

SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S EDITION

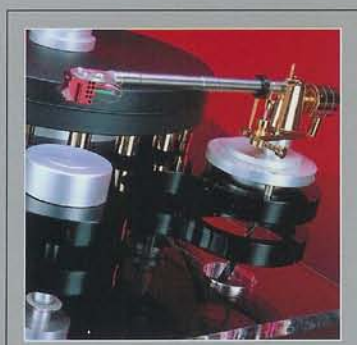
HI-FI CHOICE

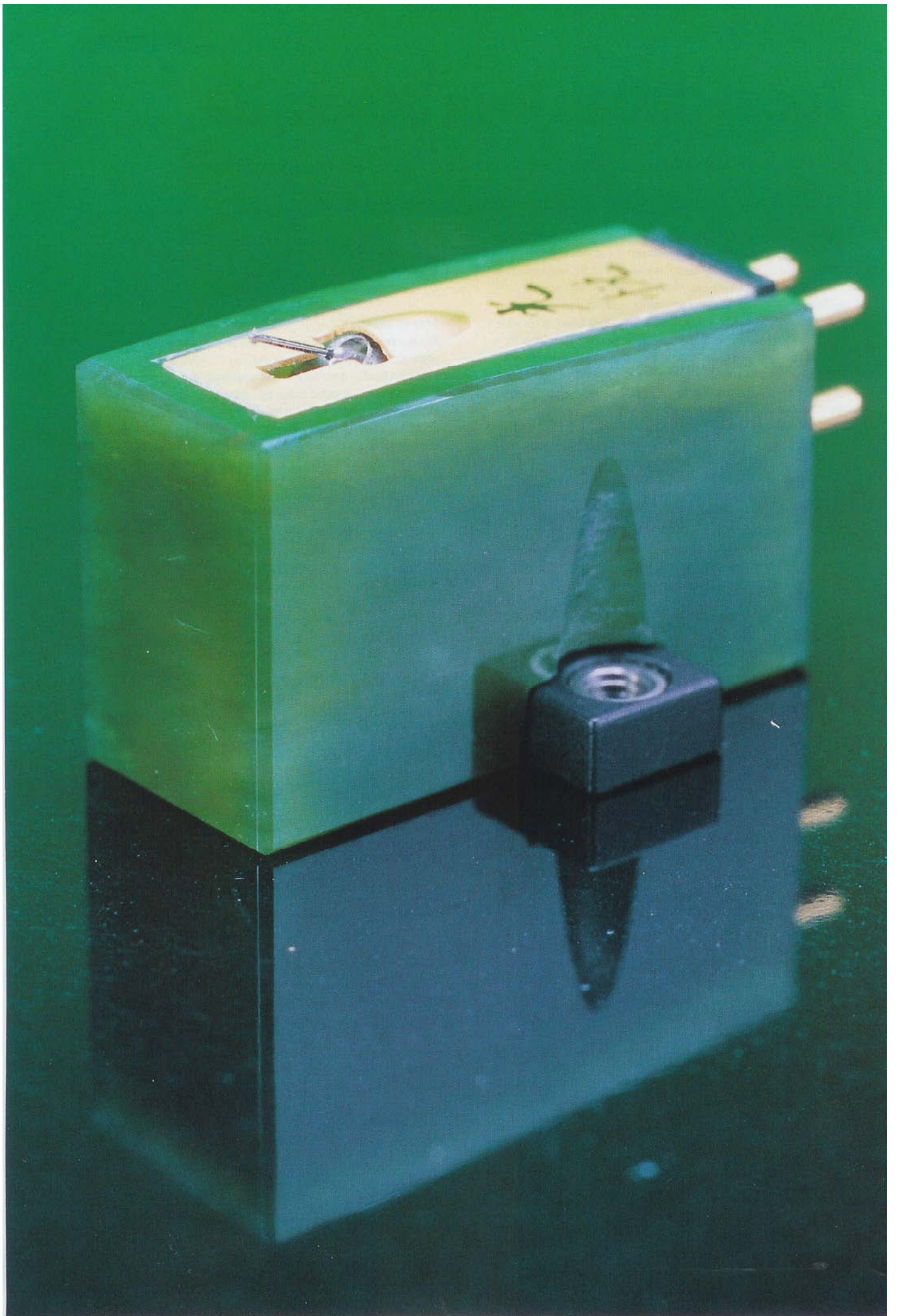
PASSION FOR SOUND

OCTOBER 2005 | £3.90 | WWW.HIFICHOICE.CO.UK



The Collection IN-DEPTH REVIEWS OF THE WORLD'S FINEST HI-FI *2005*





Koetsu Jade Platinum

Is Koetsu's first new moving coil cartridge in a decade the jewel in vinyl's crown?

PRICE: £5,598 (£8,098 with diamond 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) was a remarkable man: an artist, musician, swordsman, calligrapher and business executive. In the late 1970s, he decided to manufacture high-quality pickup cartridges and named the resulting company after his inspiration – the 17th century Japanese artist, Honami Koetsu (1558-1637).

Sugano soon gained mythical status in hi-fi circles. Indeed, he used to joke that his 'death' had been erroneously reported no less than three times! It was one of many tales that 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 pickup cartridges by hand.

Doubtless the truth was somewhat less fanciful, but there is definitely something magical about the sound of a Koetsu, something that goes way beyond science and measurement. Of course, precision engineering and the choice of the best materials are vital. But Sugano's alchemy brought something extra to the mix, and his sons (who have taken up the challenge since Sugano-san's passing) seem to have the same alchemical touch. Call it art; call it magic. It's the ability to produce results that vastly exceed than the sum of the parts.

The higher-priced Koetsu cartridges are exquisite to behold, with bodies made from exotic materials – from the lacquered Urushi finish, to the use of natural gemstones. Each one is packaged in a simple but beautifully made sandalwood box, so even the smell of Koetsu is good. As its name suggests, the Jade Platinum – the first truly 'new' Koetsu in a decade – features a body hand carved from a solid piece of jade. This gives each cartridge a unique and beautiful appearance, like a piece of exotic, hand-made jewellery.

It's a big cartridge, even for a moving coil design (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.

Koetsu uses 99.9999 per cent pure copper wire for its coils, along with a special silver cladding, whereby a silver sheath is slowly drawn over the copper conductor. Platinum alloy material is used in the magnetic assembly, which features Samarium Cobalt for

concentrated power. The cantilever is made from boron, but there's also an option with a one-piece cantilever and tip that's fashioned from a single solid piece of diamond, thereby avoiding the interface between stylus tip and cantilever. This costs an extra £2,500.

The Jade Platinum has a lower output than some Koetsu cartridges – around 0.2V to be precise. This results in a slightly less forward and exuberant musical presentation, but greatly increases refinement. If immediacy and presence count above all else, then possibly one of the higher output Koetsu pickups might be more to your liking. But don't expect the same levels of magical refinement and subtlety.

Clarity is outstanding – the way this cartridge allows individual vocal lines, or subtle instrumental passages, to cut through simply has to be heard to be appreciated. It's partly a question of aural space; each voice or instrument retaining more of its individuality and separation... and something subtler and more elusive. Somehow, you've got more time to listen, more time to explore the music and the separate individual strands that go to make up the whole.

Although refinement is one of the Jade Platinum's most notable qualities, it's not something false that's grafted on to each recording. The more you listen, the more you

“It turns those squiggly grooves on your records into living, breathing music.”

Incidentally, although the initial cost of a Koetsu is high, experience says these pickups have an extraordinarily long working life. Even given relatively heavy use – say, two or three hours a night for four or five days every week – you can expect to get many years of entertainment from these cartridges. Given clean, well cared for LPs, there's very little tip wear, even with extensive use.

SOUND QUALITY

The Jade Platinum offers a deceptively refined, almost velvety smoothness. It's wonderfully poised and relaxed sounding, with a musical delivery that's breathtakingly effortless and natural. The music just seems to 'happen' between the speakers. Voices and instruments materialise without effort or strain, sounding magically integrated and absolutely right in terms of tonal balance and timbre.

The presentation is luxuriously smooth and subtly shaded, yet tactile and immediate. It's a curious mix of opposites: chocolatey smoothness allied to great brilliance and attack. Tonally, the presentation is natural, with a solid bottom end, liquid midband and crisp, flowing highs. It's pin-point sharp on transient detail, yet very homogenous, too.

The uncanny ability to produce crisp, focused detail without sounding 'hard' or over-driven is the Jade Platinum's signature. It's a very engaging and positive-sounding cartridge. By virtue of its refinement and naturalness, the Jade Platinum is easy to listen to. Your brain has less 'processing' to do, so it's better able to take in the entire picture and make sense of the whole.

realise that the pickup is faithfully reflecting the individual qualities of each recording. It really is an open window on the music, sounding sweet and beguiling one moment, then sharp and tactile 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 sort of hangs in free space between and around the enclosures, almost as though the speakers no longer existed. This is something only analogue LP at its very best seems to manage.

The great thing is, the Jade Platinum doesn't need special 'audiophile' LPs to produce the sort of results outlined. You can play really quite ordinary pressings and hear magical results. Your very best LPs will sound better than you ever thought possible, yet 'average' LPs surprise you by sounding fabulous too. Surface noise is very low, and the cartridge tracks cleanly and securely given a good tonearm and turntable.

The Koetsu Jade Platinum is a fabulous phono cartridge, one of the very best we have ever heard. It turns those squiggly grooves on your records into living, breathing music, making you listen to your hi-fi in rapt attention – much as you'd listen to real musicians playing live in front of you. It's that sort of direct experience. The results are endlessly fascinating and deeply rewarding, bringing a new depth to your appreciation of music and hi-fi. For sheer enjoyment, it doesn't get much better than this. **HFC**

Jimmy Hughes