

Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue

After using a very early *Red* (Rosewood) *Signature* for many years, a year ago I was mightily taken by the blazing performance of a current production *Red T* in our last cartridge group test. Sadly, changes in the exchange rate have subsequently seen the price of a *Red T* rise to £1,990. Koetsu's least costly Black has a current price of £1,600, and a number of more expensive models include a current *Red Signature*, and the multi-coloured *Urushi* range.

Here we're assessing a brand new £3,700 *Urushi* called the *Sky Blue*, with blue lacquer finish over a narrower, dense composite body. High tensile threaded inserts are part of the metal back plate, so no fiddly nuts are required.

This latest *Urushi* uses an Alnico magnet, producing a healthy claimed 0.4mV output from low resistance coil windings. These are PCOC copper wire, rather than the alternative copper-and-silver wire found in the *Urushi Vermillion*. The cantilever is a long grain boron rod, and the stylus is a top quality elliptical with low tip mass. It weighs 10g and comes simply packed in a fragrant sandalwood box, but with no instructions.

This new cartridge needed running in. It actually sounded good right out of the box, but as 30 or so hours progressed, the sound became more focused and flowing, and transparency improved. Alignment was trouble free, and it was quite obvious when all was square and true – and not just visually, as this cartridge was accurately built relative to the external geometry. I left the Superline input loading at 1 kohm, but this cartridge was little affected by loading, except that clarity was reduced by the residual sound of the additional loading resistor. Downforce was fine at 2g, while this and the VTA can be adjusted to optimise the system tonal balance. Enough downforce for stable low noise tracking is a prerequisite, and when this is



achieved incidental groove noise is really low. Its open sounding top end means there's no need to lift the back of the arm at all, indeed it might benefit from being lowered a couple of millimetres below the horizontal.

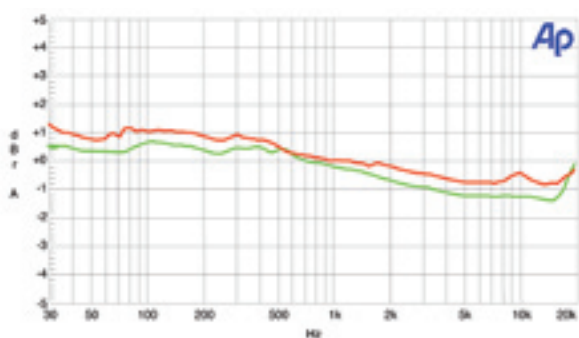
Sound Quality

The difference in fundamental character between the *Blue Sky* and the *Red T* came as quite a surprise. The latter sounds strong, rich, even slightly 'bloomed' in the midrange, and has by comparison an identifiable tinge of congestion, but also delivers a massively confident and dynamic sound coupled with fine rhythm. To our ears the *Sky Blue* sounded slightly lighter and leaner at first, with a suggestion of less attack and power in the bass. But that impression was very quickly dispelled as we came to realise that this cartridge really hit the spot, substantially improving on the *Red T* in terms of natural openness, coupled with a more accurate tonal balance.

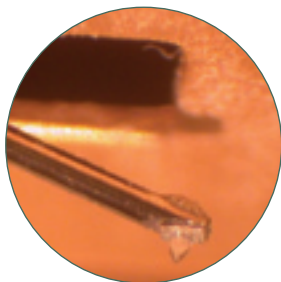
We have heard similar 'character' before, often accompanied by a clear shift in overall tonal balance, an uptilted, brighter frequency response which may tend to

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Koetsu Blue Cartridge
L&R frequency response



Manufacturer: Koetsu	Model: Urushi Sky Blue (SN 60428)	Price (UK): £ 3,700
Type: low o/p moving coil	Specified Output: 0.4mV	Impedance: 3 ohms
Cantilever: long grain boron rod	Stylus type: nude elliptical	Enclosed body type
Cartridge weight: 10g	recommended downforce: 2g	Loading: 100+ ohms
Output 3.45cm/s: 0.3mV	frequency response 50Hz-10kHz	+/-0.8dB
Channel Balance: 0.38dB	frequency response 30Hz-20kHz	+/-1.1 dB
Separation:	34dB typically, 50Hz to 8kHz	20dB at 20kHz
Distortion:	300Hz lateral +9dB: 0.4 %	300Hz vertical +6dB: 1.9 %
Trackability, 300Hz:	300Hz lateral +15dB	2.5g 300Hz vertical +12dB: 1g
Supertrack Test:	+18dB lateral	Failed at 3.5g
Stylus finish and alignment:	Finish excellent	Alignment excellent
LF resonance, 15g test arm:	Frequency: 10.5Hz	Rise: 15dB
Suggested arm type:	effective mass: 9-16g	Damping needed?: optional



exaggerate sibilance and surface noise. Not so with the *Sky Blue*, which remained calm, pure sounding and very naturally balanced, aided by very secure groove contact. Tracing and surface noise were commendably low. It comfortably leaps beyond the high standard previously set by the *Red T*, with still better dynamic resolution, a substantial increase in clarity, focus and more deeply layered stereo perspectives, and not least improved transparency, all readily revealed by the *SuperLine/ SuperCap* phono stage.

With that higher resolution comes better extended note decays, cleaner phrasing and reverberation, more obvious hall acoustic, and still sharper central image focus. This was much more just a technical exercise, the *Sky Blue* was also musically more involving and entertaining, enticing one into extended listening sessions. That subjective gain in resolution was achieved right through the frequency range, with remarkably clearer bass transients and tune playing, and a consistently well timed, lively, and upbeat sound. If the *Red T* registered a class leading 110, the *Sky Blue* confidently hits the 150 mark: it is simply that good.

In context of my system and the parameters I value in vinyl sound reproduction, the *Sky Blue* scores a direct hit. Its lifelike exuberance, clarity and expression was equally relevant to rock and classical programme, and it drove the *SuperLine* really well. Reviewing it was cruel: having experienced its virtues, it was initially something of a disappointment to go back to the *Red T*, but even though one could not forget what had been heard, it was possible to re-adjust after half an LP side or so. Intriguingly, of all cartridges I have auditioned, it was this *Urushi* that confirmed the musical accuracy of the major part of the performance of the Rega *Apheta*.

Lab Report

Despite its noise controlling low impedance, the output was a healthy 0.3mV. The frequency response is characteristic Koetsu, with that gentle down-tilt, but better controlled through the treble than the *Red T*. Uniform to 1kHz, the response then drops to -1.5dB by 5kHz, above which it levels out to beyond 20kHz. Midband channel balance is 0.15dB on lateral modulation, and while the tracking balance across the frequency band is not perfect, the inter-channel balance holds to 1dB over the entire range, a good result after all. That mild upper-mid trough adds a touch of distance and perspective to the soundstage.

Channel separation is extraordinary. The very high 40dB result over much of the midrange is an indication of how well the design extracts detail under dynamic

stereo conditions. Is this why we heard such good depth and transparency? Over 30dB separation was maintained from 100Hz to 5kHz, with 28dB at 10kHz, and still 18dB at 20kHz, which is quite exceptional. Distortion was low, trackability good, albeit refusing to take on the +18dB Supertrack level, as many moving coils do. The coupled arm resonance was at a sensible 10.5Hz, indicating a compliance of 8.5, though a little damping might help if available, as the resonance rise was a quite high 15dB

Conclusions

A healthy output from a low impedance means good power delivery and low noise. The channel separation was exceptional, which correlates with clarity and high resolution. It matches typical tonearms well and the rest of the lab results were fine.

It was a hit on rock and classical programme, and is simply a beautifully balanced design, which does rhythm and dynamics, pace and timing really well while possessed of a natural timbre and purity, and with very high resolution. Focus and transparency match the best I have heard.

It is undoubtedly very costly and deserves a top quality supporting act, but conclusively shows that higher performances, and not just variations in sound, are obtainable from experienced makers. It may be confidently recommended on grounds of pure excellence and is a well balanced performer in all respects.

Miyajima Shilabe

Miyajima might be new to *HIFICRITIC* but it's not a newcomer to the industry. The *Shilabe* suggests the designers are looking back to the traditional build and sound quality values of cartridges made in early days of the stereo LP. Indeed Miyajima also produces a pure mono cartridge, to extract best performance from early recordings, which is specifically designed for lateral groove modulations, and not merely a stereo cartridge patched to mono by paralleling the channels.

Our stereo example, the £2,195 *Shilabe*, has a relatively large, rounded African Blackwood body that lacks parallel sides and therefore has to be critically aligned by ear. There are no metal inserts so the long brass bolts supplied must not be over-tightened, so as not to split the casing, while judicious re-tightening is advised after a period to take up any slack that might have developed. Interestingly, folklore suggests that the cartridge briefly runs in for the first 10 minutes after not being used for a period, after the original recommended