



# Koetsu

## AZULE DUMORTIORITE PLATINUM

*A fabulous cartridge that casts a spell of detailed refinement over treasured vinyl*

**Price** £7,050 **Contact** Absolute Sounds ☉ 020 8971 3909 ☉ www.koetsuusa.com

**O**f all hi-fi components, moving coil pickup cartridges are undoubtedly the most enigmatic. While other links in the chain seem sensibly based on science and engineering, high-class, hand-made cartridges exude an air of the dark arts, as the pickup's job is to turn an undulating groove into music. Science? It's modern magic...

Koetsu's reputation is just as magical: just hearing one of its cartridges was enough to hook most audiophiles. Aside from extraordinary sound, these cartridges look beautiful, made from exotic materials – from lacquered Urushi finishes, to the use of natural gemstones, including Jade and Onyx.

The Azure Dumortiorite Platinum retails for £7,050, and is one of several Koetsu Platinum series cartridges at this price point. Dumortiorite is a hard blue/grey gemstone (said to have healing powers, no less) and being made from natural stone, each Azure will look slightly different – the last word in bespoke cartridge design.

Specifications include a platinum magnet, silver-plated copper coils and a boron cantilever. Output is 0.3mV and the body weighs 12.5g. Recommended playing force is between 1.8g to 2g, and the Azure is an exceptionally able tracker – possibly – deep breath – the best we have ever tested.

### SOUND QUALITY

Even difficult piano discs – for example, the four live JVC LPs of Sviatoslav Richter's 1979 Tokyo piano recitals – failed to unseat it. The transients on these recordings are explosive, and have never previously reproduced without some breakup during heavy climaxes. Remarkably, the Azure reproduced these discs cleanly, without complaint.

Sonically, the Azure has all the velvety smoothness and refinement expected from a Koetsu. It sounds detailed and dynamic; crisply focused, yet perfectly poised and effortlessly relaxed. As a result, the sound has a natural, flowing quality. There's no sense of strain or struggle – magically, the music just seems to materialise between your loudspeakers.

Voices and instruments sound realistic and true. Tonally, the bass/treble balance is natural and correctly proportioned. Dynamically, things sound finely shaded, yet crisp and tactile. It's a beguiling mix of opposites – mellow warmth, silky smoothness, and crisp immediate attack – all very much Koetsu hallmarks.

Although extremely vivid and detailed, the Azure has a remarkably calm presentation: it never sounds stretched. Listening to it is a bit like watching a great tennis player or footballer at the top of their game – comfortably doing the impossible while making it appear easy.

Background noise is very low, and – unless surfaces are poor – the music seems to emanate from an inky-black, silent background. Music First Audio's MC Step-Up transformer seemed to enhance the impression of clarity and focus, creating a sound that had amazing presence and immediacy without needing to be played loudly to project crisply.

You don't need special audiophile LPs to experience audio magic. A superior cartridge like the Azure reveals hidden

virtues in ordinary records – LPs that, via lesser equipment, show no special merits. This gets you back listening to the recordings you want to hear for their musical qualities – not simply those that sound good.

That said, even a cartridge as fabulous as the Azure can't make a truly poor recording sound great. However, you'll definitely find records you'd written off as disappointing suddenly displaying all sorts of special qualities that hadn't been apparent before – like a rather extreme example, the Chandos LP of Shostakovich's 5th symphony and *The Bolt* ballet suite with Neeme Jaarvi conducting. This is a very vivid digital recording with huge dynamic range. Unfortunately, the single LP accommodates around 75 minutes of music, so cutting levels are ridiculously low. Compared with the CD, the LP always sounded pale and insubstantial. Having owned

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both for over twenty years, it's been interesting to sample the LP from time to time to see if anything new can get music from the grooves. Now, via the Koetsu Azure (and MFA transformer), the LP almost matches the CD for vividness – it's an amazing transformation.

The ability to produce crisp, focused detail, along with low background noise even when LP cutting levels are extremely low, gets to the heart of what matters with vinyl reproduction. Being able to deliver a vivid full-bodied sound from a disc with virtually no grooves indicates the resolving power of this cartridge. On LPs cut at a normal level, you can count on every scrap of subtle low-level detail being reproduced.

While such audio perfection doesn't come cheap, a Koetsu definitely represents a good investment. Barring accidents, these cartridges have a long working life. Even with regular use – say two or three hours a night, three to five days a week – expect upwards of two or three years' use. Given clean LPs, there's very little tip wear. ☺

Jimmy Hughes

