



# KOETSU URUSHI VERMILLION

*A wonderfully refined moving coil cartridge that combines smoothness with crisp, biting detail*

**PRICE** £2,699 **CONTACT** Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0TW ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.absolutesounds.com

The founder of Koetsu, Yosiaki Sugano (1907-2002), who began manufacturing moving-coil cartridges back in the late 1970s, adopted an extremely low-key approach to marketing. He never promoted or advertised his products. He did not even produce any sales literature. The brand's reputation effectively grew by word of mouth alone. Quite simply, once you'd heard one of Sugano's cartridges, nothing else sufficed.

Apart from their superb sound, Koetsu cartridges are beautiful to behold. With bodies made from exotic materials – from various lacquered Urushi finishes, to the use of natural gemstones including Jade and Onyx – each comes packaged in a simple, attractive wooden box that has a sweet, pungent odour. Koetsu offers an interesting variety of different cartridges. While there are models at different prices and quality levels, there are also several at identical prices. The Vermillion retails for £2,699, so it's less expensive than models such as the Blue Onyx or Jade Platinum. Nonetheless, it has all the Koetsu hallmarks of subtlety and refinement allied to incredible detail.

Sonically, the Vermillion has that beautifully refined, almost velvety smoothness you expect from a Koetsu. It sounds detailed and dynamic, yet wonderfully poised and relaxed, providing a musical delivery that's utterly effortless and natural. The music just seems to 'happen' between the speakers. Voices and instruments materialise without effort or strain, sounding realistically integrated and absolutely natural in terms of tonal balance and timbre. Tonally, the presentation is smooth and finely shaded, yet crisp and tactile. It's an intriguing mix of opposites: mellow warmth and silky smoothness allied with immediacy and crisp attack.

The presentation is vivid yet natural and unexaggerated; transparent, with a full, solid bottom end, liquid midband and brilliant highs. Transient detail is crisp and pin-point sharp, yet there's no sense of forwardness or exaggerated brightness. Tonally, the sound is very open and natural. This ability to produce vivid, sharply focussed detail without sounding hard or over-driven is something of a Koetsu trademark. For the exceptionally well-heeled, there are even more expensive Koetsu cartridges to tempt you, but we have to say that – without the benefit of a direct comparison – it's hard to imagine this one being improved upon. It really is that good.

But everything is relative. The more expensive cartridges may offer even greater

refinement and detail but, compared to CD, the Vermillion has subtlety and fine detail that the latter can only hint at. There's a deliciously relaxed openness and refined smoothness, allied to tactile brilliance, that CD, for all its many positive qualities, fails to approach. Clarity is outstanding. Individual vocal and instrumental lines 'tell' with effortless ease. No matter how complex the music gets, you still hear every strand. The result is a sound that's highly detailed yet almost disconcertingly relaxed. Subtle tone colours and delicate changes of phrasing or dynamics are revealed without being thrust upon you.

One of the first LPs we played was Leopold Stokowski's 1969 recording of Debussy's impressionistic orchestral seascape *La Mer*, a Decca Phase Four Stereo disc. Phase Four

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aimed at vivid, larger-than-life sonics, with wide stereo and spotlit detail. The recordings were made with a 20-channel mixer and a great many microphones. Audiophile purists may harbour mixed feelings about Phase Four, but through the Vermillion, Stokowski's *La Mer* sounded beautifully spacious and incredibly detailed. True, you could still hear the way certain instruments had been close-miked but, nonetheless, the sound remained refined and completely integrated. Also, something of Stokowski's legendary ability to create uniquely subtle and sensuous timbres could be heard. There was a ravishing palette of tonal colours and fine shadings – all the more remarkable given the multi-miked nature of the recording. You could tell that the conductor and orchestra were creating a fabulous sound in the hall.

Although refinement and exquisite subtlety are among the Vermillion's special qualities, they're not adornments grafted on to each recording regardless. The more you listen, the more you appreciate the way the cartridge faithfully reflects the individual qualities of each recording. It really presents a transparent window onto the music. The sound can be sweet and beguiling one moment, then sharp, tactile, and crisp the next. Stereo soundstaging is wide and – on the right LP – vivid and holographic. The music 'materialises' between the loudspeakers; it kind of hangs in free space

between and around the enclosures, almost as though the speakers no longer existed. CD never quite manages this: it's something only analogue LP seems able to do, though don't ask us how or why. Nor are these qualities only apparent with special audiophile LPs. Often, the magic's there on quite ordinary pressings.

Surface noise is very low, and the cartridge tracks cleanly and securely given a good turntable and tonearm. We used the excellent Origin Live Aurora Gold turntable fitted with an Origin Live Illustrious MkII tone-arm, and set the playing weight to 2g.

The Vermillion has a healthy output of 0.4mV. While many Koetsus feature coil windings using 99.9999 per cent purity copper wire with a special silver cladding – a silver sheath slowly drawn over the copper

conductor – the Vermillion is said to have special Copper/Silver hybrid coils. The magnetic assembly employs Alnico for its concentrated power while the cantilever is made from Boron. It's quite a big cartridge, incidentally – 23mm long and 14mm deep – and also quite a heavy one at about 12.8g. Optimum playing weight falls between 1.8g and 2g. At 1.8g there's slightly greater transparency and fine detail, but our preference was for 2g, which reduces surface ticks and improves tracking a little.

Experience tells us that these pickups have a long working life. Even with extensive daily use, you can expect to get upwards of two or three years from a Koetsu, before a stylus change is called for. Each one is a miniature work of art, and the Urushi Vermillion is no exception. ■■

*Jimmy Hughes*

