

Koetsu Red K Signature (£3300)

Crisp and fast yet with a midrange able to wring every last drop of passion from a recording, the Koetsu legend lives on in the addictive sound of this 'Signature' MC
Review: Steve Harris **Lab:** Paul Miller

Very few western audiophiles speak or read the language, but there are a couple of Japanese pictograms familiar to all. They have appeared on every Koetsu cartridge since the 1970s, and they always tell you that you're looking at one of the hi-fi world's most enduring objects of desire.

When the original Koetsu MC1 reached the UK market in 1980, it was already a cult product in the USA and Japan. Here it cost about three times as much as any other top-of-the-range moving-coil available, but it quickly gained fervent devotees.

CARTRIDGE KINGS

The MC1 was followed by the Rosewood, and then the slightly cheaper Black. Even at a time when new and tempting MC cartridges were popping up every week, the Koetsus remained effortlessly at the top of the heap.

And so they do today. In essence, the product has never changed, though new materials have been introduced. There have been no claims of great technology breakthroughs, no miraculous specifications. In fact, Koetsu has never provided more than a bare minimum of information to consumers. Click on the Absolute Sounds website's Koetsu

KOETSU HERITAGE

Yoshiako Sugano, creator of Koetsu, passed away in 2002, but his son Fumihiko was ready to take on his mantle. Meanwhile, the Rosewood Signature had become an aspiration, an inspiration, and a reviewers' reference too. Ken Kessler's June 2009 issue 'Audio Milestones' feature told the Koetsu story. Yet looking back, we realised that it was literally decades ago that we'd last reviewed a Rosewood model, when KK covered the Red Signature in April 1986. It was time to listen to a current Red K Signature.

pages (begin at www.absolutesounds.com) and you will find pictures and descriptions of each cartridge, but under the heading 'Tech specifications' you will read 'There are no technical specifications for this product'. From a quick glance, you might even start to think that all the models are the same beneath their beautiful casework of lacquered wood or gemstone.

This isn't quite the case, of course. But although you can find some specifications for Koetsu models, they don't tell you much. For example, Koetsu claims the same frequency range of 20Hz-100kHz and channel separation of 25dB for every model. Based on what is essentially the same generator structure, all have the same internal impedance of 5ohms and recommended load of 30ohms.

All models come with a boron cantilever, unless you take up the rather expensive special-order option of having a diamond one, and the styli are all Koetsu's proprietary special fine line-contact shape. What



ABOVE: The classic Koetsu body, clad in a clear lacquered rosewood with an inscribed, gold-coloured baseplate, silver-plated cartridge pins and reinforced alloy lugs for firm mounting

really makes the difference between models is the exact choice of materials, selection of parts and final tuning.

With its anodised aluminium body, the Black is still the base model, but even this gains a jewellery-like appearance thanks to its gold edge trim. Next come the Red or Rosewood models (the names seem interchangeable), the wood bodies making them slightly lighter at 9 grams.

SIGNATURE TUNE

The Rosewood Signature version is described as having 'a more closely matched core and coil set' than the Rosewood Standard. Outwardly, the base or underside of the Standard slopes slightly at the front, ahead of the stylus, like the Black. The Signature version, though, like all models further up the range, is the classic rectangular shape with a flat base. The Signature body is also described as aged rosewood, making it slightly darker in colour.

Next come what without too much disrespect can be called variations on the Rosewood theme, with the opulent



KOETSU RED K SIGNATURE (£3300)

lacquer finishes of the Urushi series. Inside, silver-plated copper wire is used for the moving coils, instead of just high-purity copper.

Above these come the fascinating gemstone-bodied cartridges, the newest addition being the Coralstone. These models use magnets of a special platinum-iron alloy, and so form the Koetsu Platinum Series. In fact this series also includes a Rosewood with the platinum alloy magnets, which at £5200 is a lot less expensive than the gemstone models, but still almost £2000 more than the normal Rosewood Signature reviewed here.

LETTING FLY

For this review I was able to make use of the surprisingly capable Kuzma Stabi S-12/Stogi Reference 313 and other turntables but for

'There was anticipation, then release as Clapton soared'

the sake of continuity I mainly deployed the trusty SME Model 10. My personal starting point was to find out how big a step up this current Rosewood Signature would be from the Koetsu Black, which I'd been using for some time. It didn't take me very long to find out the answer. The difference was huge.

I put on that classic direct-cut *The King James Version* [Sheffield Lab LAB-3]. Compared with the Black, there was just more of a true brassy snarl to the leader's trumpet, and all the instruments in the brass had this realistic edge too. On the drum feature, 'Cherokee', there was a great sense of freedom, Les DeMerle just letting fly with tremendous swing, while the saxes and brass sounded crisp, fast and urgent, and the track was over before you knew it.

How can one cartridge give you a better feeling of swing and rhythmic drive than another, especially another one that's already pretty good? I don't know, but this one did.

Listening to some Julian Bream from 1962 [*Popular Classics for Spanish Guitar*, RCA SB6887, the you could almost see the sunlit bookshelves in the library at

Kenwood House in Hampstead, where these tracks were recorded. With the Rosewood, you felt that the artist was revelling in the contribution of an explicit and characterful room acoustic as he extracted an unbelievable range of colour and scale from his six strings. The Rosewood's warm and mellifluous midrange suited this recording so well I just couldn't take it off. Eventually I did though, and came back to rock 'n' roll.

Clapton's fabulous slide guitar workout 'Motherless Children' from *461 Ocean Boulevard* [RSO 2479 116] really sizzled with the Rosewood. Right from the start, and the repeated riff, it conveyed excitement and anticipation, then release as Clapton soared. Carl Radle's great bass line thumped along, although I think the bass itself could have been tidier.

You could perhaps fault the cartridge for being more passionate than analytical at times,

but with a track like this that was no bar to enjoyment.

Listening to a lot of music on several different systems only confirmed a thought I've often had about Koetsus, which is this. They are a bit like the great soloists of classic jazz. They'd be stunningly brilliant when they had the best accompaniment and favourable conditions, but even when surrounded by mediocrity, they'd know how to rise above it and do themselves justice. Quality always shines through. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

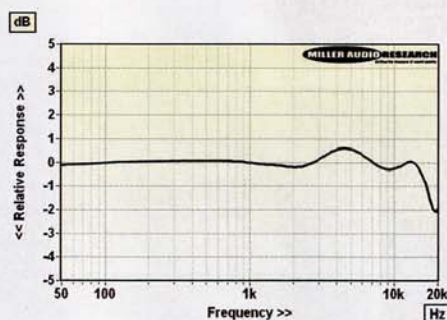
There's no doubt that this current Red K Signature maintains the great Koetsu Rosewood tradition. Other cartridges may offer more analytical detail, may sound more neutral or more spacious (or airy), perhaps even appear more dynamic, or track better. But the Koetsu still offers an ear-catchingly solid and coherent sound with the right combination of warmth and sheer guts, simply leading you to play disc after disc. Sheer enjoyment.

Sound Quality: 89%

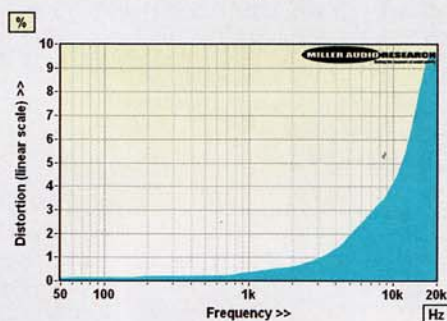


Distinguishable from the 'Standard' Red K by its rectangular body (the Standard has a chamfered nose), this particular Koetsu can trace a direct descendency back to the original Rosewoods of 20-30 years ago. Like the Black [HFN, Sept '06], the Red K Signature offers a 0.42mV output (re. 5cm/sec) from a 5ohm coil impedance. Similarly, pre-equalised distortion also hovers around 2.5%/1kHz comprising a dominant 2nd harmonic. With RIAA equalisation this falls to ~0.3%/300Hz at +6dB all the way up to ~0.6% at +12dB. There's some obvious mistracking at higher groove modulations as distortion jumps over 1% at +15dB and hits 100% at +18dB. Increasing the downforce beyond 2.0mN helps but also exaggerates the slight treble loss of -4.7dB/left and -1.8dB/right [see graph 1, below]. At moderate groove modulations, however, both bass and midrange distortion is impressively low before increasing through the treble to ~9% at 20kHz [see graph 2, below].

Stereo separation holds to a best case of 35dB through the midrange while channel balance is a superb 0.1dB through bass and midrange. The Red K Signature seems to use a very similar boron rod cantilever, samarium-cobalt magnet and diamond stylus as the Black, also mounted with an effective VTA of 25 degrees. The compliance of the Red K Signature is symmetrical but slightly lower at 15cu, however, making it slightly more compatible with medium/high mass tonearms. Readers are invited to view a QC Suite test report for the Koetsu Red K Signature by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: Frequency response, lateral groove modulation at -8dB re. 5cm/sec



ABOVE: Tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harmonics) versus frequency from 50Hz-20kHz (1kHz, -8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-coil/9.0g
Recommended tracking force	1.8-2.2mN
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	420µV / 0.10dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	15cu / 15cu
Vertical tracking angle	26 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	76µm / 70µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.5-12.9% / 0.2-9.3%
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.7dB to -1.8dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	35dB / 19dB