

Koetsu Jade Platinum

Could this be the ultimate Koetsu? Well, unless you want to go *really* mad, it probably is...

PRICE	£5545
SUPPLIER	Absolute Sounds
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Mystique is something you can't buy. You either have it or you don't. Exotic Japanese cartridge brands came and went in the closing years of the analogue era, but one in particular survived, and retained that magical quality.

It hasn't worn off yet, although it's now almost 22 years since *Hi-Fi News* first reviewed a Koetsu cartridge. 'Already something of a legend in Japan and the USA...' wrote Martin Colloms, introducing the Koetsu MC1 to *Hi-Fi News* readers in a November 1980 group test, 'this model has only recently become available here.' The UK availability was thanks to Absolute Sounds, then a fledgling import company, still trading from the owner's home and selling what most people regarded as impossibly expensive exotica. The Koetsu then cost £500, roughly three times as much as you'd expect to pay for a respectable, top-of-the-range moving-coil from other makers.

Spiritual ancestor of all the Koetsus was the Supex SD900 low-output moving-coil, made in Japan, imported to the UK by Linn along with

TECHNOLOGY

All Koetsus to date have been classic low-output moving-coils, with output of between about 0.2mV and 0.6mV for 5cm/s, depending on the model. The Jade Platinum comes close to the top of the range; in this variant the coils are of platinum-coated copper, which raises the output to typically 0.35mV. The platinum alloy used in the magnet system makes this an unusually heavy cartridge; it weighs at least 14g, compared with the usual Koetsu figure of around 11g. Compliance is specified as 6.3cu, tracking force 1.8-2g.

KEY FEATURES

- Boron cantilever and fine-line stylus
- Hand-carved jade body
- Ultimate communication!



the Grace G707 arm and sold in that supremely happy combination, 'Linn/Grace/Supex'. Its low compliance meant it needed at least 2g playing weight. However, it had a Namiki Vital super-elliptical stylus, with a far greater contact area on the groove wall than ordinary elliptical (or 'bi-radial') styli, so the pressure on the vinyl was not too excessive. The Supex still couldn't track the high-level test bands on test LPs like *HFS 75*, nor would it shine on the tinkly-bell tracking tests of Shure's *Audio Obstacle Course*, but even if it lacked 'trackability' by Shure standards, it was fine on real music discs.

Inevitably, Linn decided it could do better by designing and selling its own cartridges (initially still built by Supex). So by the time of that 1980 review, the Linn Asak cartridge was well established. Many other hi-fi companies in the West were also now specifying cartridges, made to order in Japan, to sell under their own brand name. With hindsight, it's easy to see that such an approach would seldom lead to the creation of a truly great product.

By contrast, Yoshiaki Sugano, who'd been involved in the development of the Supex, was now expressing his very clear understanding of what a cartridge should be, with his Koetsu design. It followed the basic layout and concept

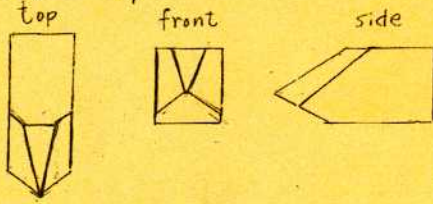
which had evolved in Japan over the previous decade (influenced partly by the extended-response needs of CD-4 quadrphony), but with a refinement in every area which transcended all norms. Sugano was not designing a product to meet arbitrary precepts or irrelevant technical specifications. He was building a cartridge for his own satisfaction, which of course is the best reason for building anything.

The essential architecture of the Koetsu design has never changed, but over the years the various models have incorporated different combinations of material and tuning. The body may be of wood, metal or semi-precious stone. The cantilever could be a boron-coated aluminium tube, solid boron, or ultimately, solid diamond. The coils themselves could be copper, silver-clad copper or a double-coil combination of the two. Latest refinement is the use a platinum-alloy magnet material. A connoisseur could order a non-standard combination of these elements, but would have to wait an unspecified time for his cartridge to be built.

After the wood-bodied MC1 came the aluminium-bodied Black [reviewed in Sept '82 and Dec '84] and the range settled down to Rosewood, the Black and Onyx. Outside Japan, the Rosewood was usually regarded as the



So: Absolute Sounds
Koetsu stylus tip.



Quadrilateral

F. Sugano.

From the horse's mouth: when we asked what kind of stylus profile current Koetsus use, Fumihiko Sugano answered by sending this drawing

think was impossible to achieve with analogue, and yet the bottom-end also has a quality of freedom that you would be very hard-pressed to get with CD. It was full, detailed and tuneful, but not in any way overpowering — although I guess it could be with the wrong combination of speakers and room, or perhaps with a flabby-sounding amplifier.

Despite these great qualities, it would be wrong to suggest that the Koetsu's sound is really dominated by the bass or in any way unbalanced. In fact, it just performs the same way throughout the range. It brings out detail, timbre and dynamics in the music throughout the frequency spectrum, and it does this effortlessly. The result is that it communicates the music. We ran through the gamut of test material, and this essential ability showed through every time. For example, with the title track from Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*, where subtle noises betray the presence of the guitarist before he starts playing, the Koetsu proved to be almost uncannily revealing, creating an almost palpable image of the musician between the speakers.

The cartridge doesn't impose a character of its own, it just seems able to bring out the sheer vitality of the music. And it can do this with any recording you put on. This was immediately confirmed when I installed the Koetsu in my system, using an SME Model 10 turntable. I just put on the first record that came to hand, which happened to be a Decca LP of Django Reinhardt, the music recorded (on 78 of course) in 1935-39 and transcribed I think in the late 1950s, by the great Geoff Milne, presumably using a Decca cartridge. It just sounded like a 78, but a perfect 78 — in other words, it was the kind of sound you can dream of but never usually get. It was so gripping, so immediate, it was as if the gypsy genius was just sitting there, alive today, smashing at those heavy strings with demonic vigour, while behind him, you could hear every string in brother Joseph's rhythm chords.

Then I treated myself to Gilès playing Brahms Piano Concerto No 2 [DGG] and many other delights, and found that the magic worked on music of any scale.

So what about the mystique? Well, the mystique persists not because it's so hard to get technical information, not because every cartridge is different, nor because Koetsus cost so much that no normal, sane person can even consider buying one. It's ultimately because they do deliver. I know it's cliché to say that this product made me rediscover my record collection, and it's another cliché to end by saying that I was very, very sorry to have to send the Koetsu back after the review. But it's absolutely true. In fact, I almost shed a tear.

WORDS STEVE HARRIS

model to own; the Black had a higher output which made it less critical of pre-amp noise.

The Rosewood transmuted into the Red [reviewed by MC in Jan '84], and was followed by the more costly Red Signature [which was reviewed by KK in April '86, although even he wasn't able to pin down what exactly were the differences between this and the standard Red]. Then a higher-level metal-body model was introduced. This was the Urushi [reviewed by KK in April '90], whose lacquer finish coat was said to add rigidity to the aluminium case.

So, at least as far as the UK is concerned the range starts with the Red T (£1499) and Red Signature (£2499), followed by the Urushi (£2799). There are three cosmetic Urushi variations, Wajima (encrusted with gold flakes), Tsugaru (piano black with gold speckle) and Vermillion (a reddish lacquer), this model fitted with the double coils. Above the Urushi model comes The Signature (£3899, and the price is all I know) the Jade, and the Jade Platinum.

One day in the early spring of 2002, a bike

messenger came to the office to deliver a small Jiffy bag. It was labelled, rather unwisely as I thought, 'Retail value £5000'. The Koetsu Jade Platinum had arrived. We were eager to try it!

First we ran it in a Michell Orbe with an Incognito-rewired Rega RB300 arm, which worked fine once extra weight had been added at the back: the standard Rega counterweight is not heavy enough to balance out the 14g Koetsu. Tracking was set at 2g. Sugano never believed in bias compensation; the cantilever is said to be set so that none is required.

The results were pretty breathtaking. On Jennifer Warnes's 1989 *Famous Blue Raincoat* album [Classic Records 180g version], even the PA voiceover intro which opens 'First We Take Manhattan' was enough to reveal the cartridge's tremendous authority and dynamics. But when the rhythm section really started into the first verse, it took just a few seconds to be awestruck by the power and swing of the electric bass. The Koetsu achieves a depth, power and dynamics in the bass that you'd

he became a high-ranking executive in the Toyota car company. In the 1970s, Sugano was associated with the Supex company and helped develop the legendary Supex 900 moving-coil. He'd long experimented with phono cartridges by substituting his own parts in commercially available models, and finally created his own no-compromise design.

While still at Supex, he had started to make Koetsu for a selected few friends who wanted better musical replay. Sugano named his cartridges after his famous ancestor, Hon'ami Koetsu (1558-1637), a calligrapher and designer in Kyoto. The Japanese characters for Koetsu translate as 'light' and 'pleasure'.

By the early 1990s, Sugano could no longer make the cartridges himself, and so production was taken over by his sons, led by Fumihiko. Today, Fumihiko continues to build the cartridges in the tradition established by his father.

YOSHIKI SUGANO

Yoshiaki Sugano, who passed away in January 2002, was the multi-talented creator of the Koetsu cartridge line. He was born in Kyoto, Japan, on 3 March 1907. In his youth, choral singing introduced him to Western music. He pursued sword making, duelling, calligraphy and painting. He also took up boxing. After the war,

