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Koetsu Blue Onyx

The Koetsu legend continues with this refined jewel of a cartridge

PRICE £4,999 (boron cantilever) CONTACT Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Rd, London SW20 0TW ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.absolutesounds.com

Koetsu is an enigmatic company. Its founder, Yosiaki Sugano (1907-2002) took inspiration from the 17th century Japanese artist, Honami Koetsu (1558-1637). So, it was only natural that Sugano adopted the name of his guiding spirit when he decided to manufacture high-quality pickup cartridges in the late 1970s.

The company appears never to have promoted or advertised its products, nor produced any sales literature. The reputation of Koetsu grew by word of mouth alone.

Whether he intended it or not, Yosiaki Sugano's minimalist approach quickly earned him mythical status in hi-fi circles. He used to joke that his 'death' had been erroneously reported no less than three times! It became part of the Sugano legend; the quiet infinitely patient little old man, steeped in ancient wisdom, slowly and painstakingly creating magical-sounding pickup cartridges by hand – and raising himself from the dead.

No doubt the truth was somewhat less fanciful. But, sadly in 2002, the reports of his death were not so greatly exaggerated. His son, Fumihiko Sugano has taken up the Koetsu mantle, having spent most of the 1990s learning the craft from his father.

The higher priced Koetsu cartridges are a delight to behold, with bodies made from exotic materials – from the lacquered Urushi finish, to the use of natural Gemstones including Jade and Onyx. Each one is packaged in a simple but beautifully made wooden box that has the sweet, pungent odour of sandalwood.

While many of the Koetsu pickups use 99.9999 purity copper wire for their coil windings with a special silver cladding that consists of a silver sheath slowly drawn over the copper conductor, the Blue Onyx is said to be platinum coiled. No details were available – presumably the copper is platinum sheathed? The magnetic assembly employs samarium cobalt for its concentrated power.

The cantilever is made from boron, but perfectionists with deep pockets can specify an optional one-piece cantilever and tip fashioned from a single solid piece of diamond. This avoids the interface between stylus tip and cantilever, but costs an extra £2,200 or so.

The body is made from a gorgeous powder blue onyx, and each cartridge has a unique and beautiful appearance – like a piece of exotic jewellery. It's a big cartridge, incidentally (23mm long and 14mm deep) and also quite heavy at 14.8g. You'll need a good tonearm

with an extra-heavy counter weight. Optimum playing weight falls between 1.8g to 2g. At 1.8g there's slightly greater transparency and fine detail, but our preference was for 2g, which reduces surface ticks and improves tracking slightly.

From experience, these pickups have an extraordinarily long working life. Given clean LPs, there's very little tip wear, even with extensive use. Koetsu also provides a retipping service for its cartridges, so the cartridge could stay in your system for decades, potentially.

The Blue Onyx has a lower output than some Koetsu cartridges – around 0.2mV to be precise. This results in a more subtle, less forwardly balanced and assertive musical presentation than higher output Koetsus.

SOUND QUALITY

Listening to the Blue Onyx is at once thrilling and sobering. The thrill comes from hearing your LPs sound better than you ever thought possible. The sobering part comes when you realise just how far most digital forms of audio still have to go in terms of realism and relaxed naturalness. Such is the price of perfection.

“It is an open and transparent window on the music, sounding sweet and beguiling one moment, tactile and crisp the next.”

The Blue Onyx has a beautifully refined, almost velvety smoothness. It's detailed and dynamic, yet wonderfully poised and relaxed sounding, with a musical delivery that's effortless and natural. The music just seems to 'happen' between the speakers. Voices and instruments materialise without effort or strain, sounding realistically integrated and 'right' in terms of tonal balance and timbre.

Tonally, it's a curious mix of opposites; mellow warmth and silky smoothness, allied to immediacy and crisp attack. The sound is vivid, yet natural and unexaggerated, with a full and solid bottom end, liquid midband and brilliant highs. It's pin-point sharp on transient detail, yet velvety smooth and totally homogenous.

Musically, the Blue Onyx is engaging and positive-sounding, yet also relaxed and refined. This mix of qualities is evident on all sorts of music, particularly human voice. Whether it's an unaccompanied solo singer, massed choral forces, or the lead vocals in a rock or pop track, the Blue Onyx recreates a natural, believable and articulate result.

Clarity is superb. The way this cartridge allows individual vocal lines, or subtle instrumental passages to cut through, must be heard to be appreciated. The Blue Onyx is good at revealing subtleties of aural space – the natural hall ambience behind individual voices or instruments – so that each retains more of its identity and separation.

By virtue of its refinement and naturalness, the Blue Onyx is easy to listen to. Because your brain has less 'processing' to do, it's better able to take in the entire picture and make sense of the whole. Although refinement is one of the Blue Onyx's glories, it's not something false that's grafted on to each recording regardless. A curious by-product of all this is that, somehow, you're given more time to listen – more time to explore the music and the separate individual strands that go to make up the whole. The more you listen, the more you realise that the pickup faithfully reflects the individual qualities of each recording. It really is an open and transparent window on the music, sounding sweet and beguiling one moment, tactile and crisp the next – often during the same track.

Stereo soundstaging is wide and (on the right LP) vivid and holographic. As previously indicated, the music 'materialises' between the loudspeakers. It kind of hangs in free space between and around the enclosures, almost as though the speakers themselves no longer exist.

Best of all, the Blue Onyx doesn't need special 'audiophile' LPs to create the sort of results outlined. Often, the magic's there on quite ordinary pressings. The best LPs sound great, but 'average' LPs gain a new lease of life, too. Surface noise is very low, and the cartridge tracks cleanly and securely given a good tonearm and turntable.

A magnificent cartridge, then – one of the finest money can buy. When it comes to turning those squiggly grooves on your records into living breathing music, there's little better. Result? You listen to your hi-fi with rapt attention – much as you'd listen to real musicians playing live in front of you. Each Blue Onyx is made to order – the wait will be worth it, do not doubt! **HFC**

Jimmy Hughes