

TEST CARTRIDGE

RIGHT ON TARGET

After the Umami Red and Blue, Hana now presents its new top MC, the Umami Black. We were expecting an analog sensation – and we were not disappointed.

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When it comes to the Japanese cartridge brand Hana, it is still something of a newcomer to the scene, having been founded only in 2015. However, it was launched as a proprietary brand of the famous and highly respected company Excel Sound, which itself was founded back in 1970 by the now already legendary Masao Okada. Since then, a wide range of top-tier cartridges has emerged from a suburb of Tokyo, manufactured by Excel primarily on behalf of third-party brands and to the very highest standards.

The customer list is long and strictly confidential. From time to time, however, information does surface. For example, Excel produces the Excalibur MCs, and the former smaller Benz models also originated there. OEM business for others relies on discretion – even though the Japanese company could easily boast about its professional manufacturing expertise and know-how.

There is no such secrecy surrounding Hana. Since the launch of the first series, the E and S models available as both low- and high-output MCs, the name has stood for quality and especially strong value for money. This also applied to the later, significantly more expensive M series. With the €3,750 Umami Red, Hana made a clear statement of its own capabilities and commitment in 2020.

Those wishing to spend less could opt for the Umami Blue, introduced some time later, for still a respectable €2,500 (tested in STEREO 11/20 and 11/23). And with the current MK II versions of the popular SL and SH MCs, priced at around €750

each, Hana once again offers strong recommendations for budget-conscious vinyl listeners since late 2024 – both earning top marks in the test published in issue 12/24.

So far, so good. But recently, an MC cartridge called the Umami Black was announced – one that is intended to outshine all previous Hanas. Price was clearly no object here, and at €10,000 it is correspondingly substantial. Delivered in an elegant wooden box, the Umami Black features a number of special characteristics, the most striking of which is its cantilever made of solid diamond.

This extremely hard material is said to ensure optimal signal transmission to the coil armature. At its front end, the diamond rod, mounted in an aluminium sleeve, carries a “nude” stylus shaped in the MicroRidge profile. At its tip, a narrow ridge is ground that resembles the flanks of the cutting stylus and is intended to retrieve the maximum amount of information from the groove. Such a stylus can also be found on the high-quality boron cantilevers of the Umami Blue and Red.

Each Umami is different

Unlike other manufacturers who differentiate the various models of a series with virtually identical internals merely by the quality of the cantilever and stylus – an approach that is perfectly legitimate – Excel chose a different path for its Umami Hanas. All three models – Blue, Red and the new Black – differ significantly in their internal construction.

For the Black, the crowning achievement of his work, the now 84-year-old “Okada-san” drew upon his vast experience and created a design that is unique in this form. Its heart is the “High-Efficiency Moving Coil Generator,” which he briefly refers to internally as “OKD.” The term must be understood in relative terms, as the Umami Black’s output voltage is only 0.32 millivolts according to our measurement method. This means the large Hana requires a low-noise phono preamplifier – something one would reasonably expect at this level.

While this value is at the lower end compared to other MCs, it appears generous in light of the exceptional dynamic behaviour sought by Okada for the Black's lightweight armature. The armature plate, measuring just two square millimetres, is wound with only a small number of turns of highly pure 4N copper wire with a diameter of 30 microns. This saves moving mass, as does the hybrid permalloy carrier itself, which apparently consists of 78 percent carbon-containing nickel-iron.

Urushi lacquer applied by vapor deposition

In combination with Hana's reportedly first-ever method of manufacturing the pole piece together with the rear yoke as a single unit, this design is intended to create a particularly effective, low-loss energy flow. The driving force comes from an unusually powerful neodymium-iron-boron magnet (NdFeB), which makes the Umami Black the only cartridge in the Hana range to use this type. In addition, Okada installs the front, fork-shaped yoke in an inverted orientation, promising especially effective resonance control and a more homogeneous magnetic field alignment.

Hana specifies the internal coil resistance at five ohms and recommends, following the "factor of ten" rule of thumb, a phono input impedance of at least 50 ohms. The 100 ohms often suitable for Japanese MCs proved absolutely practical here as well. With the manufacturer-recommended tracking force of around 20 millinewtons, the 11.3-gram Umami Black also fits seamlessly into this category.

At least with its siblings, it shares the solid "Auricle" housing made from aircraft-grade steel. This housing is coated in a multi-stage vapor deposition process with Japanese Urushi lacquer, which is then cured under controlled conditions at 120 degrees Celsius. The result looks elegant and, thanks to the intimate bond between lacquer and metal, is also said to support the cartridge's sonic properties.

A special position among top MCs

We always have a number of exclusive cartridges in regular use (see “Test Equipment”), and these challenged the new Umami Black. As if it had been waiting for such an opportunity, it immediately took centre stage from the very first note. Since the local distributor – the Augsburg-based High-Fidelity Studio – supplied us with a well-run-in sample, we cannot comment on the break-in behaviour of this Japanese MC. It seems likely, however, that it sounds somewhat less smooth initially than after the 20 to 30 hours already logged by our test Black.

The finesse and polished refinement of this cartridge not only set the large Hana apart from the bulk of high-end cartridges, but even give it a special status within the top tier itself. What the Umami Black delivers in terms of resolution and fine dynamic contrast is simply outstanding.

Of course, it responds instantly and powerfully to strong dynamic swings, but it is precisely the tiny gradations that create a vivid, tingling immediacy and captivating presence in musical reproduction. Despite the slight treble lift visible in the frequency response, the Black does not sound overly bright. Instead, it counterbalances its clear brilliance with a solid, robust bass that is full of substance.

Master of finesse

It is an experience in itself to hear how precisely the Umami Black shapes sibilants. Its ability to focus energy not only in broad strokes but down to the most subtle branches of a performance is remarkable. The motto here is clarity in every detail – and the high-class, finely resolving Hana delivers plenty of them. Delicate shimmering in fast guitar playing, such as in Alex de Grassi’s *Window*, becomes audible, as do the tiniest nuances in performances like Erlend Øye & La Comitiva’s joyfully celebratory *Matrimonio Di Ruggiero*.

Yet it is not only the combination of lightness and precision that fascinates. This is paired with a consistently firm grip on the structure of the soundstage, lending the Umami Black a sense of linear purposefulness and even a certain strictness in the construction of its musical presentation – beyond its grace and playful love of nuance.

It never loses the thread of the music, instead clearly working out the respective impetus, whether rock or baroque.

When Lyn Stanley and her Big Band Jazz Mavericks launched into Boogie Woogie Santa Claus, the Hana was fully on board. When Gary Burton and Pat Metheny drifted through gently rhythmic ballads on their Reunion album, the music floated hypnotically between the speakers as the Umami Black carefully traced the grooves.

And one could go on. With this Super Hana, you not only listen to music at the highest level, but rediscover many of your records because it draws previously unknown sounds from them. Fortunate are those who can afford one – and provide it with an adequate environment for its sonic development. An investment in vinyl happiness that one does not regret, because the Umami Black truly hits the bull's eye.

TEST RESULT: WELL-FOUNDED. CRITICAL. TRANSPARENT.

MEASUREMENTS – 70%

Rating: very good – 1.2

- Frequency response: very good

- Channel balance: very good
- Tracking ability: very good

HANDLING & OPERATION – 30%

Rating: good – 2.0

- Included accessories: four pairs of screws, screwdriver, brush, stylus guard
- Haptics & build quality: very good
- Colour-coded connections: yes
- Pre-threaded mounting holes: yes
- Quality of manual: English only
- Warranty: 2 years

PRACTICAL SCORE

Overall rating: very good – 1.4

Sound description: exceptional resolution, fine and macro dynamics, and vivid musicality. A dream!

SOUND SCORE

97 / 100 points