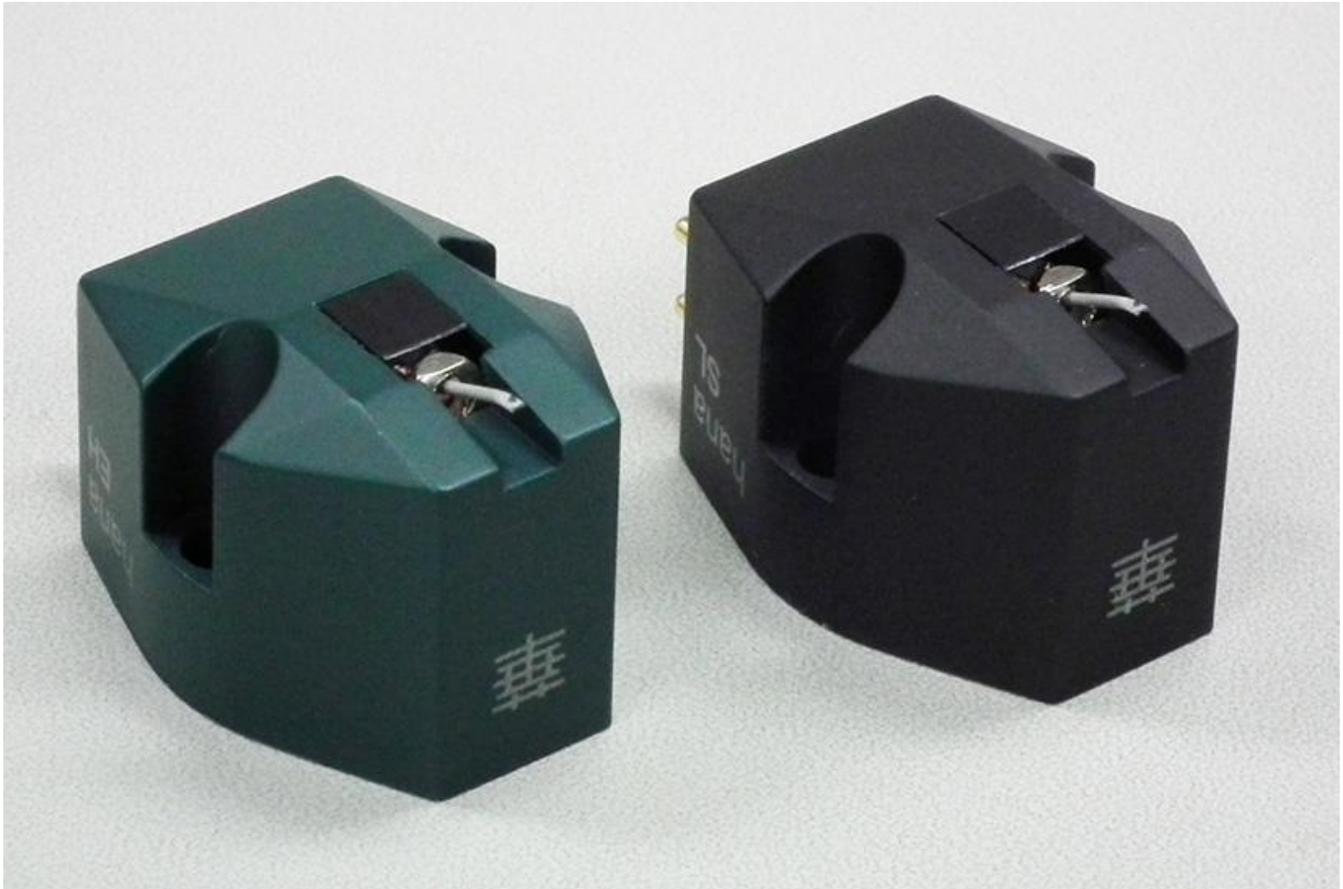


Hardware Review



Hana EH and SL

Friday, February 12, 2016 | moving coil cartridges | René van Es

The revival of vinyl has not only brought us new turntables and arms, but cartridges as well. Hana is a new name that makes four models of cartridge at very competitive prices, and they all follow the moving coil principle. I listened to an EH, a high output MC with an elliptical stylus and to the opposite the SL, a low output MC with a Shibata stylus. The other options are a high output Shibata (SH) and a low output elliptical (EL).

Hana cartridges are made by the Excel Sound Corporation, a Tokyo based company that has been producing OEM cartridges for more than 50 years. I wonder why it took so long for them to introduce products under their own brand. As mentioned the Hana series consists only of moving coil cartridges that vary in stylus type, output and colour. The high output types deliver a rather low 2mV, which is sufficient for most (but not all) MM phono stages to produce a healthy, noise free output. The low

output MCs deliver 0.5mV and need an impedance of over 400 Ohms for best results. Hana uses either a nude elliptical stylus or a Shibata shape on an aluminium cantilever.

The Hana's were mounted in an SME 5009 arm on a Transrotor Super Seven turntable. Which is an expensive player for these cartridges, but it gives them a chance to show off their capabilities in a neutral and revealing environment. The phono stage was an Octave Phono EQ.2, fully adjustable for both high and low output types on loan from the Dutch Hana distributor. For the EH I chose 50dB gain and 47 kOhms impedance. The SL needed 62dB gain for the same output with an impedance of 500 Ohms.



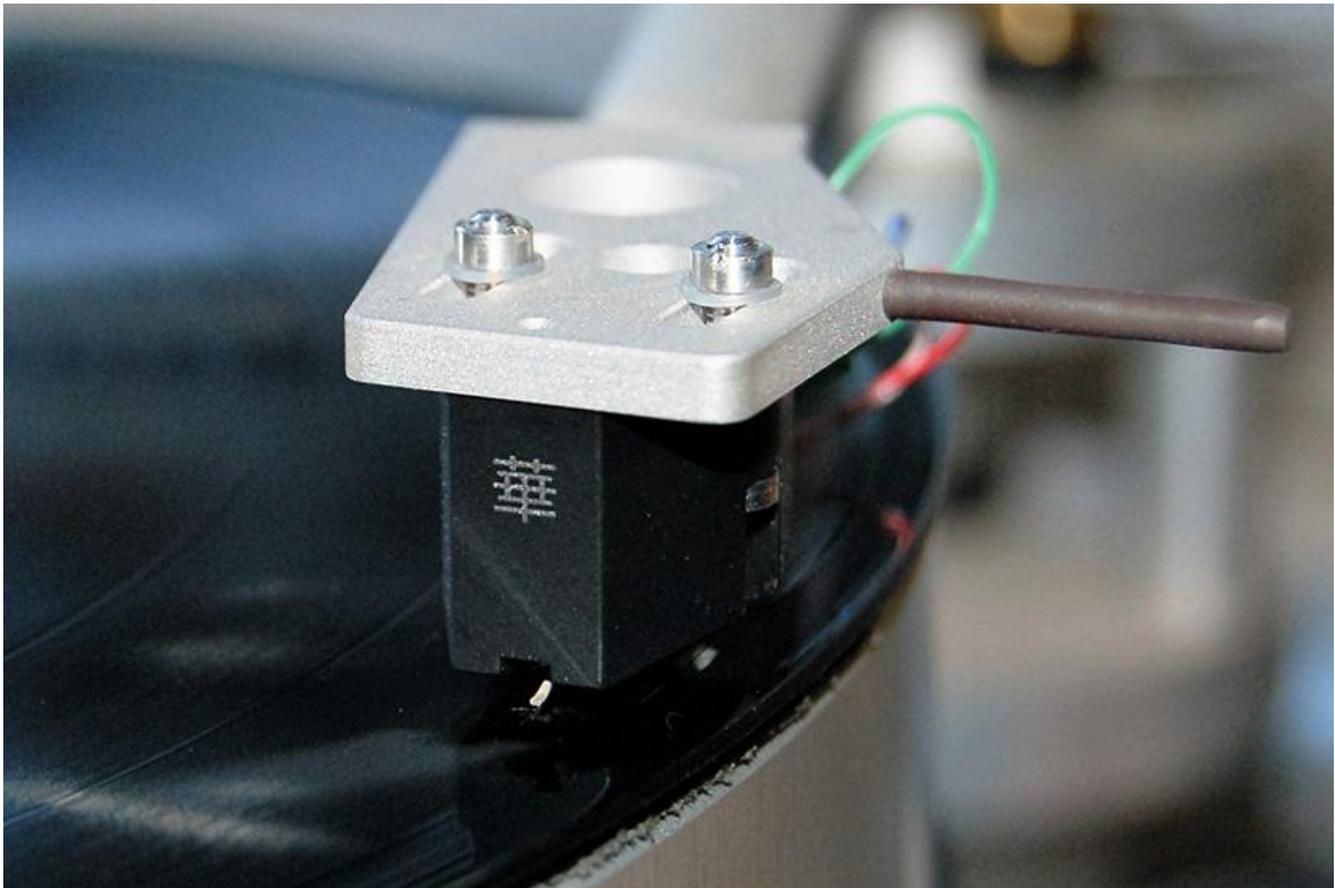
Having given the Hana cartridges a proper run-in, I tried the EH version (elliptical stylus, high output). Among general characteristics is the perfect balance between the left and right channels, with a stereo image exactly positioned between the speakers. Tracking was never a problem on any record I played, surface noise is very low, even on older LPs and the styli do not collect much dirt. The EH was a pleasure to listen to over long periods, higher notes play a little softer compared to my reference (Transfiguration Axia) and the Hana sounds warmer. The midrange has a rich sound, good definition and delivers both voices and instruments to a commensurate standard. Lower notes and deep bass are a little problematic with the elliptical stylus, there is more than enough bass but it's not very well defined. Zooming in on music fragments, I put on Stacey Kent with *The Changing Lights* and notice a streamlined stereo image between the loudspeakers with a lot of depth. Solo instruments like her husband's saxophone or a solo guitar jump forward from the stage, but not far enough to be in your face. The sound is shapely and organic with deep involvement, but a certain distance remains. With the classic *The Köln Concert* by Keith Jarrett the charming character of the Hana produces a grand piano in all its glory. Where other cartridges are sometimes too cold this delivers a big instrument in a large concert hall with slowly decaying harmonics. The hall acoustics are easily recognizable, a result that surprises me in a cartridge of this price as does the way the Hana behaves so well.

Holly Cole plays 'Be Careful, It's My Heart' with great subtlety on a rich sounding piano and her beautiful voice. It won't bring tears to my eyes in the way that more expensive cartridges might do, but the message in the music is made clear. Horns in the next track are followed by drums, both sound good, although the bass notes get a bit cluttered in the busy parts. There's too much bass for large speakers but a bookshelf model might benefit from this extra push and sound a bit bigger. The moment I listen to 'You're My Thrill' and enjoy the rich palette of sound, detail and instruments it is not easy to leave Holly behind and turn to the Dave Brubeck Quartet performing 'Take Five'. But needs must and Paul Desmond's beautiful sax opens the song and makes room for the drums of Joe Morello which sound impressive and sufficiently weighty. The higher notes could be louder to emphasize cymbals and snare drum, but I've no complaints about dynamics and/or speed. I could go on in the same sense with Sade, Amy Antin, Dire Straits, Stan Getz etcetera, all these artists had their time on the platter. The best way to leave the Hana EH is with 'Guantanamera' from the legendary Weavers concert in Carnegie Hall. It should be possible to hear three microphones, the stamping on the wooden floor and appreciate how soft and tender the female voice is to the left of the male storyteller. The Hana EH shows it all and I enjoy the way that each and every singer has their own place on the stage. When the public applauds the handclapping clearly comes from individuals, it does not blur into a noise.



A week later the more costly Hana SL (Shibata, low output) is run-in. During the run-in period I enjoyed the more open character of the SL and the reduced bass output. This extra definition is a nice boost with 'Soular Energy' from the Ray Brown Trio, where the bass plays such an important role. I can raise the volume with ease, in the meantime the snare and body of the bass remain one entity. Drums are unmistakably real, cymbals clear and the piano keeps its light tone. The stereo image stays tight between the speakers but never goes beyond them and 'Cry Me A River' goes abyss deep into the bass. The SL cartridge seems made for jazz music like this, playing it in a natural and easy way. Marika Cailly's

'Chante', an outstanding production on Meyer Records, makes the Hana SL very happy. From the moment the music starts my feet start moving up and down following the rhythm section with its finely proportioned bass, lots of guitar accents and a freestanding, fully understandable voice. The SL was much lighter in tone in the beginning than the EH, but after a lot of vinyl had passed beneath it the impression changed for the better. The SL delivers enough weight, without loss in the midrange or treble but higher notes are a bit rounder. Never judge the SL out of the box. I force myself to take Marika off the platter and move on to 'Brothers In Arms' by Dire Straits, an original on very thin vinyl. On the B-side during 'Ride Across The River' the £447 cartridge shows its limitations. I know how much detail and dynamics this track contains, how wide the stereo image can be with a very expensive cartridge. The Hana SL is limited in all three aspects, and in cost for that matter! Music stays between the speakers, not every detail is heard from Knopfler's guitar and dynamics could be more explosive. That does not mean that the Hana leaves a lot to desire, it only shows that you get what you pay for. A little better would cost a lot more money. Your wallet will decide how much you want to invest in the ultimate vinyl experience.



You need to remember that a Hana probably ends up in turntables costing between £750 and £1500, would a more expensive cartridge perform so much better in such a player? I have my doubts. 'Smooth Operator' by Sade swings and pushes the bass notes around, this is what the Hana loves to do. It's so enjoyable that I wonder why we ever started with CD, jumping from vinyl directly to streaming would have been a better idea (not for the record business! Ed). My LP is from 1984, bought on a flea market, it should sound awful but it doesn't. I play the full side of the record before coming to an end with Juliette Gréco's *Et Ses Grandes Chansons*, my vinyl reference since the day I fell in love with her voice. 'Sous Le Ciel De Paris' makes clear what I wanted to tell you all time, the sound is just right with the Hana SL. The balance between instruments, the voice, the atmosphere and the union of the instruments. It could be even better, but who cares, when sounds this entertaining and impressive.

Well armed

During the last few weeks of 2015 it was analogue time at my house, the Christmas songs could stay on the file server. Both the Hana cartridges were surprisingly good, both styli had their own strengths. That said, I assume that the output voltage of 0.5 versus 2 Volts has less to do with the final results than the stylus type. Many years ago, during the time I was helping at an audio shop on Saturdays, we had a customer with multiple arms on his deck. One for easy listening with a glass of wine in his hand, one for intense, full immersion reverie. Both Hanas would have suited him, the EH with the wine, the SL with his eyes closed. The EH is easier to enjoy, it plays without pretensions and performs well, giving that cosy feeling we all want on Christmas eve. The SL benefits from a better arm, gives you more detail and is more to the point, it reaches for the audio haute cuisine. If you play records every once in a while the elliptical stylus will be more than adequate. If you have a larger budget for turntable and arm and want more from you record collection, take the Shibata track. Your preamp/phono stage will make the choice for you between high or low output versions. Note that the low output Hana needs an impedance of 500 Ohms and no less if you want to enjoy the higher notes and full dynamics. If the vinyl revival continues I see a bright future for the new Hana brand, its excellent price to quality ratio should ensure that.

Specifications:

Model No. HANA-EH or HANA-EL

Stylus Elliptical Nude Synthetic
Cantilever Aluminium
Output level 2mv/1kHz (EH) or 0.5mv/1KHz (EL)
Output balance <2dB/1KHz
Vertical Tracking force 2g
Trackability 60µm/2g
Channel separation 22dB/1KHz
Frequency response 15-25,000Hz
Impedance 130Ω/1KHz (EH) or 30Ω/1KHz (EL)
Suggested load Impedance 47KΩ (EH) or >400Ω (EL)
Cartridge weight 5g
Body Colour Moss Green

Model No. HANA-SH or HANA-SL

Stylus Shibata Nude Diamond
Cantilever Aluminium
Output level 2mv/1kHz (SH) or 0.5mv/1KHz (SL)
Output balance<1.5dB/1KHZ
Vertical Tracking force 2g
Trackability 60µm/2g
Channel separation 25dB/1KHz
Frequency response 15-32,000Hz
Impedance 130Ω/1KHz (SH) or 30Ω/1KHz (SL)
Suggested load Impedance 47KΩ (SH) or >400Ω (SL)
Cartridge weight 5g
Body Colour Black

Manufacturer Details:

Excel Sound Corporation
www.excelound.co.jp

Distributor Details:

Air Audio Distribution
www.airaudio.co.uk