

EXCLUSIVE!



Hana Umami Black moving coil cartridge

Chris Frankland

In the town of Healdsburg, in California's Sonoma wine-growing region, a group of journalists from around the world gathered at the beginning of October to celebrate what promised to be a rather different sensory experience – the new Umami Black flagship cartridge from Hana, and the 55th anniversary of Excel Sound, which manufactures them. Yours truly was among them, representing **hi-fi+**.

Also attending were Masahiro Okada, son of Excel Sound founder Masao Okada, and Hiroshi Ishihara, president of YouTek, which exports Hana.

Excel Sound has been producing cartridges for fifty years, and although it initially supplied OEM for other brands, today most of its production is for Hana, which it launched in 2015 – all designed by Masao Okada.

The Umami concept was introduced in 2020 with the Umami Red (£3,399). Umami, the fifth basic human taste alongside sweet, sour, salt, and bitter, was discovered

in Japan in 1908 by Kikunae Ikeda of Tokyo Imperial University, and means 'pleasant savoury taste' or 'deliciousness'. Hana describes its Umami cartridges as offering "a uniquely captivating musical experience that leaves a lasting emotional impression".

The Umami Blue (£2,149) entry-level model was introduced to the range in 2023, while the new Umami Black, positioned at the top of the range, is priced at £8,500 and features all-new components.

Black art

The new Black is an elegant product featuring its Urushi lacquer finish. Inspired by traditional Japanese Makie craftsmanship, it is vapour-deposited onto the aircraft-grade (A 7075) aluminium body and thermoset in place for durability. Hana says it also helps reduce resonances, which enhances imagery and bass clarity. But the Umami Black's beauty goes beyond surface appeal.

» Its core features a new OKD high-efficiency generator system and Hana's first-ever diamond cantilever. While not the first cartridge to use a diamond cantilever, it is Hana's debut. Hana states that diamond was chosen for its exceptional rigidity and "precise transmission of groove modulations to the new generator." It is mounted on a new hybrid carbon permalloy armature, made from 78% carbon-infused nickel-iron, onto which Hana hand-winds the 4N high-purity copper coils.

The generator uses a high-power neodymium-iron-boron magnet, unlike the alnico used in the Blue and the samarium cobalt in the Red, which allows Hana to use fewer coils, thereby reducing moving mass and keeping internal impedance down to 5 ohms. The new generator is their first to feature an inverted U-shaped front yoke, designed to minimise resonances and magnetic energy losses by creating a more homogeneous flux field, thus reducing saturation. The chosen stylus is a nude microline stylus with a 0.2mm square profile.

It has long been understood that cryogenic treatment of metals can enhance their microstructure. All magnetic and signal path components in the Umami Black – U front yoke, the one-piece pole piece/rear yoke, and the gold-plated brass terminal pins – have been cryogenically treated to below -184°C, which Hana states improves conductivity and reduces distortion.

Masahiro Okada told me that the one-piece magnet/rear yoke assembly is a very important part of the design, and Hana claims it is a world first. He said it prevents mechanical vibrations and the loss of magnetic energy. In the Blue and Red versions, these parts are separate and glued together.

Paint it Black

The Hana Umami Black warrants a high-quality turntable and arm, so I installed it in my reference Audio Note TT3/PSU3 and Audio Note Arm Two. Fitting it was straightforward, as the body features tapped holes on top and Hana provides fixing bolts in 4mm, 5mm, 6mm and 8mm lengths to suit different headshell thicknesses.

After some experimentation with excellent results using a Gold Note PH-1000 and Vertere Calon phono stage (with which the Black sounded best with input impedance set to 150 ohms), I discovered that the best results by far were achieved using my Audio Note top-of-the-range S9 transformer. The recommended tracking force of 2g proved to work most effectively. The amplifier used was an Audio Note Meishu Tonmeister, which sat on a MusicWorks Acouplex Revue support slab.

Speakers used were the Fyne Audio Vintage 10 with SuperTrax super tweeters and a REL S850 subwoofer. The Fynes were driven bi-wired using Audio Note cable, and I used a MusicWorks Reflex G5 mains distribution block with ReVive Ultra II mains leads.

Eager to explore the capabilities of the Umami Black, I started with Ben Sidran's *Bop City* album. On 'It Didn't All Come True', the Umami Black impressed me from the opening bars with its clear, articulate, and captivating vocal quality. Sidran's piano was delivered with excellent dynamics, sharp detail, and a strong rhythmic pulse. The drum kit was powerful, tight, and lively, with a kick that made me smile. The snare and toms were superbly tight, and when the drummer struck them hard, you could genuinely feel it. The bass guitar line was deep, flexible, and melodious, and as the track's tempo increased, the Umami Black did not let me down. I know this track inside out, and the Umami Black offered an outstanding performance, revealing subtle nuances I swear I'd never noticed before.

Next on the programme was Fergus McCreadie's *Stream*. On 'Sun Pillars', the Umami Black captured his piano playing well, with great depth in the lower registers and effectively conveying his nimble-fingered and signature style, revealing just how loud or soft each key was struck. The acoustic bass line was deep, agile, and I could really hear the leading-edge twang when David Bowden plucked a note. Stephen Henderson's sensitive and skilled drumming was also superbly captured, with cymbals ringing out clearly and subtle details on the snare beautifully rendered. The strong rhythmic pulse of the track was effectively conveyed.

Picking up another all-time favourite of mine, guitarist Larry Carlton's *Discovery* album and his cover of The Doobies' 'Minute by Minute', the Umami Black again impressed with its clean, dynamic sound, revealing subtle details of how Carlton shaped each note. Backing vocals were clear and well-focused, while the sinuous, driving bass line was deep and tuneful, with the lowest notes tight and distinctly defined.

I'm a big fan of Al Jarreau, and next I chose to listen to bassist and singer Chris Walker's version of 'We're in This Love Together' from his 2019 tribute album to the great man. Walker's voice was clear, focused, and full of emotion, whilst his bass line was deep, weighty, and syncopated. Gerald Albright's saxophone had bite and presence, while remaining smooth and sensuous, and the track had a rhythmic bounce and drive that was compelling.

Going for some simpler recordings, the Umami Black impressed on Stephen Fearing's *The Secret of Climbing* album. The Black perfectly voiced his gorgeous Manzer Cowpoke acoustic guitar and conveyed the nuances and subtle twists and turns that make his vocals and guitar play a delight. And still on a simple recording, I played a few tracks from keyboard ace Bob James's album *Just Us* with sax player Dave Koz. This features just the two of them recorded on two mics in James's home, and the Black conveyed the voice of both instruments and how they were played, as well as the naturalness and purity of this beautiful recording.

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» Next, I wanted to hear what it would make of the track 'Night and Day' from Jon Allen's wonderful *Deep River* album. The Umami Black captured his guitar with presence, body and inner detail. At the same time, his vocals were open and articulate, conveying his range and power without ever sounding harsh or strident. That really impressed me as some hi-fi components can make it edgy and glaring.

I also compared the Umami Black to a somewhat cheaper rival from a top brand. The team at the excellent Signals dealership in Trimley St Mary kindly supplied a Linn Sondek LP12 and two Ekos SE arms to assist with this. Suffice to say, the Umami Black outperformed its rival with better dynamics, less coloration, and greater musical integrity, leaving me with no doubt about its value for money.

Beguiling

It sounds a bit poetic, but I found the Hana Umami Black utterly captivating. It is detailed, musical, and capable of subtlety and dynamics in equal measure. It revealed new nuances on many of my favourite albums, giving me fresh insights into the music. It possesses a power and momentum that made the drum kit burst into life and bass lines really groove. It achieved all of this while never sounding harsh or forced, and took everything I played at it in its stride. Its sound was clean, crisp, and controlled on any material, and I recommend it most enthusiastically. +

Technical specifications

Type: Low output moving coil with OKD generator
Body material: Duralumin (A7075) with thermoset Urushi lacquer finish
Cantilever material: Diamond
Stylus: Microline nude diamond
Armature material: Permalloy, 78% carbon-infused nickel-iron
Magnet: Neodymium-iron-boron
Coils: 4N high-purity copper
Coil impedance: 5 ohms
Output voltage: 0.3mV
Load impedance: 50 ohms or higher
Frequency response: 15Hz to 50kHz
Output balance: 0.5dB/1kHz
Channel separation: 30dB/1kHz
Tracking force: 2.0g
Cartridge weight: 11.3g
Price: £8,500, €10,000, \$11,500

Manufacturer Excel Sound Corporation

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