



## Hana SH and SL

**H**ana is a relatively new name on the phono cartridge scene, although the company that builds them isn't.

Tokyo-based Excel Sound Corporation has been producing OE phono cartridges for more than five decades, and even the mass-market, low-cost carts it's been supplying under its own name have an established reputation for quality and value.

The Japanese symbol 'hana' means 'brilliant and gorgeous', providing some indication of what to expect from the Hana brand's products. Its cartridge range comprises an all-moving coil (MC) line-up.

There are four models – two with elliptical styli, and offered in high-output and low output versions dubbed EH and EL respectively; and two with nude Shibata styli, again with a choice of high output or low output, and designated SH and SL.

Externally, the shape and dimensions are identical across all four, with the geometrically shaped plastic enclosures finished in green for the 'E' models, while the higher-spec, dearer 'S' versions have black housings.

Additional features common to all four Hana carts are cross-shaped armatures, light, stiff aluminium cantilevers, and gold-plated terminal pins.

Under scrutiny here are the Hana SH and SL. The only way to tell the two apart is the designation on the cartridge body – the rest appears absolutely identical. However, the electrical differences are significant: the SH features a 2 mV output (fairly low by high-output standards), and requires a 47 kOhm load.

By comparison, the SL only musters a 0,5 mV output and requires an impedance loading of at least 400 ohms, and preferably slightly more. Frequency response, weight

and recommended tracking force are identical, however.

Installation is relatively simple. Unlike many current cartridges, which have threaded inserts that accept standard mounting screws, the Hanas are fastened to the headshell using a screw and nut combination, which can be a bit fiddly.

Also, alignment is made a little fussier by the fact that the cartridge sides are not perpendicular, although the flat front end does help in this regard.

The two Hanas were mounted in identical SME head shells, which made it easy to swap between the two, using the SME 309 tone-arm on my Avid Diva II SP turntable. A Sutherland 20/20 phono stage provided a consistent interface between the deck and a Naim Uniti2. Vivid Audio V1.5 loudspeakers completed the review system.

Each cartridge underwent about 20 hours of running in before any critical listening





VITAL STATS

Hana SH

Type..... High-output moving coil  
 Stylus type..... Shibata nude diamond  
 Output.....2,0 mV @ 1 kHz  
 Frequency response .... 15 Hz – 32 kHz  
 Channel separation ..... 28 dB (1 kHz)  
 Internal impedance ..... 130 ohms  
 Recommended load.....47 kOhms  
 Recommended tracking force .... 2,0 g  
 Weight..... 5 g

Hana SL

Type..... Low-output moving coil  
 Stylus type..... Shibata nude diamond  
 Output.....0,5 mV @ 1 kHz  
 Frequency response .... 15 Hz – 32 kHz  
 Channel separation ..... 28 dB (1 kHz)  
 Internal impedance .....30 ohms  
 Recommended load..... >400 kOhms  
 Recommended tracking force .... 2,0 g  
 Weight..... 5 g

Verdict

Two moving coil cartridges, one high-output, one low-output, that both punch well above their weight. Expressive sonics allow the music to come alive with a strong emotive intensity. SL version achieves a touch more refinement and detail, but SH answers with slightly more verve and vigour. Excellent value.

Price

SL: ..... R7 678  
 SH:..... R7 678

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OUR RATING: 80/100



commenced, although it has to be said that they both sounded pretty good straight out of the box. I'd say they reached optimum performance at about 30 hours or so.

Diana Krall may be a bit of a hackneyed choice from an audiophile perspective, but her tribute to the Nat King Cole Trio – *All For You* (Verve/ORG Double LP) – is one of those records that still sounds fresh and charming, even after numerous listens.

On 'Deed I Do', Krall's piano sounded liquid and effortless, with the subtle rhythm of Russel Malone's guitar and Paul Keller's bass providing a melodic, foot-tapping foundation. Krall's vocals were allowed free rein, soaring gracefully over the accompaniment, while the both the guitar and bass solos were reproduced with pace and finesse.

I enjoyed the way the Hana SL extracted plenty of detail without losing sight of the overall musical picture, ensuring a cohesive and engaging musical performance. The piano had just the right timbre and texture, the bass was projected with ample urge and impetus, and Mallone's guitar solo sounded burnished and eloquent.

Surface noise was noticeable only by its absence, and the overall staging was generous and accessible, while accurately capturing the chemistry between the three performers.

Moving to the SH version, using exactly the same set-up, the most notable difference was a stronger sense of impetus and energy. I'd adjusted the gain to better suit the higher output of the SH, but the sound was

still somewhat more athletic than the SL, with greater verve and drive.

As a result, the sound was more exciting, with greater impact, while the lower registers seemed to benefit from a measure of extra substance. Back to back, this would be the sound most listeners would prefer during an initial listen.

But during a series of direct comparisons, it became clear that the SH achieved this greater sense of presence and excitement at the expense of refinement and detail. The tonal graduations were not as fine, and some of the SL's subtleties and nuances had receded.

Yes, the SH served up its musical wares with more brio and vim, and it seemed more generous in tonal terms. But the SL dug deeper into the soul of the music – it painted a more highly resolved picture of the performance, with less grain and a cleaner, smoother image.

The more time I spent with the SL, the more I preferred it – mainly because it provided the more complete, more emotive and ultimately more engaging sound image. That said, if I didn't have the SL as a counterpoint, or if my system precluded the use of a low-output MC, I would be more than happy to live with the SH's energy and zeal.

Best of all, both these Hana cartridges represent exceptional bang for the buck. You'd have to spend a lot more to get anywhere near what the SL and SH deliver in both sonic and musical terms. A case of value meeting musicality then!

Deon Schoeman