

Product of the Year Awards

Phono Cartridges of the Year

Hana Umami Blue

\$2500

Excel Sound Corporation's Masao Okada-san has been building OEM cartridges for decades. Several years ago, Excel started designing its own cartridges, the flagship being the Umami Red—a gorgeous-sounding mc with an ever-so-slight hint of warmth to go with exceptionally balanced coverage of the frequency spectrum. The Hana Umami Blue is the latest addition to Okada-san's lineup. The cartridge has a glossy blue finish that gives off a bit of brilliance to the eye. The solid-boron cantilever, nude micro-line stylus, and the cryogenic treatment (front and rear yokes, pole piece, and 24-karat gold-plated terminals) are all shared with the Umami Red. Sonically, the Blue has a more illuminated character than the slightly warmer-sounding members of the Hana family. It moves even closer to neutral without running anywhere near the cool side. The Blue traces the groove easily on more dynamic and complex passages and has what reviewer Andre Jennings considered superb micro- and macro-dynamics that comfortably compete with cartridges at any price point. The Blue also adds a surprising level of transparency to the music embedded in the grooves, preserving harmonic content and speedy note transitions with uncanny ease. With the Blue, Hana has set another baseline of performance-for-cost, even against competitors into the upper four-digit range. A sonic winner and one of TAS' 2023 Phono Cartridges of the Year.



Phono Cartridges of the Year

DS Audio Grand Master

\$15,000, cartridge/\$45,000, two-box equalizer

The DS Audio Grand Master optical transducer comes closer to the sound of R2R tape than any other phono cartridge (except for the yet-to-be-reviewed Grand Master EX). Yes, it is expensive, though you don't have to buy the dedicated Grand Master EQ units to get your sonic money's worth. (Any DS Audio EQ device will work with it—and there is a wide variety of them at a wide variety of price points, starting below \$2k.) Unlike every other phono cartridge and phonostage on the market, the Grand Master and its EQ units are dead quiet—without a trace of the hum, buzz, RF, and self-noise that analog lovers have simply learned to live with. The elimination of the usual background racket, coupled to an optical system's deeper and fuller presentation of the bass and lower midrange, rich supremely detailed midband, and sweet, airy, ribbon-like treble, makes for the most "complete" and (given a great LP) most realistic reproduction of the music and musicians on LPs JV has yet heard (the EX excepted). A Grand Masterpiece that well deserves TAS' 2023 Cartridge of the Year Award. (316)