Andre Jennings

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Excel Sound Corporation Hana SL phono cartridge

$750

In a sea of $10,000-ish super-cartridges, what's a vinyl-playing audiophile with discriminating tastes to do? For that matter, what's a sub-$999-budgeted audiophile to do? The $750 Hana SL is a cartridge that sets a baseline of fine performance. Of course, there are better cartridges to be had for (much) more money: I have a few of them in my collection. Why give the Hana SL a Golden Ear? Once set up, the Hana SL has very low distortion and excellent channel separation (measured and by listening) that match—and in some cases, exceed—the premium performers. Subjectively, it is even across the frequency spectrum; it traces very well (especially the high frequencies—the bane of many cartridges), and has a nice helping of added warmth that tips it slightly away from neutral. As I mentioned in my review, the SL is the gem of the Hana lineup and can easily fit in any 'table/'arm combination that will accommodate a 0.5mV output. With the Hana SL, the user can rest assured the cartridge will support the next 'table/'arm "upgrade" and will provide a clear standard to judge if any future cartridge "upgrade" is warranted. This is performance that any more costly cartridge should equal at a bare minimum, and that some don't. (Reviewed in Issue 270)

Accuphase C-3850 preamplifier

$43,500

Accuphase's flagship preamplifier can serve as the heart of any system. Never bright and fatiguing, neither is it soft and dull. The presentation tended to stay close to the sonic groove that provides long-term listening pleasure, with enough resolution, warmth, and soul to allow full exploration of the music being presented. Having multiple inputs and configuration options, the C-3850 should be at home in most systems, while performing at a high level of satisfaction. (Reviewed in Issue 272)