

Koetsu Urushi Black with Koetsu Stepup Transformer | Review

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The Koetsu Urushi Black phono cartridge reminds me that in my more pretentious moments as a journeyman audiophile, I referred to myself as a “Koetsu Guy.”

This was after decades of less expensive and mostly MM cartridges, ones more suitable for the steady stream of Rega ‘tables I owned over the years. Moving up to the entry-level Koetsu Black Goldline—a hefty \$1500 at the time—was one of the most illuminating and dramatic upgrades I’ve made to my audio system. EVER. And yes, I’m still proud of the fact that I mounted it on a Rega P25 turntable. It sounded glorious to me at the time, and I have no doubt that it would still impress me with its lush, smooth delivery.

I had this dream of owning Koetsu after Koetsu, moving up the line (the US distributor at the time offered a very attractive trade-in allowance on old models), and eventually working my way up to the top where the Koetsus run five figures and they’re made out of such precious materials as onyx, jade and coralstone. I managed to upgrade once, moving up to the \$2500 Rosewood

Standard at the same time I traded the Rega in on a J. A. Michell Orbe SE with an SME V arm. If you know me, you probably know this rig. It helped me to get where I am today.



So what happened to that Koetsu Guy? In a way, 2008 did. I needed to downsize during my Texas Years, and the Michell, SME and Koetsu were among the first casualties. I had to switch to a back-up, a lime green Rega P3-24 with a Zu Audio 103. It was a superb rig, but it wasn't a Michell Orbe SE with an SME V and a Koetsu Rosewood Standard.

If you even said the word *Koetsu* to me during these years, I might've let out an unexpected and choked-back sob. I started telling myself that I wasn't really a Koetsu guy. I owned and reviewed dozens and dozens of Koetsu competitors, and I convinced myself that they were just as good, that they possessed that same openness and warmth and sweetness and maybe added something the Koetsu didn't have, like an overall sense of neutrality. (Koetsus had a reputation of being colored back then, especially compared to the Lyras and the Benzes and the Clearaudios of the world.)

I also convinced myself that after Sugano-san passed away—yes, my two Koetsus were made and even re-tipped by him—that the quality had to suffer without him. This was based on two observations—first, that Sugano-san had passed the company onto his two sons and second, all of the sudden there were Koetsus everywhere. This was no longer about a Zen master painstakingly creating this miniature precision machines that were individual works of art. This was commerce, and these modern Koetsus couldn't possibly be anywhere as good as MY Koetsus.

But I'm the Koetsu Guy

Then, out of the blue, Eric Franklin Shook sent me a link to the “reissue” of the original Koetsu step-up transformer, called the Koetsu Stepup Transformer, which was a bit of a legend in its day. It allowed you to listen to the Koetsu of your choice through any ol' MM phono stage.

“You're the guy who needs to review this,” Eric said, knowing my haunted and poignant past with Koetsu. (I've already told the story about having recurring nightmares after destroying a Koetsu cantilever, something that happened twice.)



Even though I'm not the biggest proponent of step-up transformers, I do realize that Koetsus prefer them. The only other time I've needed an SUT was to fix an impedance mismatch between a Yamamoto Sound Craft phono stage and that Rosewood Standard. Yamamoto-san made me a custom stereo pair of SUTs and the noise issue was fixed.

"It wouldn't make sense to review the SUT without a Koetsu cartridge," I told Eric, and pretty soon we were figuring out how to approach MoFi Distribution, the US distributor. First I spoke with Lenny Mayeux, whom I've known for many years, and he referred me to Jonathan Derda, whom I've known for a few. Jonathan had to hunt one of the SUTs down, because this is one of those limited edition thingamajigs, but he finally had one sent to me.

"Which Koetsu did you want?" he asked. That's sort of like asking me which ice cream I like the best. I didn't know—I was expecting something fairly modest, possibly even one of the models I used to own (which are much more expensive these days, \$2995 for the black and \$3995 for the Rosewood). I told him that I was using a Technics SL-1200G with a number of high-falutin' phono stages from Allnic, Brinkmann and Pass Labs.

What did I get? The Koetsu Urushi Black, which retails for \$6,495. Then again, that little SUT, which you can hold comfortably in one hand, is \$5K. Nightmares about broken cantilevers on a last chance power drive aside, I haven't been this excited about reviewing analog gear in a very long time.

Koetsu Stepup Transformer

The Koetsu Stepup Transformer costs \$4995, which is on the high side of SUTs these days. That price comes into sharp relief when you have the Koetsu SUT in your hand—it's small and light and

doesn't seem like something that costs this much. But SUTs usually aren't all about the big iron inside, but how the coils are wound.



The Koetsu SUT is custom made for Koetsu cartridges. It adds 26 dB of gain, and it's designed to be the perfect load for Koetsu cartridges. I used the SUT with other cartridges I had on hand such as the Hana Umami Red, Sumiko Celebration 40, Allnic Audio Amber MC and a few more—and in most cases the sound was different but not necessarily better. With the Koetsu Urushi Black and the SUT, the improvements were more than obvious.

If I decided to buy another Koetsu cartridge, something I've considered about two hundred times in the last decade, I know now that the Koetsu SUT is considered essential—at least once you pass by those entry level models.

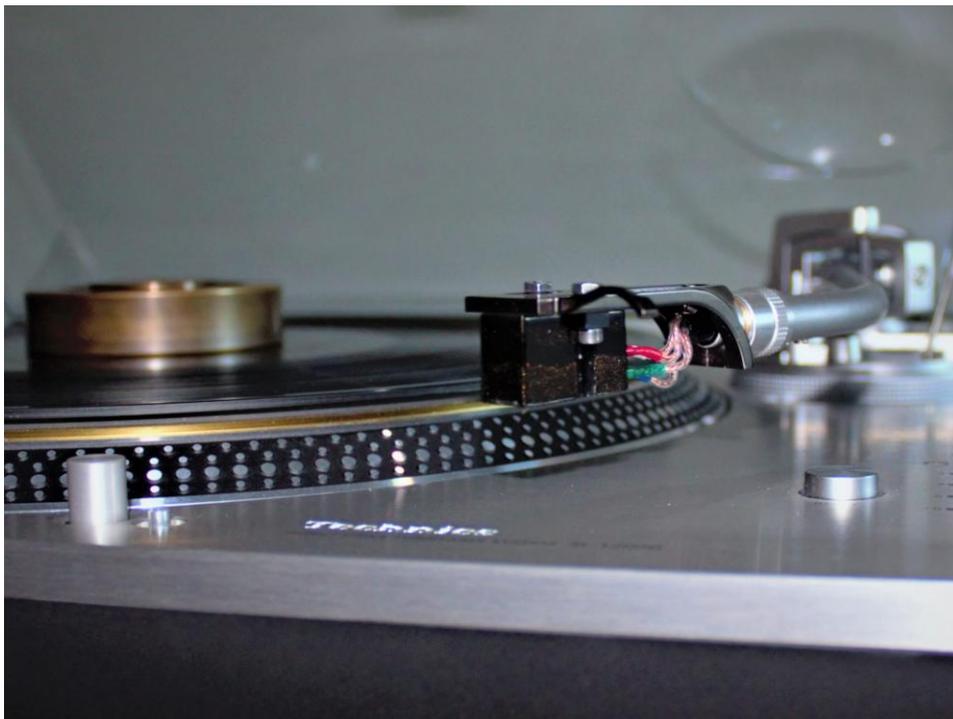
Koetsu Urushi Black

Scot Hull, who has presumably not had the passionate long-term romance with Koetsu cartridges that I have, asked me a really good question about the line. Are all Koetsu cartridges the same basic design, with the only differences being between the materials used for the body? For a while, I thought this was true. It's definitely true about the upper-echelon Koetsus, the ones made from all those precious and rare materials. And yes, you're supposed to hear sonic differences between onyx and rhodonite and coralstone and jade.

(What an assignment that would be, right? Reviewing every single Koetsu and writing down thoughts on each one. Where do I send my resume?)



But you start noticing changes as you move from the bottom to the top. Output changes from 0.4 mV to 0.3 mV as you move from the Rosewood and Urushi models. The Urushi line, which the Koetsu Urushi Black obviously belongs, feature the same rosewood bodies but there's a layer of



lacquer over the wood—which reflects the Japanese art of using lacquer to build up layers and create amazing details when you look up close. The various models in the Urushi line feature beautiful layers of lacquer, and sometime gold flakes that sparkle.

The other curious thing about the Urushi line is that all the models now use silver-plated copper wires instead of just copper. When I

last considered myself updated on all things Koetsu, I noticed that the Koetsu Sky Blue Urushi was different from every other Koetsu in that it used that silver, which made the Sky Blue the linear and most neutral of the Koetsus. Now, all five models of the Urushi line—Vermillion, Sky Blue, Tsugaru, Black and Wajima—feature silver-plated coils.

The Koetsu Urushi Black, by the numbers, has that silver-plated copper-coil wiring, a Permendur magnet, and a boron cantilever. The output is in that higher range for Koetsu at 0.4mV, and the recommended tracking force is 1.8 to 2.0g. I settled in closer to two grams. But I'll tell you, those numbers won't tell you what a Koetsu sounds like.

Koetsu Urushi Black Set-Up

In my recent “shootout” between the Technics SL-1200G and the Technics SL-1210GAE, which yielded almost no useful findings, I saved the best—the Koetsu Urushi Black and the SUT—for last. I was able to evaluate the Urushi with and without the SUT by using the MM and then the MC section of the Allnic Audio H-5500 tube phono preamplifier.

A little foreshadowing here—I kept the Koetsu Urushi Black and the SUT for as long as I possibly could, which meant that I used a wide variety of components outside of Technics SL-1200G, and the cabling and power management from Furutech and AudioQuest. I even held onto the Koetsu rig when the Brinkmann Taurus turntable arrived a few weeks ago. But if I had to go back to the magic combination, I'd have to go with the Allnic Audio T-2000 integrated amplifier and Falcon Acoustics LS3-5a MoFi Edition (which, like Koetsu, is distributed by MoFi.)

This was a system for the ages, one that really opened my eyes to the incredible possibilities of life with the LS3/5a and nothing else. Oh, and Koetsu.



I will say that I achieved spectacular results with the TotalDAC d100 loudspeakers, which provided me with the necessary low frequencies that the Falcons can't quite retrieve from the ether, and the Balanced Audio Technology (another MoFi stablemate) VK-3500 integrated amplifier. The BAT, by the way, has an outstanding inboard phono stage, which also spent time with the Koetsu gear.

Koetsu Urushi Black with the Stepup Transformer

Dave McNair and I recently had a conversation about the Koetsu SUT and step-up transformers in general; he'd rather use a low-output MC section because he tends to "hear" the transformer in the sound. I didn't agree or disagree with that; I kind of just went *hmmmm*, like an errant and underpowered transformer, and I thought about it while I compared the Koetsu Urushi Black with and without the SUT.

I'd love to send this Koetsu SUT and Koetsu Urushi Black over to Dave and see what he thinks, because my initial impression of the sound was something had been stripped away, one of those proverbial layers of haze we used to accept back in the '80s when I first started reading the high-end audio mags. In fact, I've never had the word "veil" pop up in my mind with such expediency. Ta-DAAAA!

I may be oversimplifying here because my system, prior to the installation of the Koetsu SUT, was anything but veiled. But for some reason the sound with the SUT was a little more naked, a little more honest and a little more present in my personal space. And everything was quiet. Oh so quiet.



That reminded me of the first thing I ever noticed about the Koetsu sound all those years ago. They are exceptionally quiet in the groove, and they are singularly impressive when it comes to relegating surface noise further back into the soundstage. I once had an old 'sensitive cartridge-

hatin' old audio guy attempt to tell me something had to be wrong with the Koetsu if it was getting rid of surface noise and that I was probably missing a lot of musical info around those same frequencies and NO NO NO. It's not getting rid of the surface noise, it's just that you're getting more information and more space and the pops and cracks are diluted. They're not gone, they're just way over there.

Every time I mention Koetsu, by the way, I have to say what I just said. But it's true.

That may be the first thing I notice whenever I use a Koetsu cartridge, but it's not what sticks with me afterward. I'm always reminded of that lush, smooth delivery.

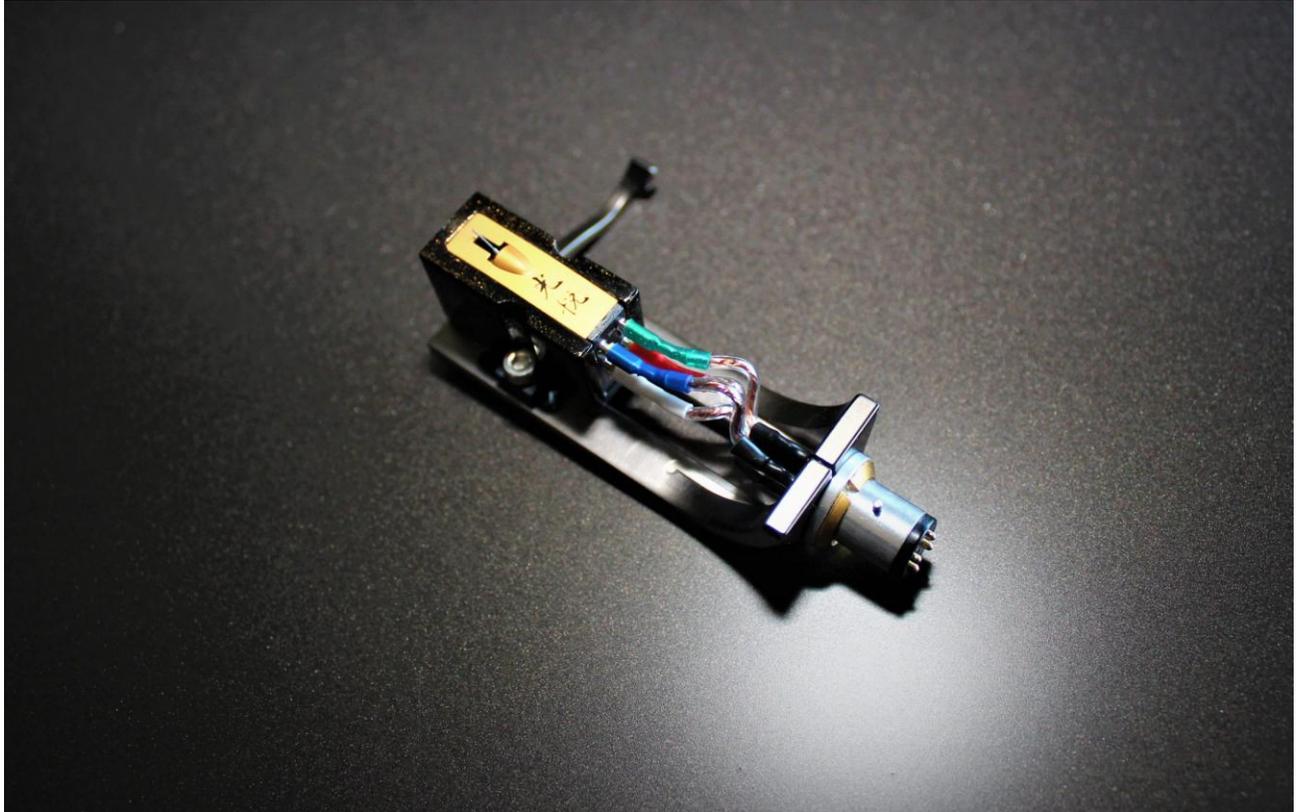


Conclusion

Am I still a Koetsu guy?

I last owned a Koetsu in 2009, and since then I have found a sort of permanent happiness with cartridges from Transfiguration, ZYX and a few others. There's that Allnic Audio Amber I've been listening to over the last few months, and I can't help but think that it's the most revealing cartridge I've heard in one of my systems. If I never heard another Koetsu, if every cartridge created by this company over the decades was swallowed up by an angry yet incredibly discerning hole in the earth, I'm confident that I could go on. That's what I've been doing for the dozen years, right?

Of all the listening rooms in all the towns in all the world, this Koetsu Urushi Black cartridge and Stepup Transformer walked into mine, the veritable old flame looking—and sounding—better than ever.



I'm not quite prepared to call Koetsu cartridges the finest in the world right now, mostly because these are still basically the classic designs from Sugano-san and there's a whole lot of new advances being made in cartridge design—especially in Japan and, as I mentioned, South Korea. A lot of those advances have less to do with the luxuriant materials use to build cartridges at this level and more to do with how they're treated by the designer. ZYX's 100-piece carbon fiber cantilever comes to mind.

Now imagine two vinyl lovin' audiophiles. One has a brand new Porsche Panamera Turbo S E-Hybrid Sport Turismo in his garage, and the other has a mint 1962 Jaguar E-type convertible with less than 250 miles on it. One of those audiophiles is more likely to choose the Koetsu Urushi Black, in my humble opinion, than the other, and if you understand what I mean you might also be a Koetsu Guy.

While all these newer cartridge makers are clamoring for space at the top of Five-Figure Cartridge Mountain, the Koetsu Urushi Black with the Koetsu SUT is on a different mountaintop, with a unique and enduring perspective on the rest of the world. It's still magical to my ears, and it still warms my soul as it did almost twenty years. It's hard to say no, I'm not a Koetsu guy when the Koetsu Urushi Black—with the Koetsu Stepup Transformer—speaks to me so directly. Highly recommended, and a Reviewer's Choice.



