus Verniciflua*). The oil is subsequently tinted and applied in multiple layers, with each of them being polished after its hardening. The result is an elegant but resistant surface, which is notable for its pleasant lustre.

The packaging of a cartridge, the price of which is climbing up to 4000 euros, can be described as almost Spartan-like. The majority of us would expect at least a lacquered casket with handmade ornamentation, accompanied by a certificate signed by the "big chief". However, this is not the case. Umami Red tends to be delivered



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in a simple unpolished wooden box, which alongside the cartridge itself, contains solely the most necessary fundamentals - three pairs of screws of different sizes meant for fastening the cartridge to a tonearm, little, according to me useless, brush for cleansing of the stylus and a list of paper with the technical parameters. This minimalist approach is more than alluring to me, as it shows that the price we pay for the product is used solely to produce the cartridge and is not wasted on unnecessary luxuries.

I have had the honour to use the cartridge for more than two months, which allowed me to combine it with various gramophone preamplifiers (Gold Note PH-10, FSL Acoustics, VTL, Parasound Halo JC3 Jr, ...). I have had her acquainted with all music genres and LPs of differing quality levels. The audio set of which Umami Red was a component comprised the speaker systems such as Avalon Acoustics Arcus, preamplifier Ayre Klxe, power amplifier Ayre V5xe, audio cable system Nirvana S-L and signal cable system Cardsas Neutral Reference. The whole set was dominated by a gramophone SDPV mk3. The auditory test was performed in an acoustically modified room of medium size.

The first tones drawn out of LP grooves and a sound image put together by a cartridge was, initially, quite a disappointment. Althou-

gh, due to the brand newness of the cartridge, I have been expecting a noticeable handicap in a form of raw and incoherent sound, the negative first impression exceeded my expectations. The sound in the bass zone was completely "plundered", the high-mids zone emphasised, the whole demonstration was sterile and bland, and the spatial projection was not worth mentioning. However, I have encountered such a situation before and despite the negative first impression, I have attempted to look for the positive aspects of the sound - and it was not such hard work. The high-mids zone has from the beginning presented itself with gentle particularity and great accuracy. "The potential is, undoubtedly, there," I thought. Gradual warming up of the cartridge had, in this case, a rather unusual progress, it could be described as having two stages that for me resembled almost leaps. The first of them was short and lasted no more than a few hours - after playing a couple of LPs the sound became more balanced, with all the components in perfect harmony. The bass zone slowly emerged, its volume and distribution perfectly adjusted. The second stage, however, took much longer. At its end, the sound, initially broken into different zones and layers, turned into a compact, coherent sound image. Details of the recording became even gentler and perfectly featured. The spatial presentation deepened and gained dimension. The process of warming

up took, apparently, much longer in the case of Umami than it does when it comes to other similar gadgets. It needed almost 200 hours to get to the required shape. The process of getting used to its changing sound seemed to be, despite the atypicality, unproblematic.

Umami Red manages to excel in any situation and present any music genre, be it jazz, acoustic music, works of the great classics, or notorious rock earworms, in a manner that is difficult to forget. It can handle even the most demanding recordings with flair, which cannot be said about other exotic cartridges, demasking mercilessly every imperfection. Umami behaves politely and does not try to show off its well-deserved supremacy. This can be especially felt when it comes to rock - even the most badly-done tracks can be listened to without greater emotional damage and sometimes even enjoyed. The masterpieces, however, are presented on a previously unheard-of level.

The way in which Umami Red played the popular band The Doors and its LP of the same name, a great debut that has grown to define the world of rock music and the whole generation of listeners, was unforgettable. With Umami Red, the experience from the album reached excellence, the distinctive voice of Jim Morrison captivatingly enriched by the additional high-quality sound of

the percussions, their swiftness, and power unbelievably well featured. The voice of the vocalist sounded distant, almost ethereal in the room. On the contrary, the sound of the musical instruments cut through the air with almost holographic accuracy. Hammond keyboard howled and by their characteristic sound pushed the atmosphere of the recording to a whole new level.

Featuring a female vocalist tends to be an extremely demanding and, in the case of Norah Jones's album *Come Away with Me*, an almost heroic task. Simplistic lyrics, uncomplicated but engaging melodies, with a number of musical instruments countable on the fingers of one hand. The dominant force and determining element around which the whole piece of music is built is in this case the voice of the singer. Its gentleness turns unexpectedly into powerful, fierce if not almost brutal vigour. These dramatic changes in modulation and dynamism put a strain on the sound system, especially the cartridge. However, the image of the vocal timbre stayed exemplary the whole time and there was no sharp inhalation perceivable, not even in the most dramatic entrances. The instruments of the musicians located around the singer were featured with perfect accuracy, timbre and volume, and impressive energy.

David Bowie and his top album with an impressively long name (*The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*) was played stirringly, violently, with a nearly coarse undertone. The whole piece was absolutely realistic. Bowie's voice timbre, volume, range, phrasing, basically all the little details were processed without any unnecessary affectation and with great certainty on the side of the cartridge. Overall, the music had a wonderful rhythm and the separative sounds of musical instruments were clean and transparent. Electric guitars were vigorous, intense, and juicy, with attention put on details such as the resonance of the strings and the echo. The exceptional work of genius served with exceptional confidence.

The masterly experience was also the Cuban *Buena Vista Social Club*, *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis or *101* by Depeche Mode. It was extremely interesting to hear the effect of the faint rustle and cracking, characteristic of LP. These traits are resolutely pushed to the background, to a level where they are hardly


certainly YES


maybe just longer playing time

accuracy, and attention to detail, the whole performance is lighter and more vibrant so to cut a long story short, Hana is the winner.

Hana Umami Red is an excellent cartridge designed for the most demanding sound systems and it is in its power to satisfy even the most refined audience. Its sound quality is in the realm of absolute excellence, where even additional few thousand euros do not necessarily mean a fundamental change in the quality of the reproduction. The proportion of the price and performance, therefore, puts it on the top of the imaginary ladder. ❌



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perceivable, which creates an unusual effect on the audience. It is caused predominantly by a distinctive style of the sharpening of the stylus and its geometry with the cooperation of the cantilever and its pliability. I was very impressed by this manner of presentation and I found it specifically attractive while listening to older, more frequently played LPs.

The direct comparison with the native E.A.T Jo N°8 which I have intentionally not avoided, is also worthwhile. Hana is dominating E.A.T. in almost every aspect. It is notable for its

Stylus: Microline

Weight: 10,5 g

Frequency Response: 10 – 50 000 Hz (-3 dB)

Output Level: 0,4 mV

Vertical Tracking Force: 2,0 g

Coil Impedance: 6 Ω/1 kHz

Price: 3 990 euros

Distributor for Slovakia:

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