AUDIO FILE

Low-output moving-coil cartridge
Made by: Excel Sound Co., Ltd, Yokohama, Japan
Supplied by: Air Audio Services Ltd, Oxfordshire
Telephone: 01491 629 629
Web: www.excelsound.jp; www.airaudio.co.uk
Price: £7995

hi-fi news YEARBOOK 26 OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Hana Umami Black



Previously, the four distinct cartridge ranges from Japan's Hana, all moving-coil-only and topped by the Umami series, had options covering a price range of £419 to £3399. But the selection is now crowned by a no-compromise flagship, the £7995 Umami Black. Described as chief designer Masao Okada-san's 'masterpiece', it follows the £3399 Umami Red [*HFN* Dec '20] and the more affordable £2149 Blue, but claims several key innovations.

The stylus tip and cantilever are not a single-piece design, *à la* DS Audio [*HFN* Oct '23], but the latter is now solid diamond, versus the boron types of the Umami Red and Blue. The 'Microline' nude diamond stylus, with 0.2mm² profile, is bonded into a laser-cut hole. This is shared with both the Red and Blue models, but also upgraded here is the Black's main armature, which is fashioned into a 2mm² hybrid carbon permalloy square consisting of 78% carbon-infused nickel-iron. By comparison, the Red and Blue MCs use simpler armatures made from an unadulterated permalloy.

'Hana's pick-up latched onto Daft Punk's disco-throwback rhythms'

The main generator has also been reworked for the Umami Black. Christened 'OKD' by Hana, it features an integrated pole-piece and rear yoke that works in conjunction with a new U-shaped front yoke. Hana claims the open-ended front yoke helps maintain a more uniform magnetic flux around the 4N-purity copper wire coils, reducing saturation in the magnetic circuit. Meanwhile, the overall generator set-up is designed to have a compact and rigid structure, with the intention of minimising magnetic power loss and suppressing unwanted mechanical vibrations. All metal elements of the Black's OKD generator, including the gold-plated pins, are cryogenically treated.

BLACK MAGIC

Hana recommends a tracking weight of 2g plus a minimum load impedance of 50ohm. The cartridge sounded best loaded at 100ohm, though – the 'rule of ten' value of 50ohm (it claims a 5ohm source impedance) robbing it of some sparkle while slightly flattening the depth perspective.

Once setup, the clear, open and dynamic performance of the Umami Black seemed to deliver on the promise of its diamond cantilever. The sound was detailed, forthright and ebullient, missing absolutely nothing within the mix of any type of music. The cymbals on Nirvana's 'Something In The Way' [*Nevermind*; Universal] have rarely sounded as crisp and precisely delineated, Kurt Cobain's vocal, backed by cello, was locked centre-stage, and the guitar accompaniment was rich with the sound of pick on string.

Just as alluring were Laufey's vocals on *A Matter Of Time* [Vingolf Recordings]. The songs of this Icelandic/Chinese chanteuse are typically mesmeric, thanks to her distinctive singing style, but with the Umami Black in charge her performance on 'Lover Girl' gained an almost eerie presence.

A combination of crisp high frequencies and fine tracking ability allows Hana's flagship to capture the essence of an instrument. The harpsichords in the 'Allegro' of Bach's Concerto in C Minor [Nonesuch] were dynamic and natural sounding, the interplay between them fully on show. The string accompaniment balanced the performance, providing not just weightier, more sinewy tones, but also depth to the soundstage.

But can this master of the gentle and sophisticated also let its hair down? Oh yes – from the first bars of Daft Punk's 'Give Life Back To Music' [*Random Access Memories*; Columbia], the Umami Black latched onto the disco-throwback rhythm. The clarity and openness that had worked wonders with the Bach piece was now contributing to a sense of relentless groove and flow, alongside deep and solid bass.

ABOVE: The 'Auricle' body is fashioned from an Urushi lacquer-coated duralumin, with black zirconia inlay, and includes two M2.6 threaded inserts for locking tight into a headshell. The diamond cantilever is fitted with the same 'Microline' nude stylus as the Umami Red and Blue models

VERDICT

A fitting flagship for Hana's range of MCs, the Umami Black leverages its meticulous engineering into an engaging, refined performance. Put simply – it's magnificent.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-Coil / 11.3g
Recommended tracking force	20mN (19-21mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	288µV / 0.5dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	12cu / 13cu
Vertical tracking angle	25 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	65µm / 70µm
L/R Distortion (–8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	1.0-8.6% / 0.55-5.9%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	–0.95 to +4.1dB / –0.7 to +7.4dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	35dB / 24dB

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