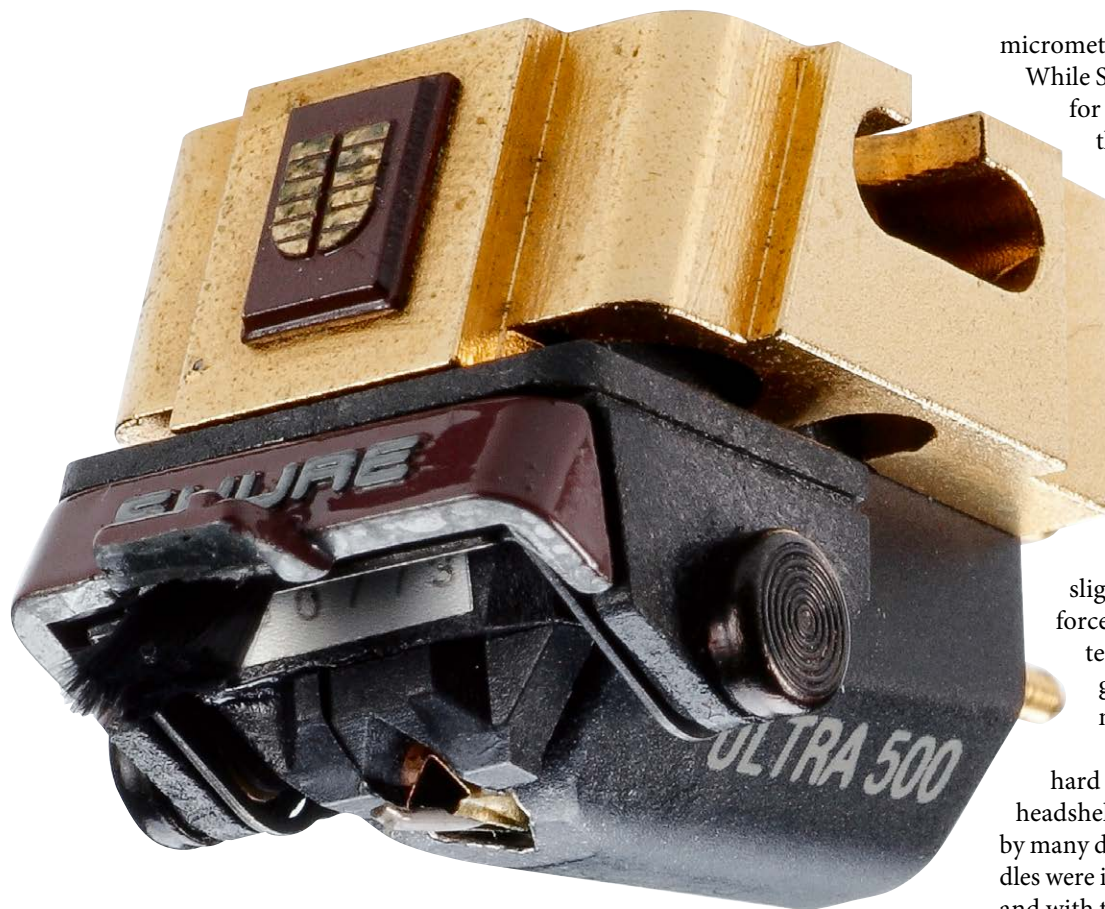


# ULTRA. REFINED.



micrometers and low distortion.

While Shure systems were well known for their vivid and bright sound, the Ultra 500 was supposed to achieve this while maintaining a neutral frequency response. An American HiFi magazine stated at the time that the generator was at least electrically in terms of coil inductance and internal resistance, output voltage and optimum connection values, but that the differences were due to the gold-plated connecting pins of the Ultra series, a slightly higher optimum contact force and a significantly higher system weight – 9.3 instead of 6.6 grams – due to the solid full metal body of the 500 series.

This also offered a perfect hard coupling of the system to the headshell, a mounting method favored by many developers. In addition, the needles were interchangeable with each other and with the V15 series, which brings us to the actual occasion for this report: the 500 cc we found lying dormant in the drawer may have been physically unharmed, but stylus insert wasn't, having become a victim of time and possibly also of impetuous contact.

## New life, not disposal

However, simply junking it was out of the question, so we started looking for sources for new stylus inserts. Already we knew that, in Germany, Axel Schürholz has been a “needle doctor” for many years, and Mijnheer Arlt van den Hul also breathes new life into old pickups, even with a diamond cantilever if necessary; however, this time we decided to put Jico, the Japanese manufacturer less-known in Germany, to the test after a long time of consideration.

The Japanese, who have been in the diamond stylus business for almost 60 years, offer three different inserts for the Ultra 500: with aluminum, sapphire and ruby cantilevers, all with a variation of the Shibata stylus, which they call SAS.

How do you turn a cartridge from the first half of the 1980s into a contemporary product with retro charm?

For several years now, the Shure Ultra 500 has been more or less unnoticed in the drawer with other discarded cartridges, even though the Shure Brothers created a milestone moving magnet design in the 1980s – and, as time has shown, a classic.

Basing the design on the commercially extremely successful V15 models, the Shures put a lot of effort into countering the emerging MC cartridge wave with high-quality MM models. The “Ultra” model series consisted of the Ultra 300, 400 and top model Ultra 500, which is the object of consideration here. The

Ultra 500 made it clear, with its price of about 1500 DM, that it was not in any way willing to leave to moving coil designs the field of top cartridges.

But what made the Ultra 500 the legend it is today?

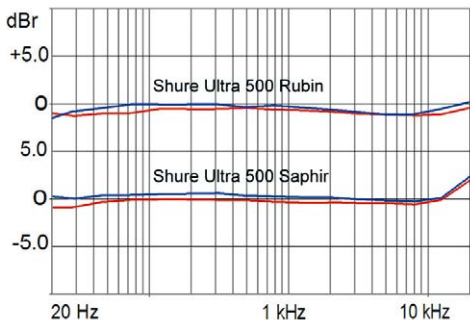
In contrast to the V15s, every model was created with painstaking manual work, with consistency assured by precision alignment of the diamond aligned for each system. Carried over from the 15 series, on the other hand, were the micro-ridge stylus-grinding, the cantilever and, very conspicuously, the multi-tasking-capable “dust catcher” in front of the stylus a dynamic damper with a small brush, which cleared the stylus-path of dust and also acted as a protector and reduced static charges. The tracking force had to be increased from 1.2 to 1.7 grams when using this damper, which also effectively attenuated the tonearm/pickup resonance, in order to ensure the desired high tracking capability of more than 80

Prices from Japan – excluding taxes, shipping costs and customs duties – range from 250 to around 500 euros. We ordered the sapphire and ruby versions and after a few days we received a small package with two stylus assemblies inserts packed very modestly in plastic boxes, of course with the original multifunctional brush at the front.

Of course, the Japanese didn't have the design possibilities that Shure's developers had three decades ago, because today a stylus assembly was only to be planted on a recognized high-quality body and 'generator'. The Americans had a very complicated hollow metal tube, thinner than a human hair, into which an equally wafer-thin beryllium foil was pushed; the Japanese are now trying to make it with sapphire or ruby.

**Constructive differences**

The micro-ridge used by Shure has become a "Super Analogue Stylus", which is supposed to offer an even longer and extremely narrow contact surface. Bearing in mind that the force with which the needle enters the groove is comparable to that of a fully loaded 747 jumbo when landing, it becomes clear why the utmost care is required in production and installation. So please do not install according to your eyesight instead of using a template and hearing test/metering platter. If you have any doubts about their precision mechanical qualities or your eyes, go to a qualified dealer who understands analogue technology. Then you will be delighted to discover how modern analogue technology in general and the Ultra 500 in particular can sound.



▲ The frequency response of the two Jico needle inserts differs quite markedly: The ruby version sounds as balanced as the frequency writing system would expect, while sapphire shows a distinctly higher treble.

The frequency response in the measurement laboratory showed significant differences. Equipped with sapphire cantilever, a clear rise in the treble is apparent – quite attractive and familiar for fans of the V15 series –, while the ruby version is very balanced.

How does that express itself sonically? Well, we listened to music from the time the Ultra series was created and experienced some surprises. True to style with a top-of-the-range turntable of time, a Sony PS-B80, we started with the sapphire cantilever model equipment and "Driver's Seat" by Sniff n' the Tears.

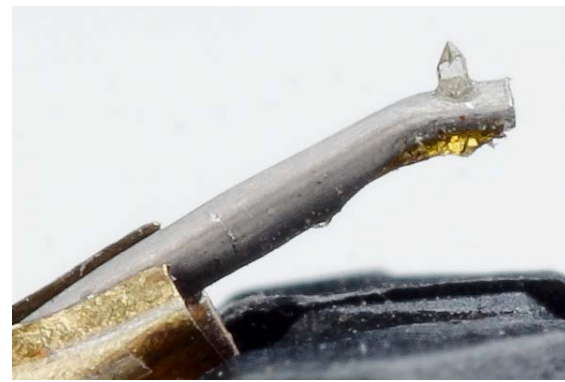
**Sound Merits**

The sound was extremely dynamic and contoured, the bass neither superficially bold nor washed out, but crisp, taut and very clean. The soundstage extended out beyond the loudspeakers, and the emotionality of the reproduction was surprisingly positive. The love of detail matched that of modern MM cartridges of the 400 Euro class, which we used for comparison, but high frequencies were striking and, in the long run, rather hard work: voices, percussion, high piano positions had a touch too much brilliance. Terence Trent d'Arby's "As Yet Untitled" bit hard in our high-resolution system: if you like this or want to spice up a rather mildly tuned set-up in the upper frequencies, you might find this suits.

At first, the ruby version seemed to be quieter than the sapphire version, but this turned out to be a miscalculation both in terms of measurement and, after a few minutes of intensive listening, acoustically speaking. The first impression had something to do with the different energy distribution over the entire frequency spectrum: both deliver about 2.0 mV and thus considerably less output voltage than the original, which was 3.2 mV.

The Ruby version made any acoustic performance sounded much more physical and vivid, and it was even more astonishing how much voices gained in naturalness. Mr. Trent d'Arby only sounded biting when this information was on the record – as we know from our many listening experiences with much more expensive cartridges.

Details, for example the mouth-shape of the singer and the occasional spit, were now presented without any artificial overtone richness, and there were also several



▲ This is how the original Ultra 500 cantilever looked: hollowed-out precious metal, lined with beryllium inside. It was a masterpiece of production technology.



▲ The Jico sapphire version convinced with dynamism and liveliness and reminded us of the virtues of the V15 series.



▲ The most expensive solution by far is the ruby cantilever – but it's also the more honest, and therefore preferable.

subtleties. Impulses were also more credible because the ruby version was able to show the physical origin, the source of the impulse.

The only conclusion is that Jico offers skillful solutions in different price ranges for the revival of old Shure cartridges, making them sound contemporary again. Information: [www.jico-stylus.com](http://www.jico-stylus.com)

*Michael Lang*