

Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue

Kessler's favourite model of Koetsu moving-coil cartridge in his favourite colour? How could he fail to be charmed?

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

A chance conversation with a highly-placed importer, while I was in Japan, opened up a can of worms: what constitutes the Koetsu line? Why are the websites all localised to specific markets? How does one make a decision, given the myriad options, when no two Koetsus seem alike? My source, whose experience with Koetsu goes back decades, speaks Japanese, and has no axes to grind, merely smiled when I explained that I was puzzled about the selection we have in the UK. 'Ken,' he said, 'none of those models really exists elsewhere. They're tailored to your market.'

But it's much worse than that: Absolute Sounds is so taken with the notion of producing bespoke cartridges that – like Vauxhall's Adam compact car – you can personalise your Koetsu with total freedom. You can order most of the models with a choice of styli, cantilever material, wiring or magnet type. As for the Urushi Sky Blue, it is theoretically a Vermillion but with an Alnico magnet instead of Samarium Cobalt, and silver wire instead of copper/silver, and with twice the output at 0.4mV.

But that is partly academic, because, underneath, all Koetsus employ the same fundamental topology, so what we're looking at is a family of cartridges that is offered in various stages of tweaking. If you want an analogy, it's like the time when Porsche only had the 911, but they ran the gamut from basic to track-ready, or Alpa cameras offered with assorted functions.

RIGHT: Pre-threaded mounting lugs and an alloy top-plate ensure a snug headshell connection



The difference is, with the user rather than the factory determining what ingredients are used, the possibilities are endless.

What this begs, though, is an assessment of your own patience, mixed

with faith. Do you honestly think that there will ever be an opportunity (let alone a desire) to audition what I calculate to be at least

1500 combinations, if you factor in the difference in sound that the body can make? For me, this is yet another Koetsu Urushi, a variant of my all-time favourite moving-coil. Period.

SKY BLUE RAPTURE

It is one of the easiest cartridges one can use: parallel-sided, flat underbody, no problem for the SME Series V arm, an instant match with the Denon AU-S1 transformer. I set it at 1.8-1.9g and heard instant bliss. Fresh from the review of the Air Force One turntable [*HFN* Jun '13], I had a regimen of LPs ready to savour. As Sam and Dave's *Soul Men* [Stax S725] was on the top of the pile, I returned directly to 'Broke Down Piece Of Man', which I'd just heard through two Koetsus costing twice the £4098 being asked for this model.

Now I don't want to be accused of being an apologist for the Sky Blue, just because I couldn't take my eyes off the

FUMIHIKO SUGANO

As with the cartridges themselves, finding out about the protector of Sugano's legacy is like extrapolating the shape of an ancient building from its lone surviving cornerstone. Suffice it to say, Sugano Sr only started his legendary cartridge manufacture in his 60s, so he wisely groomed his son, Fumihiko, to carry on. Naturally, there is a cult around pre-2002 Koetsus, in the predictable manner of all changes of dynasties. So let's say at once: post-Sugano Sr Koetsus aren't merely as good as the originals – some are even better. I say this as one who's owned eight and auditioned twice that number. Far be it for me to rob you of the kind of mythology that fuels your passion, and I salute those of you who'd rather nurse a 30-year-old Black than a brand-new one. But then, I'd rather have a new fountain pen than one that leaks in my pocket, so what do I know?

KOETSU URUSHI SKY BLUE

colour. There is no doubt in my mind that the Sky Blue is softer than the Blue Onyx or Gold Onyx from the Platinum Series, the treble leaning toward the reticent rather than the marginally aggressive. But that is a relative term: the Onyxes were hardly as in-your-face as some MCs I've heard.

This did not rob the track of any energy or power, but it did change the perspective, adding to the sound of my system a depth – call it artificial if you must – that I usually attribute to dipoles rather than forward-firing speakers like Wilsons. Here we enter the matter of personal taste/preference, but it is something to address if you're shopping for Koetsus: the knowledgeable retailer should be able to tell you exactly what you get if you change, say, copper wiring for silver.

SO CLEAR...

What best illustrated the differences among Koetsus was Willy DeVille's *Miracle* [Polydor 833 669-1] and the incredible 'Assassin of Love'. Here is a track that demands arch precision, for it is layer upon layer of sharp, attacking sounds, airy spaces and vocal texture that calls for resolution of the highest order. While the reproduction was less visceral than with either Onyx, it possessed as much mass, and I was astonished to hear bass not even one erg less robust or powerful. It simply swapped silk for satin.

Do I think that the Onyxes sound like the Urushi's opposite, *ie*, more 'digital'? Categorically not. But I'm hunting for a word that implies softer, smoother, less bellicose, without it being a value judgement. Because it isn't. It's about taste, preference and system matching.

Bonnie Raitt's *The Glow* [Warner HS 3369] sealed the deal for me.

'Bass was not even one erg less robust. It simply swapped silk for satin'

ABOVE: The solid boron cantilever and beautifully polished nude elliptical stylus emerge from the Urushi's blue-lacquered body. Cartridge pins are silver-plated

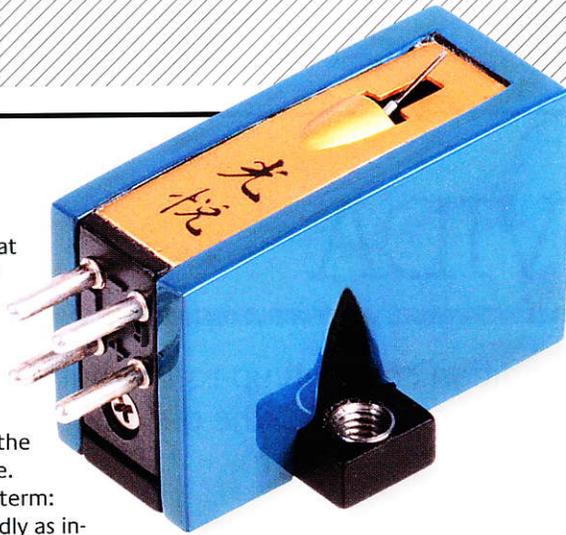
'I Thank You' (yes, another Sam & Dave song) has a thudding mass that invigorates even when heard over earbuds. At first, it was obviously a Koetsu making the joyous noise, with its wide, almost Denon-like soundstage, the *rat-tat-tat* opening drum salvo, the deliciously nasty guitar stage right, cowbell correct and accounted for, fuzz guitar in the background. In front, Bonnie's

voice came through clear as a bell, with the little break as she says 'Thank you, baby' around 1m 35s into her performance. All the while, it's a chugging machine that makes your shoulders bunch, sway side to side, head nodding. This cartridge has *soul*. And I couldn't give a toss if it isn't flat to 50kHz. It rocks. And it's Bugatti Blue. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

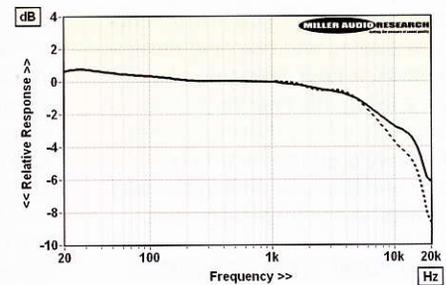
As I wear my heart on my sleeve, you know the verdict: this moving-coil is my dream lover. It oozes 'Koetsu-ness', which will mean more to those who have fallen under the spell than those who haven't. It's lush, romantic, it's Julie London reincarnated as a hi-fi component. It will not dazzle you with detail or attack. But it will seduce you. That it's finished like a Type 35B makes parting with it so much harder.

Sound Quality: 86%

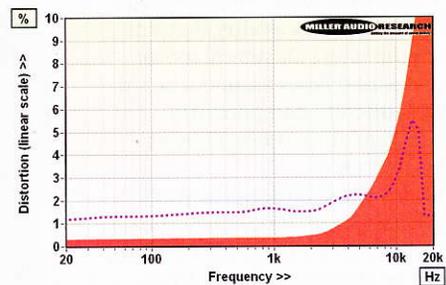


If ever a Koetsu's technical performance illustrated the brand's apocryphal rich and lush sound then this Urushi Sky Blue is the perfect contender. Unlike other Koetsus we've tested [the Black in *HFN* Sep '06 and Red K in *HFN* Oct '09], this admittedly well run-in Urushi derivative displayed a marked presence and high treble roll-off amounting to $-6\text{dB}/20\text{kHz}$ (lateral) and $-8.5\text{dB}/20\text{kHz}$ (vertical). Nevertheless there is a good symmetry between these in-phase and anti-phase responses [see Graph 1, below], suggesting the Urushi Sky Blue will offer a broad and uniform soundstage with just a slight emphasis of central images. These same responses also indicate this MC will offer a strong bass although the high-ish 25° VTA and sweetened treble suggest a slightly downwards-sloping armtube will benefit its overall balance. The $410\mu\text{V}$ output is bang-on Koetsu's specification while the 30Ω coil impedance is tolerant of 10Ω or higher loads ($1\text{k}\Omega$ is often preferred).

As with the other Koetsus, the mechanism is very symmetrically balanced – the compliance measuring 13cu in both planes and ideally suited to medium/heavy tonearms – but it's not a perfect tracker. Groove modulations up to $65\mu\text{m}$ were tracked while the right channel let go at $+15\text{dB}$ (re. $5\text{cm}/\text{sec}$) at 300Hz . Distortion is typical for the breed at $1\text{-}2\%$ (vertical) and $0.4\text{-}2\%$ (lateral) up to 5kHz and, again, gratifyingly symmetrical but the harmonic complement is especially pleasing – almost entirely 2nd harmonic. Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for the Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: Frequency response curves (-8dB re. $5\text{cm}/\text{sec}$) lateral (L+R, solid) versus vertical (L-R, dashed)



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, solid) and vertical (L-R, dashed) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harmonics) vs. frequency from 20Hz - 20kHz (-8dB re. $5\text{cm}/\text{sec}$)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving coil / 9.0g
Recommended tracking force	1.8-2.0mN (1.9mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. $5\text{cm}/\text{sec}$)	$410\mu\text{V}$ / 0.23dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	13cu / 13cu
Vertical tracking angle	25 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	$70\mu\text{m}$ / $65\mu\text{m}$
L/R Distortion (-8dB , 20Hz - 20kHz)	$0.35\text{-}11\%$ / $0.35\text{-}12\%$
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz - 20kHz)	$+0.5$ to -6.2dB / $+0.8$ to -5.0dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	34dB / 21dB