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the collection

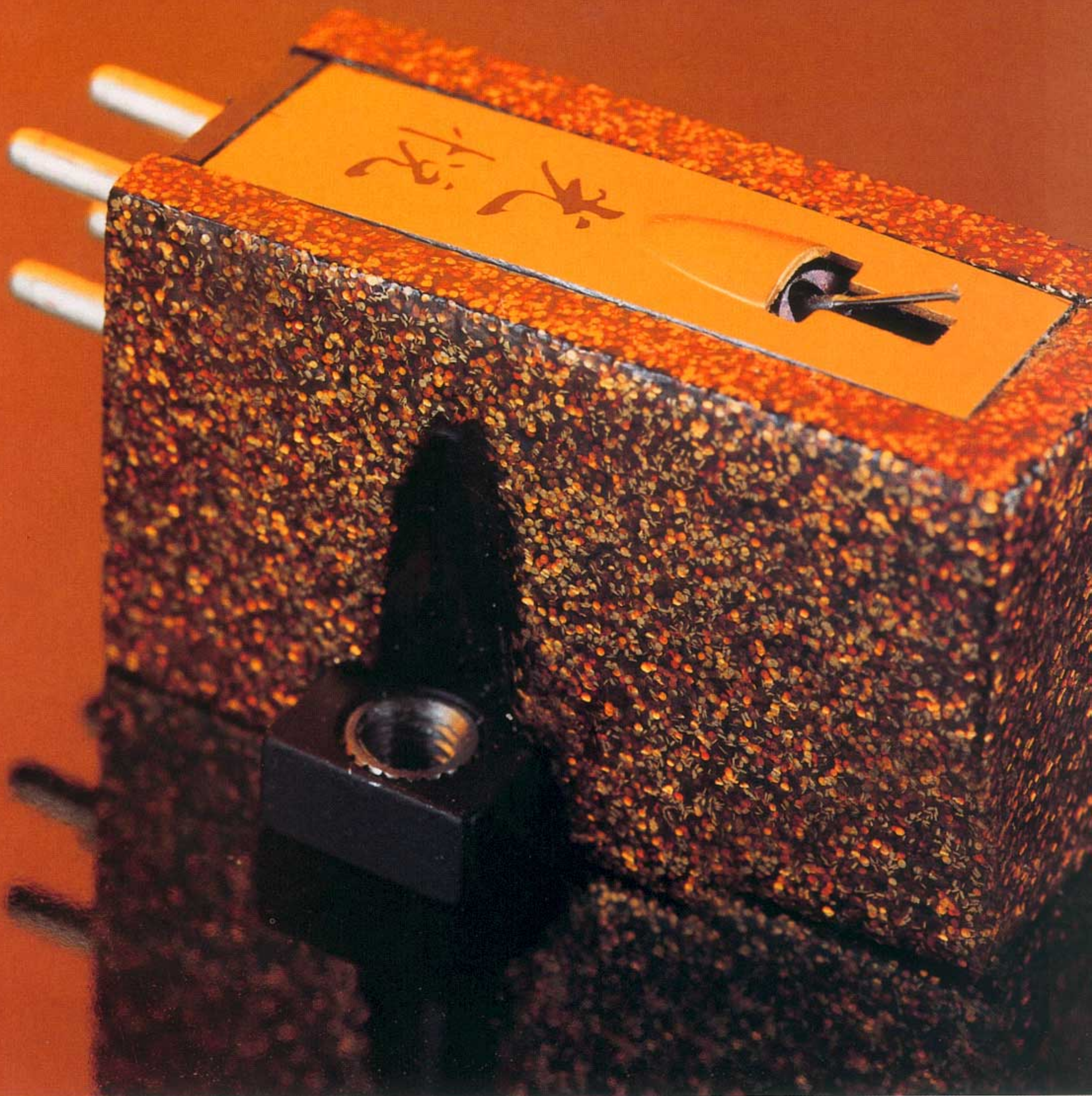
IN-DEPTH REVIEWS OF THE WORLD'S FINEST HI-FI

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THE COLLECTION 2004

£3.80





Koetsu Urushi Gold

This high-end phono cartridge has it all – breathtaking subtlety, power, dynamics and fine detail

PRICE: £2,799 CONTACT: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Rd, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.absolutesounds.com

Right from the start, Koetsu has always been an enigmatic company. Its founder, Yosiaki Sugano (1907-2002) was a remarkable man – artist, musician, swordsman and calligrapher, not to mention business executive. His great inspiration was the 17th Century artist Honami Koetsu (1558-1637). So when Sugano's thoughts turned to the manufacture of high quality pick-up cartridges in the late 1970s, he chose the name of his hero for that of his company.

To say Sugano took a low-key approach to marketing would be an understatement. So far as I know, the company has never advertised its products or produced any sales literature. The cartridges are simply yet elegantly presented in a plain wooden box. In the higher priced models, attractive exotic materials are used – from the lacquered Urushi finish, to the use of natural gemstones.

Whether by intention or not, Yosiaki Sugano achieved mythical status in hi-fi circles.

Indeed, he used to joke that his 'death' had been erroneously reported no less than three times! It became part of the Sugano legend; the image of a quiet infinitely patient little old man, steeped in ancient wisdom, slowly and painstakingly creating magical-sounding pick-up cartridges by hand.

Doubtless the truth was somewhat more prosaic. But there was something magical about the sound of a Koetsu – something that went beyond science. Of course,

The Koetsu Urushi Gold, meanwhile, still carries a premium price tag and will set you back a cool £2,799. For that you get a plain but attractive wooden box with a moving coil pick-up cartridge in it. Now it might not look like much for your hard-earned bucks., but the fact is, it can transform your entire LP collection. It's as simple as that.

SOUND QUALITY

Beautiful to look at, with flakes of real gold suspended in a rich red-lacquered body, the Koetsu Urushi Gold has some remarkable sonic qualities. The first is its extraordinary sharpness and focus. The music sounds very tactile and immediate – percussive instruments have crisp attack, and there's an impressive sense of presence. Yet at the same time, the music has a smooth, refined, relaxed quality.

Killer sharp it might be, but not at the expense of warmth, sweetness, or integration. It gives a gorgeously rich presentation, but actually it's a deceptively beguiling sort of sound – smooth and open-sounding, with a very natural tonal balance, but crisp, focused, and highly detailed.

Bass is firm and powerful, solid and deep, fluid and articulate. The midband is open and velvety, with a lovely natural delicacy. And the

Where LP betters CD is in areas like subtlety, openness and the ability to produce a powerful, strongly projected holographic sound without needing to be played loudly. There's a depth and dimensionality with the Urushi Gold that even the best CD players cannot quite match. Voices and instruments have more air and space around them, ensuring excellent clarity and detail.

It's a highly responsive and engaging cartridge, one that magically conveys the living spirit and drama of the music. Actually, this has long been a hallmark of Koetsu cartridges. And it's certainly true of the Urushi Gold. Some of the older Koetsu cartridges produced a rich luxuriant tonality; sumptuous, and warmly resonant, but not perhaps strictly accurate.

The Urushi Gold retains a certain warmth and spacious richness, yet sounds convincingly natural and unexaggerated into the bargain – neutral and very true to life. Absolute accuracy is very hard to pin down – unless you have inside knowledge of how a particular LP was recorded and mastered, it's impossible to say if the sound you hear is truly accurate.

For this reason, the term 'authentic' is perhaps more applicable. Ultimately all that matters is whether or not the music convinces and involves the listener. If the spirit of the

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treble sounds sharp and extended, yet clean and unexaggerated – not a hint of edginess.

It's like having an open window on the music – revealing and detailed, yet also flattering and kind. Surface noise is very, very low, as though the stylus tip were magically riding in the cleanest, quietest part of the groove. The net result is vivid, sharply-focused music set against a clean, quiet backdrop.

It's this ability to encompass extremes that gives the Urushi Gold its special magic. Put on a jazz trio and what impresses is the crispness of the snare drum or cymbals next to the warm resonance of the double bass and the liquid smoothness of the piano. Each instrument is allowed to be itself. That's the secret.

One of the principle attractions of CD is its reliability – you know you can listen to it secure in the knowledge that the sound won't distort or break up, or suddenly be ruined by noise. Indeed, for many, this security is more important than absolute sound quality. LP can never achieve CD's near-total reliability, but it can often get surprisingly close.

In this respect, listening to the Urushi Gold you could be forgiven for mistakenly thinking that you were listening to a CD player of exceptional quality. There's a comparable air of total unflappability about it.

music and performance is conveyed, then that's it, job done. The Urushi is exceptionally involving and totally convincing. Of course, it's vivid and tactile – like all Koetsu cartridges, its sound is properly colourful and vibrant.

But at the same time, there's no sense of exaggeration or coloration, and it sounds very pure and natural, for all it's red-blooded assertive qualities. It's the proverbial iron fist in a velvet glove – smooth and beguiling, yet full of unexpected detail and impact. It won't hold back, yet it won't bludgeon you either.

It's not that the Urushi Gold is hiding faults or smoothing over blemishes. On the contrary, it's that faults and limitations in the recording are not being exaggerated by similar faults and limitations in the cartridge. And yes, there's a bit of 'black magic' making its way into the mix too – a certain indefinable 'something'...

It's a lot of money, of course – a fabulous sum to pay for a phono cartridge. But Koetsus have an exceptionally long working life. I've personally known owners who've gotten five years' use from their Koetsu, without replacing the stylus. And that's real use, every night of the week. Once you hear the results, the price falls into perspective – it's an expensive bargain! **HFC**

Jimmy Hughes

precision engineering and the choice of the best materials was vital too. But Sugano brought something extra to the mix. Call it art, call it alchemy, it's the ability to produce results that vastly exceed than the sum of the parts.

Koetsu were almost certainly the first cartridge manufacturer to employ gemstones for the body housing – originally Onyx. This not only resulted in a beautiful appearance, it ensured the cosmetic uniqueness of each cartridge. More recently, Koetsu produced a cartridge body hand-carved from a block of solid jade – the Jade Platinum. Top model in the range is the enticingly dubbed Tiger Eye Platinum Diamond. Don't ask the price or you'll be identified as a gutter-dwelling cheapskate who clearly lacks the wherewithal for such an exclusive device.