

HANA EH AND SL MOVING COIL CARTRIDGES

£389 (EH) £599 (SL) www.airaudio.co.uk

These Hana cartridges couple high performance with value for money, meaning there's very little for **John Pickford** not to like

When I was asked to test these two cartridges, my ears pricked up, as I've been hearing great things about both their performance and value for money. Hana cartridges are produced by Excel Sound Corporation, a Tokyo-based manufacturer specialising in handmade Moving Coil (MC) cartridges. The company has been supplying OEM cartridges for half a century (though for which brands remains a closely guarded secret) and now offers a range of low- and high-output cartridges.

On test here are the EH, a high-output cartridge with a Synthetic Elliptical Diamond stylus and the SL, a low-output cartridge with a Nude Diamond Shibata stylus; the E and S ranges comprise low- and high-output models, featuring a rigid aluminium cantilever and a composite low-resonance plastic body.

The beauty of high-output MC cartridges is they can be used with a regular Moving Magnet (MM) phono input, the type found on most reasonably priced amplifiers, and also turntables with an on-board phono stage. Most MCs, however, are low-output designs, requiring more specialist phono amplification to boost the minuscule output to work with regular (MM) phono stages.

Audiophiles can be a bit snuffy about low-cost, high-output MCs, claiming they offer no real sonic improvements over a similarly priced MM design. Indeed, my old high-output Denon DL110 MC was comprehensively out-performed by the Goldring G1042 MM that replaced it.

A HALO OF AIR

With that in mind, I attach the Hana-EH to my Michell TecnoArm, feeding an Icon Audio valve MM phono amplifier. Following several hours' break-in time, I listen to a varied selection of familiar material, ranging from acoustic jazz

quartets to densely multi-tracked rock productions. The EH has no problem tracking any of the records played, nor are there any issues with phono amp compatibility or extraneous noise.

John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* (Impulse 1965) sounds wonderfully open, rhythmically engaging and tonally quite even. The balance is on the warm side, adding richness to double bass, while an absence of ultimate top-end sparkle merely hints at its budget MC status. Radiohead's *OK Computer* (Parlophone 1997) can sound cluttered and confused reproduced with a poor cartridge, however the EH maintains good order throughout, though a slight lack of low-end grip produces mild bass overhang on bottom-heavy tracks such as *Karma Police*.

Moving on to the SL, with output boosted by a step-up transformer, the same tracks reveal more filigree detail and presence. Coltrane's saxophone is raspier and conveys more emotion, while

the overall presentation is much livelier and more finely etched. The low-end of *Karma Police* is still a little loose, however *Paranoid Android* sounds much more open, with extended high frequencies adding a halo of air. Stereo imaging is also improved, though soundstaging from either cartridge is not as cavernous as many higher-end (and higher-priced) cartridges.

Both Hana cartridges perform incredibly well at their price points, with the EH easily out-performing the more expensive G1042 MM.

The SL, while not as crisp or vivid as my tweaked Benz Micro, sounds more musical and less clinical than my Ortofon Rondo Bronze.

These new Hana cartridges are highly impressive. The £599 SL can hold its own against most cartridges priced around the £1,000 mark, while the £389 EH is an audiophile bargain and a great introduction to MC reproduction. ●

VERDICT

PROS	CONS
HIGH PERFORMANCE/ PRICE RATIO	NOTHING AT THE PRICE
DETAIL RETRIEVAL	
MUSICALLY FLUID SOUND	
PHONO STAGE FRIENDLY (HIGH- OUTPUT MODELS)	

SCORE
30/33¹/₃

The Hana EH and SL phono cartridges both hold their own against higher-priced competitors

