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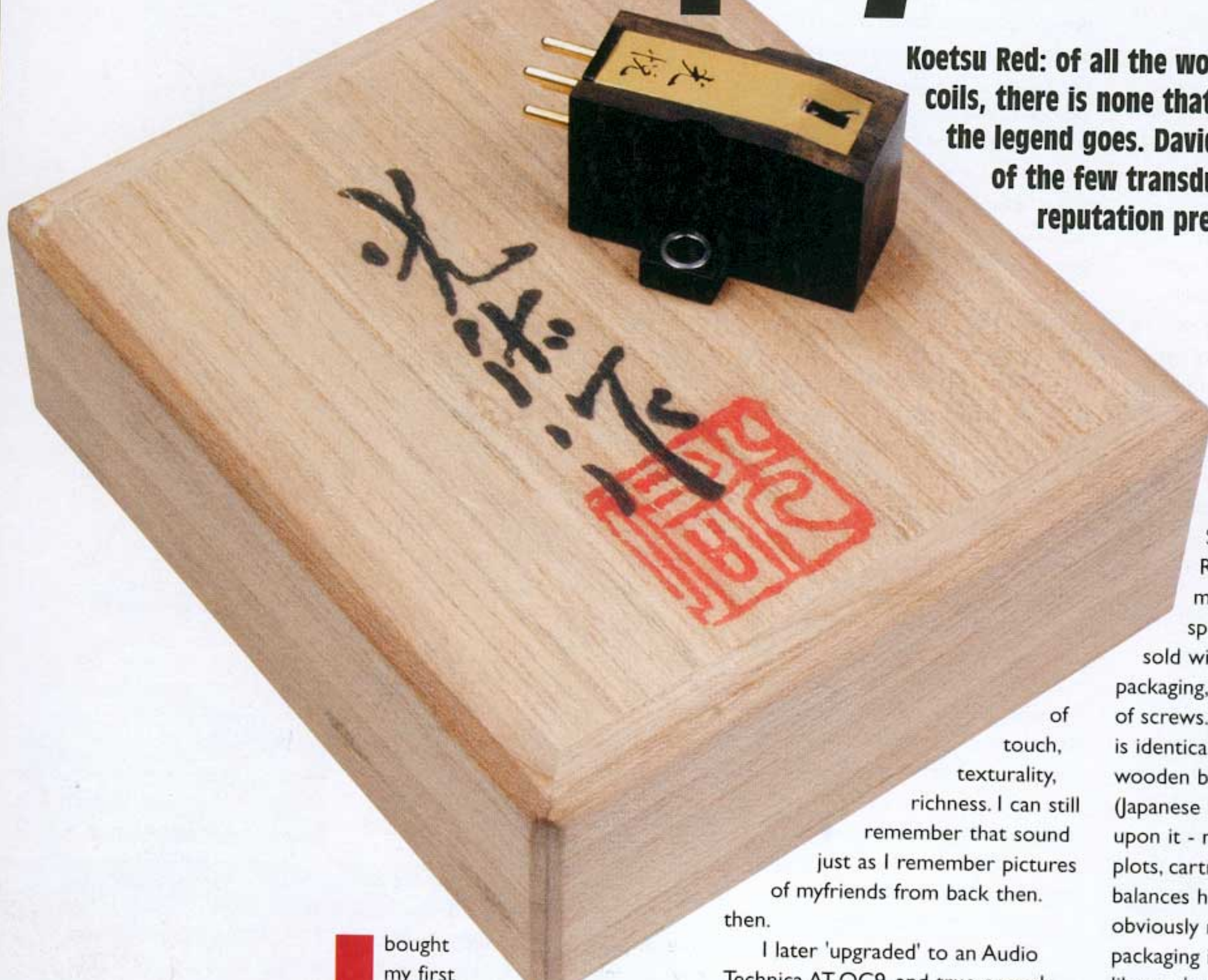
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simply red...

Koetsu Red: of all the world's great moving coils, there is none that can compare... or so the legend goes. David Price auditions one of the few transducers whose reputation precedes it.



I bought my first moving coil cartridge in 1988 for the princely sum of £95. It wasn't a budget Ortofon, an affordable Goldring or even an entry level Audio Technica, but a 'new old stock' Supex SD900V Vital. Arriving in the post, it still had the original Linn Products sticker on the box - the company that, lest we forget, brought this transducer to the UK in the days before it launched its first Asak DC2100K in 1979...

In the mid seventies, you couldn't move for magazines which recommended the fabled 'Linn/ Grace/ Supex' combination. The LP12 was, back then, one of the very best turntables yet made, the Grace G707 a highly capable - if not outstanding - pick-up arm and the Supex SD900V the very finest phono cartridge available. The combination was cracking - a superlative mix which, possibly by pure happenstance, was brilliantly synergistic.

I used my Supex in a Linn Ittok LVII, and got similarly mesmerizing results. It was almost eerie - the delicacy, smoothness, grace, lightness

of touch, textural richness. I can still remember that sound just as I remember pictures of my friends from back then.

I later 'upgraded' to an Audio Technica AT-OC9, and true enough, there was more detail, faster transients and more confident image placement. But something was lost and gone forever - that mystical, magical touch that I'd hitherto, mistakenly, thought was a feature of all coils, its ability to mesmerise, hypnotise, enchant, seduce. This, I later realised, was the Supex SD900V.

Yoshiaki Sugano was the man behind that cartridge. Later, he went on to do Koetsu, whose products bear a strong visual resemblance. The Red is perhaps the most famous of the breed. It's Koetsu's entry level model - more popular is the Red Signature, which offers a better matched core and coil set. Not that there's anything wrong with this 'cooking' version however, as our measurements show. Sugano-san sadly died in 2002, and with it the original generation of Koetsu cartridges. The range wasn't revised particularly, although there are people out there who swear the latest products are less 'romantic' sounding, and more 'hi-fi' - more of which later...

Funnily enough, the cartridge my

Supex replaced was a Rega R100 moving magnet - also manufactured (to Rega's specifications) by Supex, and sold with the minimum of packaging, without so much as a set of screws. In this respect, the Koetsu is identical. It comes in a small wooden box with Koetsu's 'inkan' (Japanese kanji signature) imprinted upon it - no frequency response plots, cartridge brushes or stylus balances here! In this respect, less is obviously more. The cartridge in its packaging is quite arresting - you feel like you've just bought something exotic - appropriately enough, because you have!

It took me just ten minutes to install the Red - a tribute to the brilliant ease of use of the SME Series IV tonearm in which I mounted it, complete with its fixed headshell and rack-and-pinion azimuth adjuster. I dialled in 2gms, confirmed it with my £6 Ortofon stylus balance, twiddled the VTA, tightened up all the appropriate bolts and screws, and ran it at low volumes for a couple of LP sides while my valve amp and Quads warmed through, and we were off.

SOUND QUALITY

They say 'what goes round, comes round' - well the first thing that struck me was that I was listening to something eerily and spookily similar to that old Supex SD900V. The Japanese have the word 'natsukashi' (with no English equivalent) that they like to say when they feel or see something so obviously from their past. That's precisely how I viewed the Red - after umpteen Audio Technicas, Ortofons, Dynavectors and

REFERENCE SYSTEM

- Michell GyroDec turntable
- SME Series IV tonearm
- Trichord Delphini NC phonostage
- MF Audio Passive Preamplifier
- World Audio K5881 power amplifier (modified)
- Quad 989 loudspeakers
- Townshend Maximum supertweeters

Linns (and the rest), it was like finally coming home.

The most important, overriding attribute of the Red is its immediacy. After Ortofon's (admittedly superb) £1,000 Kontrapunkt C, it was like a layer of insulation tape had been peeled away from the front of my Quad 989s. The music was more upfront, more immediate, more tactile. It lacked the Scandinavian MC's beautifully tidy, smooth, cultured, hi-fi sound and instead was much more like being there - right in front of the orchestra, band or singer.

The reason for this is - in part - the Koetsu's startling attack transients. Listen to a simple drum beat and it has rhythm and inflection (i.e. timing and dynamics). It's brilliant at both, making the (cheaper) Ortofon sound like it's just serving time. For me, this was its most significant gift. Its ability to weave these two factors together is almost magical - and it's precisely why I loved the Supex, too.

Yet it all sounds so natural and effortless - by contrast, two famously musical cartridges - both of which I really rate - the Linn Akiva and Ortofon Kontrapunkt B - seem positively 'forced'. The Koetsu just pulls a rhythm (or three) from any instrument(s) with utter ease, like it's sleepwalking. The Akiva, by contrast, feels like it's been in training for this moment all its life, and it will succeed at all costs... Both are a hoot to listen to, but it's the insouciance of the Koetsu that is so cool...

This is an important point. The Red's own unique brand of musicality is something that has to be heard to be believed. Whether it's the heavily programmed, synthetic world of Zero 7's 'I Have Seen' or the virtuoso jazz-funk of The Crusaders' 'That Lady', it sings with a carefree joy that I've not encountered with any other moving coil and any where near the price, if at all. It succeeds by making any given recording sound like a group of musicians playing live music together, and loving it.

The next key point is its tonality and textuality - another major distinguishing mark on the old Supex

SD900, too. The Koetsu pulls off the impressive feat of sounding both rich and deep, but relatively neutral too. Its warm, sumptuous tonality isn't easily reduceable to its frequency response trace - it's not obviously aberrant. Yet its portrayal of acoustic instruments and voices on all-analogue recordings, such as Chicago's 'If You Leave Me Now', is exquisite. The recorded acoustic was deliciously sumptuous and smooth, with that olde worlde Supex-style sweetness - that dark, deep, silky sound that SD900 users will remember fondly. All this time, however, those same aforementioned attack transients, rhythms and dynamics flooded out. The best of both worlds, to be sure!

In fact, to anyone not used to this, the most basic Koetsu, such a 'full of flavour' sound will prove a revelation. It obviously strikes a 'rich, fruity' balance (an Audio Technica ART-1 it is not), but doesn't let that get in the way of superb textural detailing. Brass has a rasp, cymbals a sheen and - most profoundly - vocals a grain that other, highly regarded designs (such as the Ortofon Kontrapunkt C) simply can't achieve. It all sounds so believable, so tactile, so tangible. Female voice is sublime - you've never heard Kate Bush until you've tried a Koetsu Red, so direct, emotive, breathy and physical is the sound.

Add a startlingly rhythmic, dynamic nature to its effortless, easy musicality, and factor in its beguiling tonality and superlative textural detailing - and you've got its measure. But what then of its downsides? Well, the Koetsu's obvious talents are so overwhelming that they're uncommonly elusive - but listen hard and they are there. Despite its obviously smooth and even sound, its high treble isn't the most finessed - Ortofon's Kontrapunkt C (despite being a lot cheaper) has a more sophisticated (albeit less tangible) hi-hat sound. The Red is never ragged, but treble isn't as silky as its upper midband.

Secondly, it's not as stable a tracker as the aforementioned Ortofon, or indeed the Linn Akiva - an immediate price rival. Although it has a very

strong, articulate and commanding nature, it doesn't have that 'fused to the groove' surefootedness of some. Together, these are doubtless the *raison d'etre* for the pricier Koetsu Red Signature...

Despite these quibbles - and they are precisely that - here's one of the most innately musical phono pick-up cartridges yet made.

That it could make my very neutral GyroDec, allied to the famously analytical SME Series IV, sing so lyrically is nothing short of amazing. It's so charismatic, endearing, charming, seductive and yet so nearly without vice that I feel it deserves our highest possible score!



VERDICT ●●●●● £

A most musical and consummately charismatic moving coil cartridge - the stuff of legends

KOETSU RED £1499.00

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MEASURED PERFORMANCE

In tracking tests the Koetsu Red managed all but the highest levels at 300Hz and 1kHz, where it was marginal but still stayed in the groove - a good result. High tracking ability makes for a confident sound.

Although the Koetsu's low impedance generator coped with loads right down to 3ohms, it worked best into 10kohms. Frequency response was flat within tight 1dB limits from 40Hz up to 12kHz our analysis shows, with a small lift at 20kHz on outer grooves to compensate for tracing loss on inner grooves that amounted to just -1dB at 20kHz.

Vertical tracking angle was nicely set to 26 degrees, giving fairly low distortion on vertical modulation. Output was a useful 0.56mV at 5cms/sec rms, enough to keep hiss at bay in most MC phono stages.

The Koetsu has no weak spots. It measures well in all areas and will sound both confident and accurate in use. NK

Tracking force	2gms
Vertical tracking angle	26degrees
Frequency response	20Hz-20kHz
Channel separation	30dB

Tracking ability (300Hz)	
lateral	80µm
vertical	45µm
lateral (1kHz)	22cms/sec.

Distortion (45µm)	
lateral	0.8%
vertical	2%
Output (5cms/sec rms)	0.56mV

