

# Koetsu Urushi Black

A new take on a classic cartridge — and it still sounds gorgeous

PRICE	£2800
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**Would you** believe it has been 13 years since I reviewed the original Koetsu Urushi? Now, on the *barmitzvah* of that review, I'm trying its latest descendant. With one difference: Sugano-San is no longer with us. Sugano believed then that the original Urushi was the finest cartridge he was capable of producing. It just shows that Koetsu are like Ferraris, and *tifosi* will never agree on 'which was the best ever'.

All of which presents a problem for me, because the Urushi Black is neither the most exotic nor the costliest Koetsu in the current range (at a 'mere' £2800); yet it strikes me as one of the most musical and 'right' cartridges I've ever used. Even without having run it in, and using a strange LP and a new phono stage, I knew that this cartridge would rank with the greats. It deserves mentioning that the original Urushi cost £2390 back in 1990. So whatever anyone says about the high-end, here's one piece that has fought inflation.

Before dealing with Urushi, or — for that matter — Koetsu minutiae, note that the review model is fitted with copper coils. Absolute Sounds feels that the differences in Urushis, especially those using gold or silver or platinum for the coils, cost so little in real terms that the



company is charging £2800 regardless of the model. I'm using copper because I've always preferred it to silver [see Technology].

Like the original, the Urushi Black's body is a slab-sided alloy block covered in hand-applied lacquer made from the sap of the urushi tree. This finish is hard to describe, as it looks — even when brand new — 'distressed', as if created to look vintage from the outset. Unlike the original, which was finished in red and gold splashes, the Black's composition is its eponymous colour plus gold flecks, and I heartily recommend that you look at it in the sunlight before forever committing it to a life indoors. It's only then that you can appreciate the artistry. (This lacquer is also used on the very rare Loiminchay fountain pens.) I also wrote in the original review, 'Urushi lacquer has a function other than aesthetic. With time, the lacquer will harden even further, enhancing the strength of the already-rigid body, eliminating whatever vestiges of resonance might remain.'

While the first Urushi held a platinum-core magnet, this uses samarium cobalt. The specs remain classically 'Koetsu', with a 5 ohm impedance and a high-ish output of 0.4mV. It likes the EAR 834P phono stage and even works with some 47k ohm m-m stages.

With a cartridge shape that's a breeze to align, the only setup problem is its weight, around 12g. This might force you to position the counterweight on some arms near the very back of the end-piece. Like the original, the new version features a boron cantilever, but the

fine-line stylus has been replaced with a new shape described as 'quadilateral'; it's a profile that features a complex array of facets frighteningly reminiscent of a cutting head. Recommended tracking force is 1.8g, and best VTA/SRA finds the top of the cartridge absolutely parallel to the platter/LP, in the SME Series V on the SME 10.

What so moved me to consider this as good as any cartridge available in the new millennium? The bass was as rich-yet-tight as its granddaddy's, the midband as lifelike as any cartridge I've heard that didn't say 'Decca' (or 'London') on the box. Tracking and detail? Ain't no Shure V15, but I found no discs to upset it, and the listening included every LP in this month's Audiophile section [page 73]. But what rocked me more than usual were its consistency, its deathly silent backgrounds, and a shimmer in the treble which I found spine-tinglingly charming. But its real magic is in the vocals.

Play some Hendrix, some Otis, some Orbison, some Fogerty via Creedence — all different textures and ranges. This cartridge will let you hear the very nuances that separate real from recorded, why Michael Hobson of Classic Records is right to fight for 200g vinyl and no GrooveGuard, why mono — let alone stereo — isn't dead. As I wrote over 10 years ago, 'The best CD sound is so far behind the Urushi that it would be comical if the Urushi were affordable.' Looks like some things don't change.

**WORDS** KEN KESSLER

## TECHNOLOGY

There are subtle sonic differences in the various Urushi models available: the Vermillion, using platinum parts, has a lower output and a rounder sound; the Black with copper wiring is more dynamic; while the Gold with gold and silver parts is leaner and less voluptuous but especially detailed. Your Koetsu dealer or Absolute Sounds will help you match your system to the right Koetsu. Any cartridge can be upgraded (if that's the right word) to platinum.

## KEY FEATURES

- Silent backgrounds
- Unmatched realism on vocals
- Spine-tingling treble quality