

Koetsu Onyx Platinum

Renewing his love affair with this iconic moving-coil brand – not that he ever strayed far – our 30-year-plus veteran Koetsu user falls in love with the flagship Onyx Platinum
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Those who recall the arrival on these shores of the first cult Japanese moving-coil cartridges in the late 1970s will also remember the shock of their prices. Kiseki, Miyabi and the rest arrived with king's ransom tickets. That hasn't changed, but if you're as irked as I am about the price/parts/labour versus reality disparity, know that £500 from 1979 is £2650 in 2017 pounds. However, with the entry-level Koetsu Black Goldline selling for £1998, perhaps relative prices have actually dropped!

Koetsu's premium Platinum range MCs – including the Onyx reviewed here – sell for £7998 apiece regardless of body material, with the optional diamond cantilever adding a further, inexcusable £3888. From this point on, I am biting my tongue for as with cables, one either accepts the avaricious prices, artificial exclusivity and fairy tales or one looks elsewhere. For the sake of this review, let's just agree that MCs with high-four-figure stickers are now commonplace.

SERVICE PLAN

There is, however, a virtue that must be cited – the fact that Koetsu offers a comprehensive rebuild of all its cartridges, protecting the audiophile's investment in an MC for the long run. Personally, I think I've tried something like 150-200 cartridges since I first used early, Sugano Senior-era Koetsus, including the first-generation Red, Black and Urushi.

While I maintain a perverse worship of Deccas, which still deliver a scintillating treble not available elsewhere, I admit without shame that Koetsus always pull me back, like Michael Corleone in *Godfather III*. Koetsus, then as now, possess poise, naturalness, warmth and, yes, a sense of

RIGHT: This shot clearly shows Koetsu's rigid boron cantilever with a fine, micro-line stylus firmly cemented into place [see magnified shot, overleaf]. The onyx body brings its total weight to 12.5g

grandeur as unmistakable as a Shure V15's detail or a Denon DL103's soundstaging. And as much as I adore Lyras, Air-Tights and other MCs, Koetsus are still the ones with the undeniable *je ne sais quoi*.

What is unfathomable, even to vendors of Koetsus, is the deliberately cryptic smokescreen surrounding the various flavours. There are currently six Urushis and ten Platinums in the UK catalogue, differing *only* in body materials. All of the Urushis feature boron cantilevers, silver-plated copper coils and samarium cobalt magnets, while all Platinums employ the same coils and cantilevers, but boost the 'engine' with platinum-based magnets.

One can only go by distributor Absolute Sounds' catalogue, which illustrates how that any differences within the ranges (diamond cantilever option aside) are strictly down to body materials. Because I do not have all ten Platinums at my disposal, I am at a loss to tell you quite what the sonic differences are between, say, this cartridge with its semi-precious-stone onyx carcass and its jade- or rhodonite-bodied siblings.

Otherwise their specifications are identical, save for weight. This varies between 12g and 13.5g according to body – the Urushis and Standards are typically 3g-4g lighter than the stone-bodied Platinums, and all share the same compliance figures.

YOUR BIRTHSTONE

Here's where speculation joins subjectivity and inconsistency to make choosing a matter of each stone's visual appeal. As

editor PM pointed out in my commission, 'Ironically, the essential performance of this Onyx-bodied version is little different from the Urushi Sky Blue that you reviewed a few years ago [HFN Jul

'13]. It has a slightly higher output and lower compliance to offset the higher bodyweight but otherwise has the same "sweetened" treble, etc.'

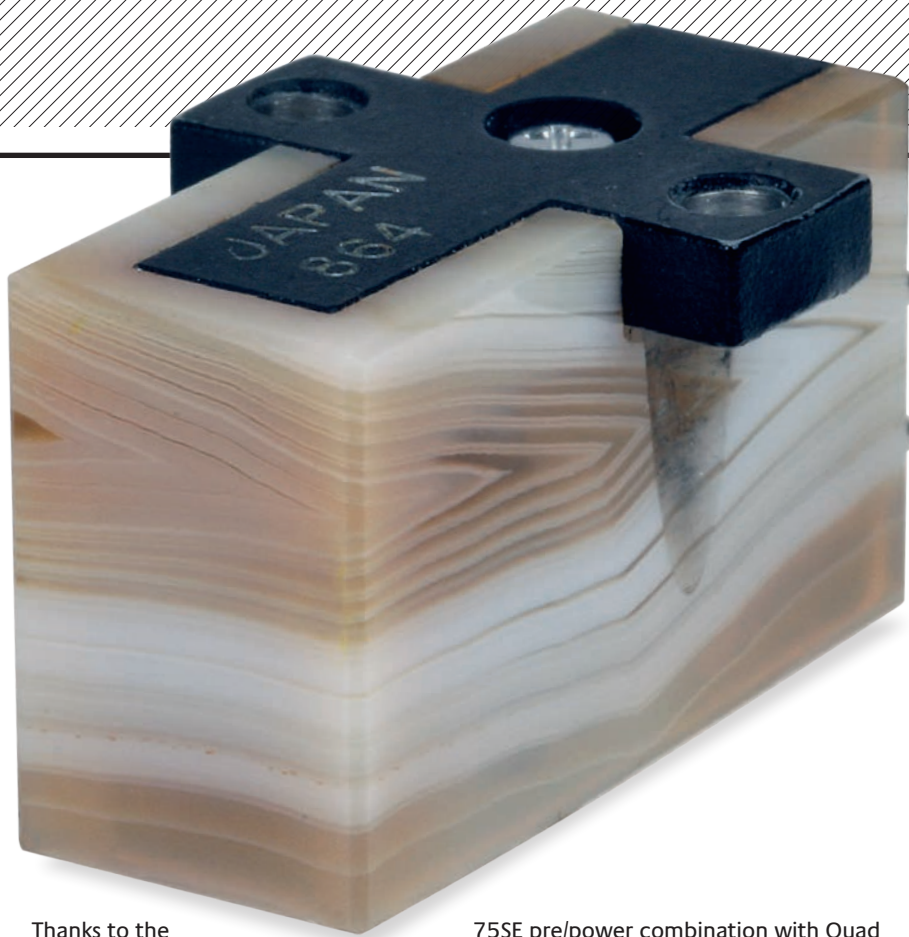
That 'etc' refers to a rich overall sound, substantial bass – not too over-damped – a cavernous, Denon-esque soundstage and a euphonic, non-aggressive top end.

What one soon realises is that they could make a Koetsu with a body of petrified chopped liver and it would still sound, well, like a Koetsu.

Present across the entire catalogue, since the dawn of the brand, whether Standard, Urushi or Platinum, is the ideal body shape for straightforward, pain-free set-up. It's rectangular, with parallel sides, a flat top and underside, with a substantial sub-frame that encourages tight fixing to the headshell. It positively inspires accurate installation. For the review, it was fitted to 9in and 12in SME Series V arms on, respectively, an SME 30/2 and SME 30/12, achieved in seconds.

'It sounded like a trio of guitars in the room – a three-way battle'





LEFT: The two-part body comprises an alloy frame to which the magnets, etc, are bolted, and includes fully-enclosed lugs. The decorative onyx stone 'overcoat' is machined from a solid block. Recessed cantilever is no boon to easy cueing!

Capitol automatically endow a system with a silky sound, further abetted by an all-valve chain of electronics and a pair of speakers so ear-friendly as to be sinful, I should also point out that prior to wiring up the Onyx, I had played with cartridges from Air Tight, TechDAS and Ortofon through the same system. It reaffirmed my belief that so strong is the Koetsu family sound that it transcends the systems' sonic signature.

To make sure I wasn't just hearing the ARC/Quad romance, I also used the Onyx Platinum in a Linn LP12 with a PrimaLuna Prologue amp, EAR 834P and JBL mini-monitors. The Koetsu's karma remained intact, varying only in degrees or intensity. The Miles Davis box was nearest the system when I switched on, and the opening moments of bass and piano were delivered with such a vivid sense of atmosphere that I had to switch speakers momentarily – again, I did not want to be manipulated by those glorious Quad '57s.

IN THE GROOVE

Richness blended with airiness, punctuated by attack: however many times one might have this masterpiece, the Onyx brought out that little bit more, bringing the listener closer to the group. It made me laugh at those oddball EQ settings on some AV receivers that let you dial in moods like 'Jazz Club' – because it's all there, in the grooves. Better still, the openness, the lack of processing and crud, beg you to focus on each and every performer.

Now in a chilled mood, I turned to mono Julie London. Has there ever been a more astounding opening track on a vocalist's debut LP than 'Cry Me A River'? As with *Kind Of Blue*, this session has an uncluttered ambience, with even fewer performers: just Julie, backed by the astounding Barney Kessel on guitar and Ray Leatherwood on bass. And while I realise that there are devotees of mono who insist on using dedicated mono cartridges as appropriate, a flick of the mode button on the REF 6 ensured that the solidity of the central event was unlikely to be bettered.

Again, it was a showpiece for the known Koetsu virtues, adding a voice to Miles' milestone for those – like me – who find vocals the most testing of sounds to ➔

Thanks to the absence of curvy bits, its straight sides acting as guides, it's a doddle to set VTA and overhang. The nervous among you will rejoice in a cantilever that exits the body from underneath, neither unprotected nor protruding in a manner that encourages disaster. As for the Onyx's external form, the only thing I can fault is Koetsu's refusal to colour-code its connector pins. I know – you can all recite by rote what red/green/white/blue equal in left/right and +/-, but I can't. So it was out with torch and loupe.

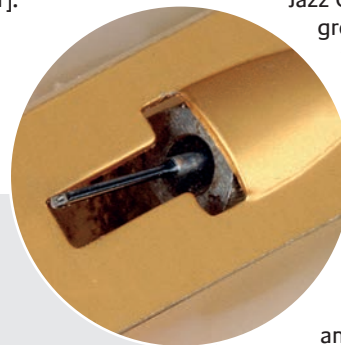
GOLDEN AGE

Feeding both SMEs into an E-Glo phono stage, the review set-up also included an Audio Research REF 6 [HFN May '16]/REF

75SE pre/power combination with Quad '57s, Rogers 15ohm LS3/5As and KEF LS50s [HFN Jul '12], with wire from Transparent and Crystal Cable.

John McLaughlin, Al Di Meola and Paco De Lucia's *Passion, Grace & Fire* [Audio Fidelity AFZLP 261] had just arrived, and, as I'm hooked on 45rpm transfers, I fed it a pile of high-speed releases. These also included Julie London's mono debut, *Julie Is Her Name* [Boxstar Records BSR 3006-45], Billy Joel's *Greatest Hits Vol. I & II* [Mobile Fidelity MFSL 3-418] and Miles Davis' *Kind Of Blue* [MFSL 2-45011].

With no desire to encourage the debate that recordings from the golden age of Mercury, RCA and



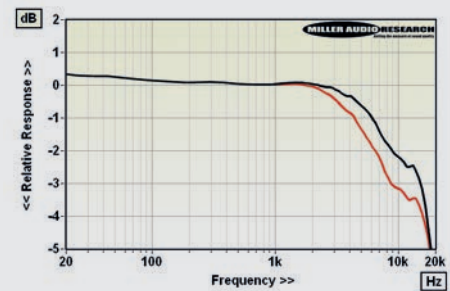
A FAMILY BUSINESS

Norbert Schmied, from Koetsu's USA distributor, agrees that extracting information from Japan is akin to revealing the secrets of Scientologists, but here is what he was able to tell HFN: 'As you know, the senior Sugano passed away some years ago. Since then, his two sons have taken over the running of the business and they are both involved with building the products.' I was not able to discover just how big the company is these days or how many cartridges it currently manufactures on a yearly basis. But we do know there are currently 17 models in its comprehensive range with separate mono versions available for all of them. In addition, all the 'Stone' body cartridges may also be ordered with a diamond rather than boron cantilever, though this is a costly upgrade. Says Norbert, 'There are also, from time to time, special one-off bodies available in super limited quantities. I can also say from our experience, we have never had long delays in getting anything that we order, or on the rebuilding of existing customers' cartridges.'

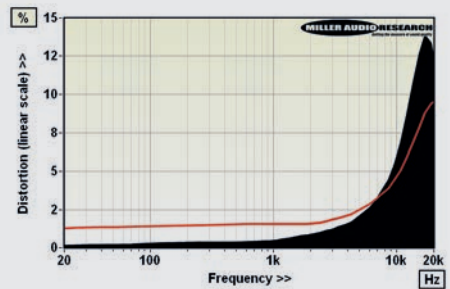
KOETSU ONYX PLATINUM

The graphs and test table [below] illustrate how Koetsu achieves its typically rich, lush balance and uniformly wide and deep soundstaging with its top MC models. Suggesting more in common with the Urushi Sky Blue [HFN Jul '13] than the Black [HFN Sep '06] or Red K [HFN Oct '09], our sample of the Onyx Platinum displayed a gentle presence and high treble roll-off amounting to $-6\text{dB}/20\text{kHz}$. Nevertheless there is a good symmetry between both in-phase and anti-phase responses [see Graph 1, below], suggesting the Onyx Platinum will offer a very broad and uniform soundstage. Furthermore, the excellent symmetry between both in-phase and anti-phase responses trends [see Graph 2] also suggests this uniform soundstaging will be blessed with an equally uniform 'colour'. These same responses indicate the Onyx 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.

While both the Urushi Sky Blue and Onyx Platinum feature silver-plated copper coils they have different magnets and, contrary to Koetsu's own specification, it's the latter that offers the higher output $-530\mu\text{V}$ versus $410\mu\text{V}$ at $1\text{kHz}/5\text{cm}/\text{sec}$ into a high-ish 1kohm load. The symmetry of the mechanism has already been discussed but the compliance is a lower 13cu in this heavy-bodied model, maintaining its match with 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 1-2% (vertical) and 0.3-2% (lateral) up to 5kHz , and almost entirely an innocuous 2nd harmonic. PM



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



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, black) and vertical (L-R, red) 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 / 12.5g
Recommended tracking force	1.8-2.0mN (1.9mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. $5\text{cm}/\text{sec}$)	$530\mu\text{V}$ / 0.25dB
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)	0.25-12% / 0.28-19%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz - 20kHz)	$+0.5$ to -5.8dB / $+0.8$ to -1.8dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	33dB / 24dB



LEFT: Another view of Koetsu's precisely aligned boron cantilever and precision-machined stone body. Although colour-coding would be useful, the cartridge pins are still sufficiently well-spaced to accommodate most tonearm leads/tags

reproduce. The sultry, breathy Ms London slithered out of the Quads, dangerously sexy even with lighter numbers like 'S Wonderful'. Kessel's guitar fills were so fluid that they could even serve as a test for VTA and the gorgeous liquidity was absolutely faultless.

One thing leads to another, and if one guitar – like a Martini – isn't enough, maybe three would be too much. The massed trio of John McLaughlin, Al Di Meola and Paco De Lucia, playing acoustic guitars with utter ferocity, proved a trying challenge for speed, transient attack and decay, imaging and detail. Because the guitarists are positioned across the soundstage (and each is identified on the LP sleeve), precise siting is crucial to transporting the listener to the event.

BLISTERING GUITAR

No muddling, no smearing, no haze, no artifice – and, yes, I know this LP was recorded digitally. It simply sounded like a trio of guitars was in the room, in a three-way battle that the Onyx ensured would leave the listener drained. I can only imagine the effect it would have on a guitarist in awe of any of the three. The sheer velocity of the notes was a testimony to how Koetsu balances the suavity of a natural-sounding acoustic with the demands of transient capabilities, precision and retrieval of tiny details.

With the heavily-engineered studio recordings of Billy Joel, I was less concerned with some cod atmospherics than I was with the overall sound *per se*. And yet... so lush-sounding was 'Piano Man' that the desired effect, that of transporting the listener to a smoke-filled bar in the wee hours, was achieved with ease. Joel's piano playing is always forceful, and he loves building up to crescendos – the Onyx simply went along as bidden.

That track has a few notorious moments that swing from the quiet to the vociferous, and the transition was as flawless as the slides from Kessel's guitar on the London LP. Via the Koetsu Onyx Platinum, it redefined 'intimacy'. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

As much as it pains me to sanction the ludicrous pricing of high-end MCs, there is no escaping the stunning sonic experience afforded by Koetsu's Onyx. It is less forgiving than an Urushi but not quite as clinical as some of its like-priced rivals from the EU or Japan. It was, from the opening bars of Miles' 'So What', an invitation to stay up late, and to keep digging out favourite LPs until the sun rose. It's magical.

Sound Quality: 89%

