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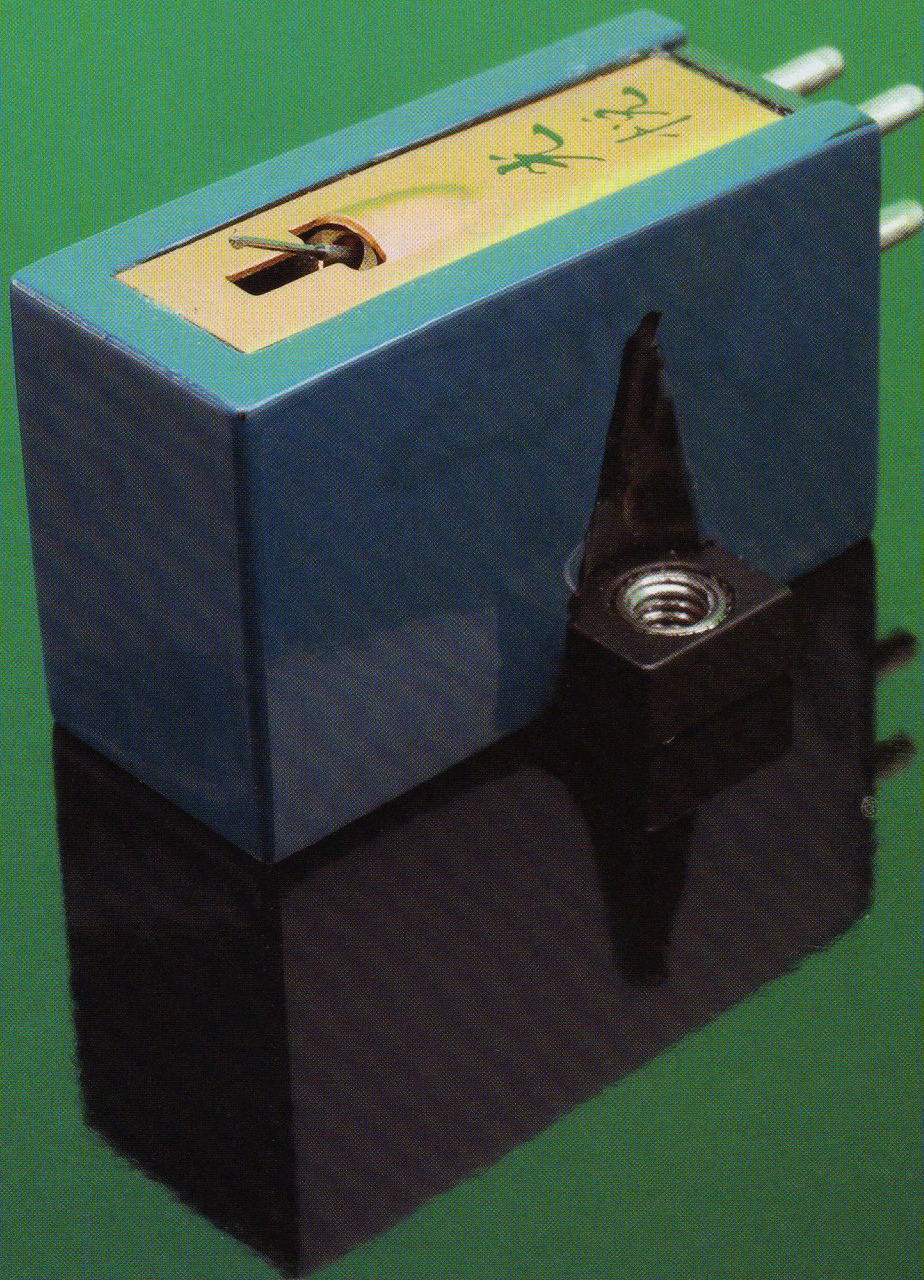


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Sonically, the Sky Blue Urushi is a beguiling mixture of opposites

# KOETSU

## SKY BLUE URUSHI

*With silver coils and an Alnico magnet this is a class act*

PRICE £2,699 CONTACT Absolute Sounds ■ 020 8971 3909 ■ www.absolutesounds.com

**K**oetsu founder, Yosiaki Sugano (1907–2002), was very much a renaissance man; artist, musician, swordsman, calligrapher, businessman and father. Inspired by the Japanese artist Honami Koetsu (1558–1637), he adopted his hero's name when he began manufacturing moving-coil pickup cartridges in the 1970s.

To describe Sugano's approach to advertising and marketing as low key hardly does it justice. He seems never to have promoted or advertised Koetsu products, nor produced any sales literature. His reputation quickly grew by word of mouth. You only had to hear a Sugano cartridge; words were superfluous after that.

Koetsu cartridges are beautiful to behold. With bodies of exotic materials – from lacquered Urushi finishes to natural gemstones such as jade and onyx – each is a minor work of art and comes in an attractive wooden box that has a sweet pungent odour.

While there are different prices and quality levels, Koetsu also offers several cartridges at identical price points. The Sky Blue Urushi is less expensive than some of its more exotic models like the Jade Platinum. Yet it exudes the qualities of subtlety and refinement and incredible fine detail that have made Koetsu world famous.

Sonically, the Sky Blue is a beguiling mixture of opposites. It has that beautifully refined integration and smoothness you expect from a Koetsu, while at the same time it is detailed and dynamic. It is wonderfully poised and relaxed, providing a musical delivery that is utterly effortless and natural.

Voices and instruments are impressively tangible, without effort or strain, sounding realistically integrated and absolutely natural in terms of tonal balance and timbre.

It is an intriguing mix of warmth and silky smoothness, allied to bright tactile immediacy and crisp attack. The presentation is vivid and sharp, yet natural and unexaggerated; transparent, with a full solid bottom end, liquid midband and brilliant highs. Transient detail is crisp and pinpoint sharp, yet there is no sense of forwardness or exaggerated brightness.

Tonally, the sound is deliciously open and natural. This ability to produce vivid, sharply focussed detail without sounding hard or over-driven is something of a Koetsu hallmark. For those with even deeper pockets, there are still more expensive Koetsu cartridges to consider. But, without a direct comparison, it is hard to imagine the Sky Blue Urushi being improved upon – it is that good.

Individual vocal and instrumental lines 'tell' with effortless ease. Clarity is superb; no matter how complex the music gets, you

seem to hear every strand. The result is music that is highly detailed yet almost disconcertingly relaxed. Subtle tone colours and delicate changes of phrasing or dynamics are revealed without being forced upon you. It is like getting the best bits of digital CD – its precision and sense of security – and combining it with all that is best about analogue – the warmth and subtle gradation of tone and microdynamics.

Although exquisite subtlety and refinement are among the Sky Blue Urushi's special qualities, they are not grafted on to each recording regardless. Increased experience confirms that the pick-up simply and faithfully reflects the individual qualities of each recording. It is like having an open window onto the music.

The sound can be sweet and beguiling one moment, then tack-sharp, and in your face the next. Maybe it is the use of pure silver coil windings, but the Sky Blue Urushi has a bright transparent 'silvery' sort of sound. More so than other Koetsu's, there is a light airy quality about it.

Stereo soundstaging is wide and, on the right LP, vivid and holographic. The music 'materialises' between the loudspeakers, hangs in free space between and around the enclosures, as though the speakers no longer existed.

Surface noise proved very low, and the cartridge tracked cleanly and securely. I used mine with the SRM Arezzo turntable and arm, setting the playing weight to about 2g, which reduces surface ticks and improves tracking slightly over the optimum 1.8g. Although by MC pickup standards the Sky Blue Urushi has a healthy output of 0.4mV, you will need an MC input or step-up transformer.

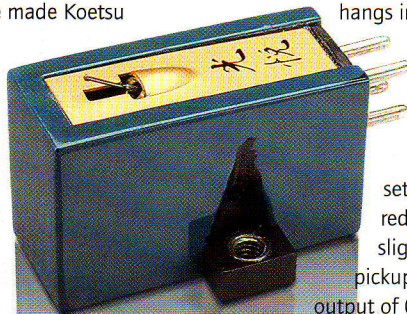
The cantilever is made from boron. The body has a gorgeous Blue Lacquer Urushi finish. It is quite a big cartridge – 23mm long and 14mm deep –

and also quite heavy at about 12.8g. You'll need a good tonearm with an extra-heavy counterweight.

The price of a Koetsu is not low, and the Sky Blue Urushi is no exception. However, I can say from experience that their pick-ups have an extraordinarily long working life. Even with regular use, say six to fifteen hours a week, you can expect to get upwards of two or three years from a Koetsu. With clean LPs, there is very little tip wear, even with extensive use.

More expensive Koetsu cartridges may offer greater refinement and detail but, compared to sources like CD, the Sky Blue Urushi has subtlety and fine detail that silver disc only hints at; a relaxed openness and refined smoothness, plus a tactile brilliance. ■

*Jimmy Hughes*



**“The music ‘materialises’ between the loudspeakers and hangs in free space between and around the enclosures”**