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CARTRIDGES

ETSURO Gin-nezu

Vincent Guillemin


For the first time at Etsuro, a cartridge is not coated with Urushi lacquer. Named Gin-nezu (literally “silver-gray”), this new entry-level model from the Japanese brand features the Urushi Cobalt’s mounting and magnet almost entirely. But here’s a small revolution: while it retains a very refined appearance, its body is painted matte and it features a boron cantilever. This superior material—used for the first time by Excel Sound in an Etsuro model—helps reduce the costs associated with the sapphire or diamond used in other models. However, by retaining the microline diamond stylus from the Cobalt and Bordeaux models, this newcomer also preserves Etsuro’s signature sound—characterized by depth and precision of detail that never detracts from musicality. In this review, we’ll share our experience living with this lovely gray Japanese gem, brimming with sensory delights, for over a month.

**ORIGIN**

Japan

PRICE

€ 2.490

WEIGHT

8.1 g (0.29 oz)

TRACEABILITY

70 µm (at 2 g)

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

15 Hz – 50 kHz

IMPEDANCE

5 Ω (at 1 kHz)

OUTPUT VOLTAGE

0.40 mV (at 1 kHz)

CHANNEL SEPARATION

30 dB (at 1 kHz)

RECOMMENDED TRACKING FORCE

2 g

In the world of analog cartridges, there's a real battle in the mid-range price bracket between moving-magnet (MM) and moving-coil (MC) technologies. But once you pass a certain price point—around a thousand euros/US dollars—the debate all but disappears, vanishing entirely when you double that amount.

In a way, it's the same with cartridges as it is with champagne. While facing stiff competition from other sparkling wines at the entry level, champagne remains unrivaled as soon as you move up the price range—and even more so when it comes to grand cru champagnes. Why this introduction? No doubt because the sound sparkles just as wonderfully as soon as you mount an Etsuro Urushi moving-coil cartridge on a high-performance turntable tonearm!

Discovered a few years ago, the brand produced by Excel Sound (like Hana or certain high-end models from other well-known hi-fi brands) had, until now, three models in its catalog. Cobalt, Bordeaux, and Gold (the latter featured in our “Trio of Stars” in *VUMètre No. 58 FR*)—these cartridges are all finished with Urushi lacquer, characteristic of Japanese tradition. And in addition to coils that rank among the best in the world, these models all feature sapphire cantilevers, or even diamond ones for the top-of-the-line model. These exceptional materials alone come at a significant cost, which analog audio enthusiasts inevitably find reflected in the cartridge's price. This is, of course, to the benefit of musical quality, but at the same time comes at a cost to buyers, since a Cobalt requires a financial investment of € 4.850 and a Gold, € 15.000.

So, to design their latest model, the Japanese engineers started from scratch to offer a new entry-level model that's nearly half the price of what was previously available.



Housed in an A7075 super-duralumin chassis identical to that of the other three models, the Gin-nezu features a stunning matte gray finish, which no longer uses the traditional Urushi technique. The tonearm is not significantly different from that of the Cobalt, nor is the 80-micrometer Microline diamond stylus. However, as mentioned above, it is now mounted on a boron cantilever (more precisely, 0.28 mm in diameter).

With a tracking force identical to that of the Cobalt (70 μ m) and a weight of 8.1 g (0.29 oz), the Gin-nezu also uses a samarium-cobalt magnet at the heart of its generator—a feature common to the entire Etsuro series. On the other hand, new coils give it an internal impedance that is slightly higher than that of the Cobalt and Bordeaux (3 Ω), and closer to that of the Gold (4 Ω)—still low, but measured here at 5 Ω .

THE SET UP

With rhodium-plated connectors of a diameter that easily connects to standard tonearm or cartridge cables, the Etsuro Gin-nezu is also very convenient to secure using two small screws that screw directly



into the top, without a locknut. An Allen wrench is provided for this task, allowing you to securely fasten the duralumin plate before selecting a tonearm weight of around 2 g (0.07 oz).

After being tested over several weeks—first with our Kuzma Stabi S paired with a Stogi S tonearm, then with a Technics SL-1200GME—this beautiful piece, whose finish resembles a Japanese stone, was also mounted on a J.Sikora Aspire. Subsequently, comparative tests with the Cobalt and the Bordeaux led us to pair the Gin-nezu with Schröder or Reed tonearms on Döhmman and C-Sport turntables.

During our listening sessions, the new Etsuro first replaced a Hana ML, before being pitted against a Nagaoka MP-700 (the only MM cartridge we felt compelled to compare it to) and the magnificent Koetsu Urushi Wajima (*VUmètre* review #61). We used a wide selection of phono preamps to delve deeply into the sonic characteristics of this beauty—ranging from our Gold Note PH-10 and the Luxman CL-38uC preamp's circuitry to the Phasemation EA-550 and EA-1500.

THE SOUND

Relatively easy to pair with a mid-range tonearm, the Gin-nezu truly shines when paired with higher-end tonearms, which can faithfully convey all the information it extracts from the grooves without altering it. And from the very first listen, you can recognize an Etsuro in this newcomer. First, in the level of detail it delivers—already exceptional—yet without the excessive sharpness that some competitors may strive for. Second, and most importantly, in the layering of the soundstage.

For if an Etsuro stands out, it is precisely in this characteristic—where voices stand out particularly clearly in the foreground and where symphonic masses reveal themselves in the height and breadth



of the recordings. And compared to the Urushi Cobalt, while the Gin-nezu is slightly less refined, the slightly more direct sound—undoubtedly due to the boron in the cantilever—also gives it a more coherent soundstage, with a sense of depth at least equivalent to that of the Cobalt.

To truly experience the same structural quality of sound as the Gin-nezu, you have to step up to the Urushi Bordeaux, which offers more in terms of color and harmony but never outshines the little silver-gray model in terms of contrast. For these aspects—whether you're swooning at every strum of Bill Withers' guitar or savoring the full instrumental range of Schönberg's *GurreLieder*—the results are always magnificent.

Without relying on excessive clarity or crystalline brightness, the treble is nonetheless always brilliant, with a luminosity that allows you to immediately distinguish a glockenspiel note from a celesta or a triangle, even in the midst of a choir and a large symphony orchestra. Although it's 3 dB lower than the Cobalt (30 dB vs. 33 dB), the channel separation is also already excellent for precisely positioning all the instruments on the soundstage. This is even more true when the electronics and speakers connected to the turntable possess the finesse and volume necessary to perfectly reproduce all the information delivered by the Etsuro.

At ease across all registers—with full bass that's

never harsh, all the way up to the treble we've already discussed, but especially with midrange tones composed of splendid pastel hues—the Gin-nezu adapts to all styles of music, even if its musicality is even better suited to jazz and classical music.

OUR CONCLUSION

While it's clear that analog listening is far from having had its final say, it still regularly surprises us with the emergence of major innovations, as current technologies allow us to go much further than in the golden age of vinyl.

These updates have recently served to further enhance the new generations of Koetsu cartridges, even though they have remained very close in design to the original versions. And when it comes to new creations—provided they are designed by expert engineers—they result in products that are better than ever, especially when the technologies are subsequently applied to more affordable models.

Although already priced on the high side (€ 2.490), the new Gin-nezu fully capitalizes on Excel Sound's analog heritage and Etsuro's Urushi models, while being much more accessible thanks to a price tag that's nearly half that of the Urushi Cobalt (€ 4.850). And yet, thanks to its similarities with the others, this new MC cartridge possesses most of the sonic characteristics that have made the Japanese brand so distinctive. Recognizable by its extreme musicality, this silver-gray version truly embodies the heart and DNA of the Etsuro Urushi models through the precision of its detail and the depth of soundstage it conveys. And while it may be a bit more straightforward than the higher-end models, it nonetheless delivers just as much contrast—and at times, with even greater overall coherence. We'd love to keep it! ■