

AN OLD FAVORITE RETURNS

The Kiseki Blue and Purple Heart Cartridges

By Jeff Dorgay

People are fond of the saying “history repeats itself.” The second I drop the stylus on the recent MoFi remaster of Tears for Fears’ *Sowing the Seeds of Love*, I know that the Kiseki cartridges have beaten Koetsu at their own game once again, and analog history is repeating itself. If you’ve been around the block with analog, chances are you know the name Kiseki, which translated from Japanese means “miracle.” Over thirty years ago Herman van den Dungen (the man behind PrimaLuna, for those of you a bit newer to the hifi scene) was the Koetsu distributor in Holland.

After a few years of struggling (and Koetsu is *still* a pain in the you-know-what to deal with today) to get orders on time and in proper working order, this young man decided to do it himself. Long story short, he approached some of his Japanese connections and started building his own cartridges that, by his admission, had to be better and less expensive than the famed Koetsu Black of the day.



REVIEW

He succeeded brilliantly and was soon building and shipping ten times what he was able to with Koetsu – and you thought Americans were the only ones to dig in their heels, kick ass and start their own venture. Unfortunately, the CD was soon upon us and the interest in vinyl waned enough that the demand for high-quality phono cartridges diminished, and what was left of Kiseki was mothballed. Van den Dungen stuck with the hifi world as a successful distributor, and then did the same thing with his PrimaLuna amplifiers, which have grown into a major brand of vacuum tube electronics. A couple of years ago, van den Dungen had that smile on his face, much like a kid who's stolen the keys to his father's sports car, when he made it known that he had uncovered a cache of old Kiseki parts and a very limited run of N.O.S. cartridges would be built. Ken Kessler wrote a very enthusiastic review for us, but alas, the remaining samples were snapped up immediately.

Fast-forward to this year's Newport Beach hifi show, and his friend and partner Kevin Deal is sporting the same grin. "Dude, I just got a batch of *new* Kisekis; want to give them a listen?" And thus, the N.S. or "New Style" cartridges are born. Based on the original models, these new models use updated technology and parts, yet stick to a short body cartridge design as in the past, making them compatible with a very wide range of tonearms.

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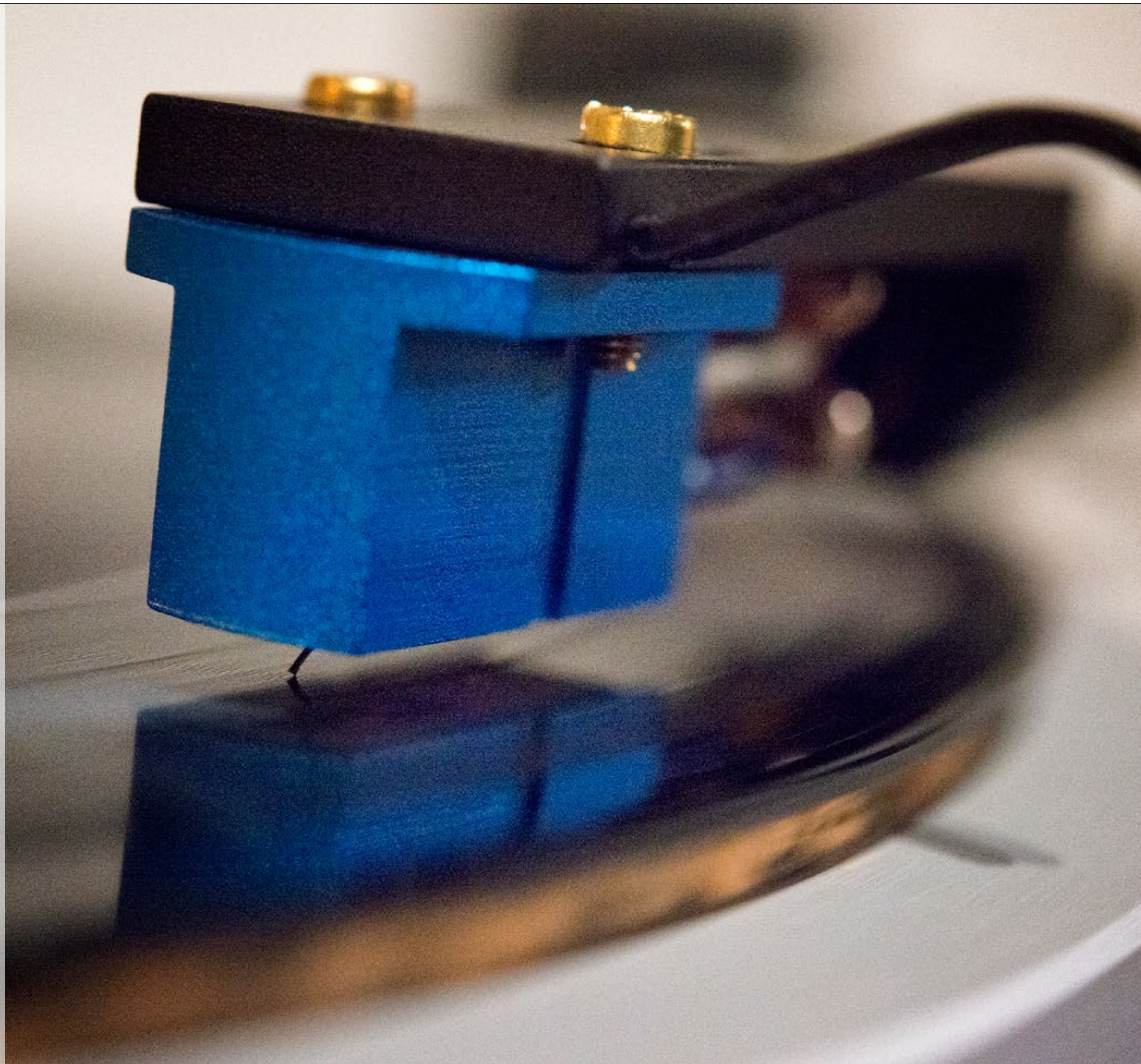


A wonderful mix of old and new

Having heard the NOS version of the Kiseki Blue only briefly, I distinctly remembered it having a very Koetsu-like sound, basing that on the sound of my then-references, the Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue and the Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum, the latter being slightly more laid-back and the former more extended in the HF range. The Kiseki Blue is very close to the Urushi in both tonal quality and dynamic range – I would definitely call it “forgiving,” but wonderfully lush.

Queuing up a clean copy of Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumours*, it’s instantly evident that the Kiseki Blue NS is a very special cartridge indeed. And, that’s the less expensive model, at \$2,299. The PurpleHeart NS for a thousand dollars more is a revelation. The tonal balance of both Kiseki cartridges are more saturated than colored, if you will. Think of it as turning up the saturation control on your TV or computer monitor, where the primary colors are just a bit brighter than they are in reality, but the end result is highly pleasing. This is what the Kisekis bring to the table (pun intended).

Getting back to the Mac, all four members’ vocals take on a distinctive, specific placement across the soundstage, going well beyond the speaker boundaries. Both cartridges set up to the UniDen alignment specification are breathtakingly quiet – providing all the wonder of analog with the ultra low noise floor of digital, with clean records, of course!



Great as the Blue NS is, if you can stretch the extra thousand bucks for the PurpleHeart NS, I would highly suggest it. It’s like getting an M3 instead of a standard 3-series BMW – everything is more visceral. Particularly in the soundstage size – if you don’t get a chance to hear them back-to-back, you’ll love the Blue NS, but if you do, you won’t be happy without the extra 100 horsepower that the PurpleHeart NS provides. The gap can be narrowed somewhat by using a bit more lush phonostage. Though it didn’t have quite the resolution of the PurpleHeart NS, using the Blue NS with the slightly warm Rogers phonostage approached the palpability of the PurpleHeart NS with the Simaudio and ARC Phonostages. Ah, the wonder of analog!

Face off

Keeping things as identical as possible, a brand new VPI Classic Two turntable (which we are also currently reviewing) was commandeered from VPI’s Mat Weisfeld with a pair of identical tonearm wands to facilitate swapping cartridges quickly and easily, minimizing listener memory loss. Later, once the initial comparisons were made, an AVID Volvere SP with an Ortofon TA-110 tonearm and identical headshells to start and then with the

Both cartridges have a claimed separation of 34dB, but thanks to the Feickert software and the SMART-ractor (reviewed by Richard Mak in this issue) I was able to get a whopping 36.2 dB from the PurpleHeart NS and 35.1dB from the Blue NS – indeed impressive! (*continued*)

A comparison with Ortofon's excellent Cadenza Black, priced at about \$2,800, proves interesting indeed. The Feickert Blackbird turntable in for review, also with removable headshells, again shows a major difference between these two class leaders. The Grado Statement 1, which I also use as a reference cartridge, does a little more of this, and the Koetsu Urushi Blue slightly more. The Simaudio 810LP and 610LP phonostages with the 820S power supply used in all of the comparisons are rock solid, dead quiet, deliver major dynamic swing and are spot-on tonally, making this comparison even easier to quantify. So, you can either see your cartridge as a tone control or something else downstream. I could live happily with either.

With a slightly different stylus profile, the PurpleHeart NS sports a 4 x 120µm line contact stylus, where the Blue NS is slightly wider at 5 x 120µm. Both feature nearly identical internal resistance (42 ohms for the former, 40 for the latter) and both have identical compliance specs. (16µm/mN), yet the PurpleHeart NS has a claimed frequency response of 20-30,000hz, where the Blue is only claimed to go up to 25,000hz, both within +/- 1dB.

Concentrating on the Classic Records remaster of Alan Parsons's *I Robot*, and the trippy, '70s electronic effects, the extended response of the PurpleHeart NS is clearly revealed. A similar effect is achieved with the recent MoFi pressing of Dead Can Dance's *Into the Labyrinth*.

A complete evaluation and judgment cannot be made on the basis of electronic music; there is a certain airiness and spatial ability that the PurpleHeart NS adds to the presentation, involving the listener that much further, regardless of turntable and phonostage used. The wooden body also adds a bit more palpability – again that tonal saturation that I've mentioned before.

Rounding out the evaluation, the Blue NS and the PurpleHeart will pull you in with the wonderful midrange, but the longer you listen and the wider range of program material you audition, their fatigue-free presentation make either one a cartridge you can listen to for days on end.

Neither cartridge had trouble tracking whatever tortures I threw at them (even *better* when aligned with the SMARTractor), and both proved to be the most similar in bass response, with solid, tuneful bass. Though not quite as powerful as some of the world's finest, they are definitely above par for their price class. Again, I would describe the LF character of the Kisekis as more organic than electronic. Perhaps this would be the best description of these cartridges' overall character.

That being said, there is no particular style of music that the Kisekis can't play with aplomb, and being slightly saturated in their rendition of music, those worshiping solo vocalists and acoustic instruments will be thrilled. Spinning k.d. lang's *All You Can Eat* portrayed the Portland chanteuse in full glory.

Rounding out the rest of the picture

Each cartridge delivers excellent dynamics when tracking force is optimized to the suggested 2.4 grams, and both work well loaded at 400 ohms. While I am sold on the SMARTractor, using the supplied Ortofon and VPI alignment tools still give excellent performances, so neither of these two beauties prove tough to live with, nor require a \$650 protractor. *(continued)*

The Kiseki Blue NS and PurpleHeart NS Phono Cartridges
\$2,299 and \$3,299 respectively

MANUFACTURER

KISEKI-Durob Audio BV

CONTACT

www.kiseki-eu.com
www.upscaleaudio.com

PERIPHERALS**Analog Source**

VPI Classic 2, AVID Volvere SP w/Ortofon TA-110 arm, Feickert Blackbird w/12" Jelco arm

Phonostage

Simaudio 610LP, Simaudio 810LP (both with Simaudio 820S external power supply) ARC REF Phono 2 SE, Rogers PA-1A

Preamplifier

Robert Koda K-10, Pass Labs Xs Preamplifier

Power Amplifier

Pass Labs Xs 300 monoblocks

Cable

Cardas Clear

Power

Iso Tek Super Titan

Accessories

GIK Acoustic Panels, SRA Scuttle rack

On one level, very little has changed. Koetsus are still hard to come by and even tougher to get serviced. Herman van den Dungen is still kicking ass and taking names. While it is great news that he's brought this great cartridge back to market, it's even better that they will be widely available.

There are mega cartridges like the Lyra Atlas, the Clearaudio Goldfinger and a couple others that occupy the stratosphere of analog reproduction. For those, you need a mega turntable and system to match, and they do surpass what the Kisekis can do. But in the extremely competitive world of \$3,000–\$5,000 cartridges, if you've always wanted that special kind of sound that a Koetsu offers, the Kiseki is still a better choice for a more reasonable price. Considering what these cartridges offer, we are very happy to award them one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2014. Now that's a miracle we can all be excited about. I know I want one. ●

