

Hana 'Umami Red' Moving Coil Cartridge REVIEW

Written by Andrew Baker on September 3, 2021

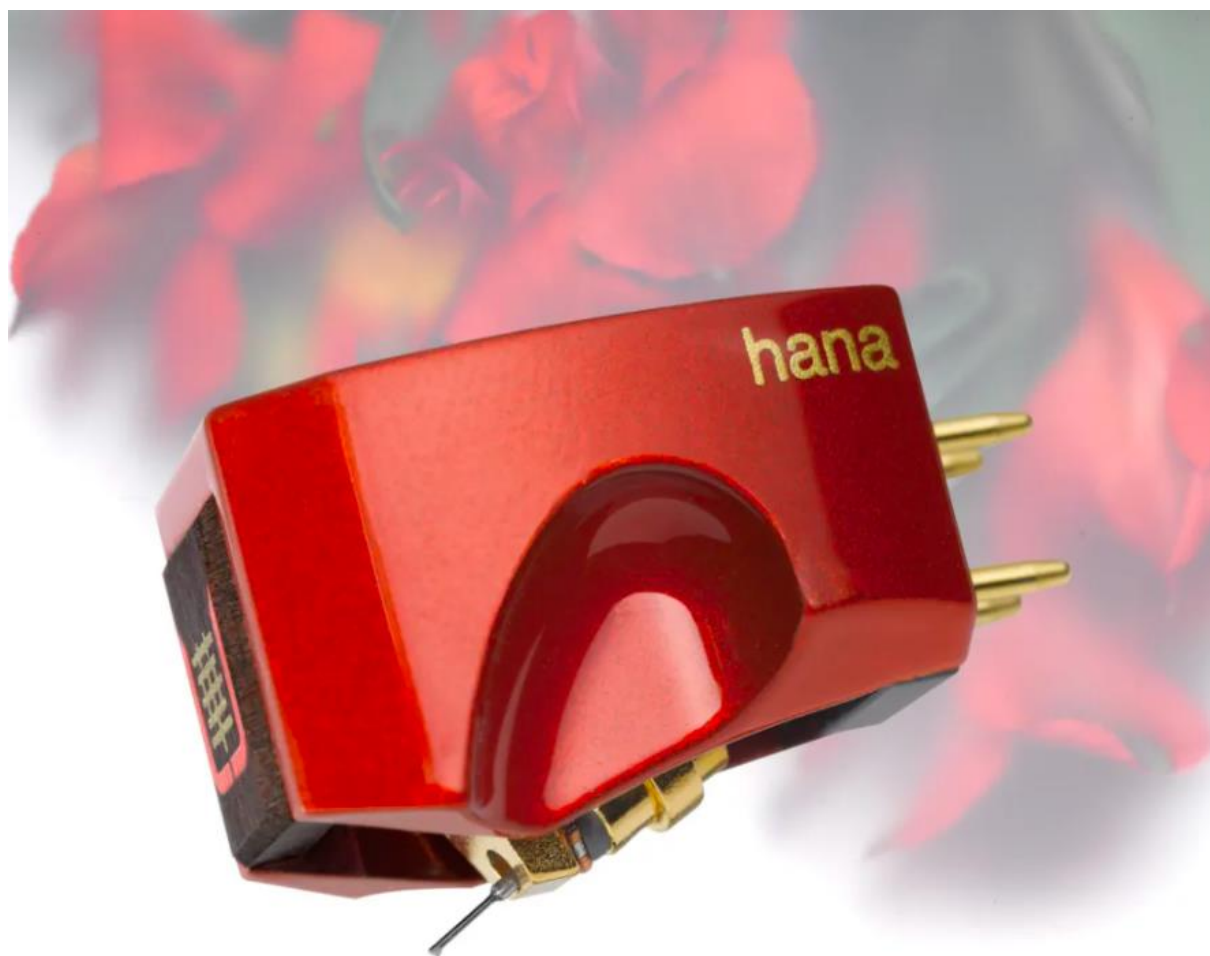
Summary

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ANDREW BAKER discovers the incredible extra flavours revealed by umami – a Hana Umami Red cartridge, that is.

\$6300





Listening to Hana's former flagship ML cartridge, I believed I had found a legitimate rival to my beloved EMT TSD15 N. Not that it's better necessarily, but I reckon the two are definitely on par and with enough of a different sound flavour to justify owning both. And at around eighteen hundred bucks, it's a genuine bargain. I also believed I was fine for cartridges for the time being – until, that is, I got to hear Hana's newest flagship, the Umami Red.

The brand Hana is made in Japan by Excel Sound who had previously been making cartridges for other brands for many years. So naturally, it figures they should know a thing or two about cartridge design – a fact previous Hana models have already shown.

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The Umami Red is a low output moving coil with a nude micro-line diamond stylus affixed to a boron cantilever. The high-purity copper coil is wound by hand and cryogenically treated. This is housed, semi-exposed, in a body made from Duralumin, which I believe is an aircraft-grade aluminium alloy of German origin. The body is meticulously layered with Urushi lacquer, starting with black and working up to the stunning red colour to which a clear coating is applied once the gold-lettered 'Hana' is printed. The body itself is a nicely round-edged piece of art featuring slightly indented sides that kind of look ear-shaped. According to Umami Red's designer, this isn't just aesthetic as it may actually help to reduce resonances. The handsome front and back inserts are made from ebony and the output pins are gold. It really is one of the finest looking cartridges currently on the market.

The Umami Red weighs 10.5 grams and has a recommended tracking force of exactly 2 grams. Its coil impedance is 6 Ohms and has a not-too-low output of 0.4 mV (compared to the EMT's 0.21 mV). Most moving coil phono pre-amps will work perfectly fine, though I would, as ever, recommend the use of a dedicated SUT in conjunction with a MM pre-amp if possible.

I am fortunate to not only be in possession of The Wand 14/4 turntable (on lengthy loan, thanks Simon), but also a brand new 12-inch The Wand Master arm and an EQ phono stage. The EQ is a solid-state phono pre-amp, designed and built by the late great Gary Morrison of Plinius and Pure Audio fame, specifically for Simon Brown's Wand stable. I shall be doing a full review of the EQ at a later date so I won't go too much into it here. Suffice to say that it is damn good and provides a nice contrast to the coloured tube sound I'm accustomed to.



Hana Umami Red review Mounting the Umami Red to the 12-inch Wand was super easy and I expect it will be the same with any tonearm model. The cartridge conveniently has threaded bolt holes and comes with three different length bolts (4mm, 5mm, 6mm) allowing users to choose depending on the thickness of their headshell. Remember not to overtighten; just give the bolts a wee nip up with the supplied Allen key. A plastic stylus guard is thoughtfully provided (take note, EMT) and this covers the entire lower portion of the cartridge, giving maximum protection and making installation less stressful. I strongly suggest ensuring this doesn't get lost.

I used the aforementioned EQ phono stage, along with my vintage-tubed EAR 834P pre-amp and my Auditorium 23 Step Up Transformer (SUT). I compared the Umami Red to my EMT cartridge (which I think is/was around 2.5 to 3K NZD, being the entry-level model), along with the Hana ML and EL cartridges.

“There is a kind of living presence emanating into the room that almost defies the usual audiophile descriptions.”

To help set the scene, the EMT TSD15 N – which is a full nude cartridge – has a lovely bold, full-bodied sound. When I listen to it, I think of image placement, wide soundstage, great dynamics and slam and good portrayal of timbre and detail. The Hana ML gives all that, more or less, but with a more sparkly treble and a deeper, somewhat more insightful bottom end. I think of the EMT as being almost business-like (in a good way) and Hana cartridges as having a certain beguiling magic.

Listening to the Umami Red, the experience was similar to the above though on a greatly expanded scale. Yet that wasn't the most striking factor, as such. The recurring theme with this cartridge was presence. I tend to liken it to my all-too few and brief experiences listening to Shindo amplification, where there is a kind of living presence emanating into the room that almost defies the usual audiophile descriptions. That being said, the following is my experience report (a.k.a. review), full of the usual audiophile descriptions.



Sound Quality

Listening to the Umami Red was like having a full-scale three-dimensional replica of a recording projected into my room. A life-sized aural diorama, if you will. Instruments and performers 'appeared' in front of the speakers with a holographic kind of presence and this effect was heightened by the replication of natural timbre and textures. The chemistry between musicians seemed eerily palpable. There was an enhanced sense of the interaction between the instruments and the resulting minutest of details as well as giving the ability to isolate and discern exact image placement. Micro-dynamic interpretation was some of the best I have heard – somehow edges of notes were enhanced, further adding to the definition and realism. The way a guitar, for instance, popped out of the mix in high definition with what I can only describe as having highly defined edges was really quite incredible. And the thing is, everything popped out in a similar way.

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The Umami proved to have a smooth, flowing nature while still having the ability to be punchy and snappy. Nothing across the frequency range sounded forced or unnatural. It does not appear as in-your-face as the EMT. Rather, it beckons you to sit down and invest quality time during which its full potential will be discovered. Not to say it won't instantly impress the casual observer, because it most certainly will, but all will be revealed to those willing to really give it their full attention.

On Cowboy Junkies' Whites Off Earth Now!! (1986, Latent Recordings) guitar notes appeared to lift up to the ceiling or down to the floor, almost startling in their clarity. Singer Margo Timmins was placed dead centre, amazingly present, her voice relayed with intense clarity and nuance – a glorious sonic illusion. On their cover of Bruce Springsteen's 'State Trooper', bass player Alan Anton's fingers squeaking as they slide up and down the fretboard were amazingly clear. With the EMT it can be heard but without so much clarity and with the Hana EL, it's present but somewhat obscured. This is a minor detail, but it's interesting how different it can be with different playback equipment. And it's amazing how such a small detail, when reproduced to such a degree, can evoke the feeling of actual human intent or being, rather than merely being a sound emanating from the surface of a spinning plastic disc. Overall, I liked how the four individuals on the recording could be homed in on, giving me a sense of space, presence and even purpose. And this without affecting the absolute harmony of the performance as a whole.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=deuQu5Zq1Mc>

Proving it could also handle big dynamic changes, the Umami Red remained in absolute control of Black Sabbath's 'War Pigs' (from Paranoid, 1970, Vertigo). By keeping images separate and defined, there was no confusion or any sense of being overwhelmed. Even at the horrifyingly high-volume levels I stubbornly put myself through when listening to this album, I felt no deathly anxiety or fatigue. Bass pounded the room but it was a detailed, well-defined and controlled pounding. The drumming was fast and exhilarating but again, the Umami had total control – the different parts and their related tones of the drum kit were easily distinguishable. At no point did the treble become unbearable, even at Ozzy's highest vocal wailings or the sharpest of electric guitar notes.

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Lesser cartridges (and I mean that in the nicest possible way), such as my Nagaoka MP-110 or the Hana EL, tend to lose control a bit; at higher volumes (and who doesn't like to turn Black Sabbath up to 10), bass can get a bit loose and unfocused and the treble, in particular, can become fatiguing. Even with the EMT, I sometimes fear the speaker drivers are going to flap their way out of the cabinets. In fact, when I switched back to the EMT, there was more bass thud and seemingly more fullness to the overall sound, but the Umami sounded even less muddled, more in control, especially with macro-dynamics (those big dynamic shifts from quiet to loud) and images were better defined and more in the room.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQUXuQ6Zd9w>

John Tejada's underrated wonky but melodic electronic/minimalist techno LP *Daydreams In Cold Weather* (2002, Plug Research) instantly came alive in my room. The extent of colourful textures and layers of electronic beats, blips and soundscapes was truly impressive. There was good sub-bass extension and detail which didn't overshadow the rest of the sonic presentation. Layers and individual lines of sound filled the space in front of me and I could easily latch on to a particular sound or effect. The Umami captured the groove and atmosphere with great ease. Also of note is the fact that there are several points on all four sides where my other cartridges invariably get stuck (it's an old copy, possibly previously owned by a DJ). But the Umami Red breezed through completely unhindered. Indeed, surface noise was barely noticeable on any of my records. Even my scratchy old original pressing of The Dave Brubeck Quartet's *Time Out* (1959, Columbia) sounded far less noisy than I've ever heard it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waHuVllwR70>

Sleep's heavy blues-riffing, chugging-bass beast 'Dragonaut' from their *Holy Mountain* LP (1992, Earache Records) was another track the Umami breezed through unfazed, easily going from loud to quiet and vice versa. It pulled the track ever so slightly from its sludgy production while maintaining that gloriously heavy stoner groove. It was hard to ignore the flash of exhilaration in my stomach as the rhythm section kicked in. Flipping the coin, Sarah Vaughn (With Clifford Brown And Others, 1955, EmArcy Records) accompanied, in an almost understated fashion, by piano, bass and drums, was pure ear candy. Those micro-dynamics again serving to highlight the minutest of detail and emotion, the focus being on that voice and even the slightest nuance and inflection.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMIS2BaDilY>

On Cymande's self-titled first record (1972, Janus Records), despite there being quite a lot going on in terms of instruments, timbre and dynamics, the whole thing sounded perfectly organised and funky. On 'Rickshaw' I enjoyed the spooky prominence of what I assume to be a guiro (that raspy, croaky wooden instrument), along with tambourines and other background percussion. Different images were clearly defined and placed to the point where it seemed there had to be more than just the two speakers in the room, each one representing a different individual musician and instrument. The Umami conveyed the energy and punch of the track, and, just as I had by now come to expect, the emotion and intent. Time and again I found myself fully immersed in the music, the Umami providing so many "wow" moments.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6R09oQmmlk>

Overall, the EMT has a coarser guitar sound, more thud in the bottom end and a solid, muscular signature. And it is speedy, rhythmic and thrilling. The Hana EL is flatter sounding in terms of projecting out of the speakers and has comparatively less detail and timbre capabilities. It images well but it sounds almost blurry in comparison. Though believe me, it is an outstanding cartridge for the money and belies its price point considerably.

“It is alive with what we audiophiles like to call tonal colour, resulting in a rich listening experience without sounding clinical.”

To me, the Hana ML is a lit-up alternative to the EMT. It really sparkles in the treble and has lovely bass extension and definition, while the midrange glows with texture and tone. The Umami on the other hand has better resolving capabilities, better imaging – in terms of definition as well as placement and the sense of space therein – and incredibly realistic timbre reproduction. It is alive with what we audiophiles like to call tonal colour, resulting in a rich listening experience without sounding clinical. It too is fast and rhythmic but seems more effortless and refined in its delivery. Images are uncannily recreated in high resolution, resulting in a highly enjoyable – and believable – sonic illusion.



Conclusion

The price and performance of the Umami Red puts it up there in the big league, competing with higher-end offerings from the likes of Koetsu, Benz and Dynavector – and of course, EMT – to name just a few. Though it is still comparably cheaper, it’s nonetheless quite an investment. If you have a system capable of supporting it, however, it’s money well spent and I really think it competes admirably with many much pricier models. For some it may seem crazy – or completely out of the question – to spend that amount on a cartridge but for those wishing to really enhance their music listening experience, taking it to a whole new level, the Umami Red is well worth considering.