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Hana SL MKII MC Cartridge

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HANA SL MKII MC CARTRIDGE REVIEW

Hana SL MKII MC Cartridge is the second iteration of the brand's SL phono-cartridge and comes with a few improvements over the original including cryogenically treated parts, a new covering material to help dampen the cartridge, and a new cantilever. Stuart Smith takes a listen to this £650 low-output moving coil cartridge.



When Michael at Air Distribution asked if I'd have a listen to the HANA SL MKII cartridge that came out in September of 2024, I was delighted to accept as I've been running the HANA UMAMI Red for some time in our reference turntable and very much enjoyed the UMAMI Blue when I had the chance to play with that.

The HANA website proudly tells us that the S series of their cartridges is their best-selling range and that the MK 2 SL we have here is (unsurprisingly) an upgrade to the original version. In this latter respect we are also told that HANA's "master cartridge designer" Masao Okada-san has added a new aluminium cantilever that is said to have improved rigidity over the older version and further enhancements include higher specified parts, advanced materials and "unique technical processes from HANA's higher-priced cartridges". Other than the improved cantilever, which HANA claims results in greater clarity, critical parts including the yoke, pole-pieces and terminal pins have all been cryogenically treated – some will scoff at the mention of cryogenically treating getting a mention and others' ears will prick up at the news of this enhancement. Yes, cryogenically treating of kit is one of those things that divides the audiophile community. However, as well as the cryogenic gubbins, there is also an improved body shape that has been developed from the M Series of cartridges from HANA and now has a "soft feel black elastomeric resin paint" that is said to help damp the cartridge. Other improvements are a brass cap with threaded cartridge-mounted fittings and the MK II is also heavier than the first iteration, something that HANA tells us will improve bass and dynamics.



The SL MK II also shares the same generator that we find in the [UMAMI BLUE](#) that I raved about when I reviewed it around this time last year. It also shares the Alnico magnet and cross-coil that uses "high-purity 20-micron copper wire" and has an 8ohm impedance. These latter two points HANA suggests reduces mass for better resolution and trackability and make it more suitable for a wider range of phonostages, though it is low output and so will require a suitable step-up transformer or phonostage with enough gain.

Price-wise the SL MKII is around the 750 Euros (£650) mark which puts it in what I would suggest is a highly competitive marketplace – a step up from entry-level cartridges (perhaps a user's *first step into the world of low output MCs*) but not (*yet*) into the rarified and esoteric world that some cartridges inhabit. I imagine a lot of cartridges at this kind of price get sold as it's enough of an upgrade from entry level cartridges to feel like a big spend, but without getting into the realms of esoterica. I recall my first jump to a modestly priced low output MC cartridge and it was one of those "there's no going back now" kind of reactions. Once at this kind of level and commitment to your vinyl playback system, the chances are you are likely to push it even further when funds allow or the desire to scratch the itch becomes too much – so I'd say the SL MK2 is pitched at that level where you've gone beyond drinking the audio equivalent of plonk and are now exploring new world wines before the inevitable lure of the romantic French classics comes calling – you get my drift, I'm sure.

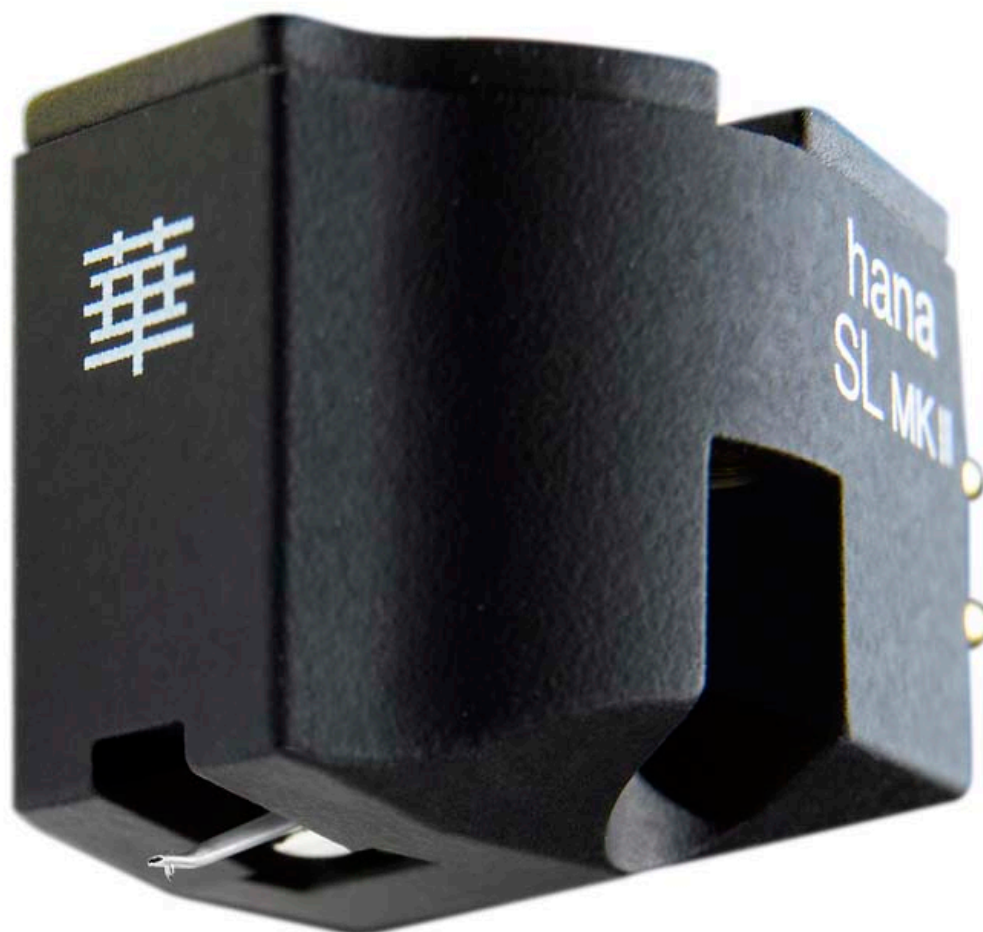
There's not much really to say about the HANA SL MKII and its construction etc – it's a cartridge.

Packaging is nice, the cartridge is well put together and with no obvious manufacturing issues, and you get the usual tools and wires to allow you to fit the cartridge to your favourite arm/headshell – in my car the HANA SL MKii will be going on our Technics SL 1200G. Bolts for the SL MKII secure into the body of the cartridge itself,

which I find a tad easier than having to use both nuts and bolts. During fitting you do feel the “soft feel black elastomeric resin paint” and it does “feel” a little bit grippy and as though it has damping qualities too.



For the duration of the review I've had the HANA SL MKII running on the Technics 1200G and into a LAB 12 melto phonostage. Amps were our Electrocompaniet AW800M and the Pre is our LEEMA LIBRA. Speakers are our Audiovector SR6s.



SOUND OF THE HANA SL MK II

What I'm looking for here is a cartridge that is electrically quiet when run through a suitable phonostage and step-up transformer, but pulls plenty of detail from the vinyl grooves without venturing into the realms of harshness. I'm expecting workaday competence with this cartridge rather than any kind of auditory fireworks. I

also expect a balanced sound from top to bottom with bass being controlled and tight. As an aside, it still amazes me that pulling a groove over a polished bit of stone manages to generate sound at all, never mind sound that is as nuanced and detailed as vinyl playback can be! I've reviewed the [Hana Umami Red](#) and [Umami Blue](#) and if there is a family sound to those two cartridges and both have a sure-footedness of bass along with open midband and treble, with the Red being a tad more transparent and open in the tops than the Blue. However, they cost over 3 and 2 grand respectively, so if the SLMKII can get close to their kind of performance (*which I very much enjoy*) then we'll be onto a winner given the it's around a third the price of the Blue and a fifth the price of the Red.

Lest's see!

For the record, I resisted playing On A Ragga Tip – those who know will know!

The first record out was to test that sure-footedness of bass. What I'm listening for here is a performance that allows me to easily follow the basslines, get a good grasp of the "instruments'" timbre and tone and for the bass to be precise and not at all "overhung" – I call this latter point bass "speed" but I'm aware that this word is a tad problematic for some, though I'm sure it conveys my meaning perfectly well. Dust Kid's A Raver's Diary pretty much says what it does on the tin and is for the most part a relentless assault on the senses and the HANA doesn't skip a beat. It remains solid and composed whilst dealing very well with what can be a difficult record to track. Here Comes Techno has a deep kick and rolling baseline that could easily get lost within all that is going on, but the HANA hits the groove and keeps at it like a dog that won't give up its favourite toy – it's locked in and this allows the track to have an underpinning that lets the track get into your head. Switch the SL out for the UMAMI RED the difference is immediate with the baseline integration seemingly more apparent and just better – it's a hard thing to put your finger on, but when something sounds better rather than different it's a pretty immediate lightbulb kind of moment – somehow, it was more dynamic and fast. So yes, the UMAMI RED is a better cartridge than the SL MKII where bass is concerned – that's not going to come as any shock to anyone. However, let's play the same track with the Vertere Sabre MM cartridge. (*The process here was to finish listening to the RED, put the SL MK II back in, listen again to the same track and then put the Sabre in there. The melto phonostage allows for this kind of (pretty much immediate) comparison*). The Sabre is a fine cartridge, for sure, and it has a similar performance as the HANA through the bass, though I'd suggest it is not as forthright in this department, meaning that for (my tastes) the better "slam" factor from the SL makes it a better cartridge, though the Sabre is an MM and won't need a Step Up Transformer and so may be the affordable option – still, it costs more in itself. I went to and fro between the Sabre and the SL on this track and every time I preferred the bass performance of the SL – it was somehow just more controlled and perhaps a smidge more pronounced in the mix – your preferences may dictate you prefer a different presentation and all I can do here is try to articulate my thoughts and findings given the cartridges I have here and others I've heard in the system.



The full range of HANA S Series MKII cartridges including the mono

One of my favourite records of any genre is The Great Summit by Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. It's a record I happened across by accident around 20 years ago and despite not really being a "jazz cat", the record immediately struck a chord with me. Throughout the upper bass and the midsection of this record whilst using the SL MKII I was pretty astounded by the detail this relatively inexpensive (*yeh, I know*) cartridge was able to pull from the grooves of the record. Piano was lifelike and it was pretty easy to follow how Ellington applied different emphasis on chords on the opening track, Dukes Place, was fabulously detailed and realistic. Armstrong's vocal on I'm Just A Lucky So and So was a little forward in the mix and I do think this cartridge is voiced to push this important part of the audio spectrum. With that said, the separation of instruments in the mids and upper-mids is impressive and I never got the feeling I was listening to anything but separate musicians performing as a whole. The way Ellington hits the top notes on the piano on Cottontail comes across brilliantly and almost as if Ellington is angry with the piano for something or other. Horns are well separated in the mix and it was easy enough to hear the differences in the instruments playing – I'd be pretty miffed with a £650 cartridge if I couldn't. There is plenty of detail present here and that separation of instruments helps to present a layered but coherent soundstage which is very impressive – you can pick things out should you want, but sit back and relax and it all comes together as a whole. This whole record was a delight to listen to from beginning to end (*and then re-listening to sections*) and the SL MKII allowed me to just listen to the music that was playing. There was good dynamics, realism of timbre, and good separation of the soundstage that bettered (*in my opinion*) the Sabre cartridge, but was bettered by the UMAMI RED. For my taste, the SL MKII bettered the Sabre with regard to feeling more musical – in a good way. I found my feet tapping more and myself just listening to the whole rather than trying to pick the mix apart when the HANA was on the arm.

Turning to Surgeon and his Tresor album Force+Form. I chose this record because it has a lot going on in the top end as well as loads happening everywhere else in the mix. Yes, this cartridge pulls plenty of detail from the grooves at the top end, but not at the expense of it becoming too much. What I found with the SL MK2 in place was a sense that when compared to the RED, things were ever so slightly rolled-off – perhaps rolled off is not the right phrase, perhaps just slightly less detailed than the RED would be a better way to express this. Whatever is going off with the tops, what you are assured of with the SL MKII is a wholly satisfactory experience from top to bottom. There seems to be a good degree of balance and poise with the cartridge that loses out to its more expensive sibling only in the amount of information it drags out of the grooves and the refinement therein. In comparison to the RED, the SL MKII is a little rough around the edges, but you get enough of the sense that this is a HANA cartridge to make it well worth the asking price. Quite honestly, listening to this album I actually thought at times that its presentation might be more suited to this kind of record than the RED – until I put the RED on and pressed play and the extra money you have spent becomes

obvious. Back to the SL and I found myself listening into this album's mix a good deal and being able to pull out sounds that were somewhat "hidden".



I was impressed but the quietness of the cartridge and low amount of surface noise it generated.

Had I not been fortunate enough to have the UMAMI RED in the collection of cartridges then I don't think I would know what I was missing with the SL MKII, but once you hear the comparison there's no doubting the RED is a better cartridge in pretty much all respects...but then it should be.

QUIBBLES

A little forward in the upper-midsection of the spectrum, but this may not be a bad compromise.

CONCLUSION

This is another great-sounding cartridge from HANA and one that will serve beautifully as a first step into the sometimes overly exotic world of lower-output Moving Coil cartridges. Those who do step up will not be disappointed with the SL MKII's performance! It's a great performer from top to bottom and comes across as being very quiet and wonderfully dynamic. No, it doesn't have the ultimate refinement of the HANA RED or BLUE cartridges, but (*for my tastes*) it betters the Vertere Sabre Moving Magnet – your mileage may differ and so if you are in the market, you need to listen to a short shortlist and then make your decision – I can only guide you as to what my thoughts were in this system and with my choice of recordings, though I stand by everything I say about this product in this review!

The stereo image is stable and detailed whatever the kind of music was played. On electronic music I was able to see into the mix and see where individual instruments and sounds had been placed by the producer. With traditionally recorded acoustic music, I was likewise able to "see" the instruments on the stage and spread in front of me.

As always, the question I always ask myself is "Could I live with this ..." and the answer to this has to be a resounding "YES!" Had I not been spoiled by cartridges further up the the HANA range.

I'm giving this cartridge our 5 Hearts award given its cost-to-performance ratio. It offers a lot of what the more expensive cartridges in the HANA range offer but lacks a degree of their refinement (almost impossible to convey in words) when compared side by side. However, the SLII finds itself in a crowded marketplace and whilst I assure you this is an excellent cartridge, be aware that there are alternatives out there around this price should you wish to go your own way – whatever, listen to the the SL MKII and I'm certain you will find it performs very favourably to anything at this price, though I've not heard everything out there!

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality and Features:

Small but easy to handle

The textured/rubberised paint feels purposeful and as if it will be dampening

Good packaging

Sound Quality:

Dynamic and precise sounding

Slightly forward in the upper-midsection, but otherwise a nicely balanced cartridge

Great sound staging

Quiet and I thought there was less surface noise than with the Sabre cartridge I compared it with

Solid bass

Top end is not as detailed as the reference RED but cannot be said to be at all screechsome or harsh



Value For Money:

This is not an insignificant purchase at £650, but one that I think the vast majority of folk will be well pleased with. It gives a taste of what the cartridges further up the HANA food chain can offer, but with a degree less refinement overall when compared directly. As your first step into the world of Low Output Moving Coil Cartridges, it is a good move, but this is a relatively crowded marketplace and your options are many.

We Loved:

The dynamic and yet relatively refined nature of this cartridge make it a delight to listen to. On genres that demand it, the SL MKII has enough refinement to make it a class act, but on the likes of techno it manages to get across a good degree of the grit and distortion this genre has, but without sounding brash or uncouth

Great sound-staging and imaging

A cartridge for those who just want to get on with listening to their music without over-obsessing about everything

We Didn't Love So Much:

Not a great deal. Had I not been spoiled by having access to the HANA RED and some other very nice cartridges, I'd have been well chuffed with this as my main cartridge – a case of not knowing what you are missing until you hear it!

Slightly forward in the upper-mids.

Elevator Pitch Review: At £650 the HANA SL MK2 is a well-specified and relatively low-priced low-output Moving Coil cartridge from a brand that has gained itself a great reputation. The cartridge is able to bring a good deal of the better cartridges in its stable to the table, but in the final analysis, lacks a smidge of the refinement of the RED or BLUE. It is a dynamic performer that is pretty even across the frequency spectrum but perhaps with a slightly pushed upper-midband – not a bad thing at this price. I thoroughly enjoyed my time with it.

Price: £645, 750 Euros, \$850



Stuart Smith

SUPPLIED BY AIR AUDIO

SUPPLIED SPECIFICATION

Magnet – Alnico

Yoke & Polepiece – Pure Iron/Cyro treatment

Coil Wire – High Purity Copper

Armature – Permalloy/Cross-coil

Output Pins– Gold Plated/Cyro treatment

Cartridge Housing/Cap – Elastomeric coated ABS/Threaded Brass

Cartridge weight – 8.6 grams

Cartridge colour – black

Output level – 0.4mV/1KHz

Coil Impedance – 8Ω SL MKII

Load impedance – ≥80 ohms SL MKII

Frequency response – 15 – 32,000Hz

Channel separation – 28dB/1KHz SL MKII and SH MKII

Output balance – <1.5dB/1KHz SL MKII and SH MKII

Vertical tracking force (VTF) – 2 grams

Trackability – 70µm/2gr

Dynamic Compliance – 10×10⁻⁶cm/dyne

 **Shanling EH2 DAC/Amplifier**

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