

ANALOG CORNER

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THIS ISSUE: Listening impressions of the Kiseki Purpleheart N.S. phono cartridge and the Lamm LP 2.1 phono preamplifier.

The Return of an Old Smoothy & the Introduction of a New One

At the 2011 Consumer Electronics Show, Herman van den Dungen handed me a surprise: a brand new Kiseki Blue cartridge manufactured from new-old-stock parts. It wasn't mine to take home—only to look at, to prove it was real.

Herman van den Dungen may not be a household name even for audiophiles, but his products are: his PrimaLuna electronics are exported from the Netherlands to the US and distributed by tube connoisseur and collector Kevin Deal for PrimaLuna USA.

In the 1980s, Kiseki was legendary among audiophiles, even if their cartridges' prices were beyond the reach of most. But the brand's history is less well known—and younger analog devotees may not have heard of Kiseki at all. While the name is Japanese, and many Kiseki cartridge parts are made there, the brand itself was created by van den Dungen. In the early 1980s, he and former Sumiko principal Dave Fletcher were having trouble communicating with and being supplied by Sugano Yoshiaki, designer and builder of Koetsu cartridges, and his agent and daughter, who spoke only Japanese and some German. Prepaid monthly orders of 30 or so cartridges were arriving more and more slowly, and Fletcher and van den Dungen began to hear a variability in their sound that required them to listen to every cartridge, and return for repair those that didn't make the grade, paying fees for return shipping and the repairs.

The story of how van den Dungen and Fletcher each lost his Koetsu distributorship to the late Yasuo Nakanishi, another legend of Japanese high-end audio, is one I won't recount here, as I have only heard find only one

side of the story. However, the loss motivated van den Dungen to come up with a line of cartridges that would sonically compete with Koetsu's but, if possible, at lower prices. After designing cartridge bodies and having them machined locally in the Netherlands, he shipped his design specifications for the stylus, cantilever, coil, magnet, and tuning to several unspecified Japanese cartridge manufacturers, who built them and returned them to him for blind auditioning. Thus was born the Kiseki brand, built in Japan by Goro Fokadu to van den Dungen's specs. According to vdD, *kiseki* means "miracle."

奇跡

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The first model, the Kiseki Blue,¹ was priced to compete with the Koetsu Black. Van den Dungen soon had orders, and reportedly was selling hundreds of Kisekis each month. Dan D'Agostino, who founded Krell in 1981, began distributing Kiseki cartridges in the US. The line grew to include the Purpleheart, the Blackheart, the Agate, and the Lapis Lazuli—the latter two available in a variety of candy colors. Worldwide, the Kisekis were very well received by reviewers and consumers alike.

Audio reviewer Marco Benedetti, Italy's "Mr. Analog"—he narrated the Italian edition of my DVD *21st Century Vinyl: Michael Fremer's Practical Guide to Turntable Set-Up* (16,000+ sold so far in three languages; thanks, everyone!)—is a Kiseki enthusiast. A few years ago, at an Italian audio show, he exhibited his collection of Kisekis and demonstrated them for a roomful of covetously appreciative listeners.

But soon after the introduction of the Compact Disc, Kiseki was no more. Sales dropped, and Herman van den Dungen was busy with other projects. Now, thanks to vinyl's growing popularity, the famed cartridge line has returned.

¹ Reviewed in its final version by Dick Olsher in March 1992; see www.stereophile.com/content/kiseki-blue-goldspot-phono-cartridge

KISEKI'S NEW LINES: N.S. AND N.O.S.

That Kiseki cartridges are again being built, and in the 21st century, is itself a minor *kiseki*. Kiseki N.S. (New Style) cartridges feature new parts but technology based on the design of old parts, and have a new, somewhat shorter body than the originals. The Kiseki N.O.S. (New Old Style) models are made using a mix of old Kiseki parts ca 1981–1990 and new parts.

Which parts are used depends not on their age, but on which are better for a given unit. Enough parts are available for Herman van den Dungen to produce 100 Kiseki Blue N.O.S. cartridges, with one reserved for vdD himself. Three of the four other original models will



follow as N.O.S versions, also subject to availability of parts. At the moment, vdD is not planning a Lapis Lazuli N.O.S.

Four years after the announcement of Kiseki's resurrection, at last spring's T.H.E. Show Newport Beach, Upscale Audio's Kevin Deal placed in my hands a Kiseki Purpleheart N.S (\$3299). It was 25 years ago that the late Harry Pearson handed me an original Kiseki Blue, which I still have.

If you care about looks, the Purpleheart N.S. has the goods. Accenting its 30mm-long body of purpleheart wood is a burnished top plate of an unspecified brass-like metal, into which are tapped threaded mounting holes. A cutout in the front of the plate exposes the body's wooden top—a nice touch. Too bad the iconic bottom plate is hidden from view once the cartridge is mounted in a headshell. I don't know what the Japanese ideograms signify. Could be Häagen-Dazs, for all I know.

The Purpleheart weighs 7gm and has a cantilever of solid boron 0.3mm in diameter, to which is attached a nude, mirror-polished, line-contact diamond stylus whose tip has a



Broken in and tracking at 2.5gm, the Kiseki Purpleheart tracked most anything I threw at it.

radius of $4 \times 120 \mu\text{m}$. The coil former is made of "pure iron," and around it are wound coils of copper wire. The Purpleheart's channel balance is claimed to be within 0.2dB, its channel separation an excellent 35dB at 1kHz.

Continuing with Kiseki's specifications, the Purpleheart N.S.'s output voltage is 0.48mV at 5cm/s, its internal impedance 42 ohms. Its tracking ability at 315Hz with a vertical tracking force (VTF) of 2.6gm is $80 \mu\text{m}$. The range of VTF is 2.0–2.6gm, with an optimal setting of 2.46gm. The dynamic compliance is moderate, at $16 \mu\text{m}/\text{mN}$, and the recommended loading is 400 ohms. Kiseki recommends 50–100 hours of break-in; based on my listening, so do I (see below).

When you read, in a cartridge's specs, an output of 0.48mV and an internal impedance of 42 ohms, both of which are relatively high, you know that that output has been achieved with more turns of wire on the coil, which raises internal impedance—an old-school approach. Designs more modern than the Purpleheart, such as Lyra's Atlas, can have high output (0.56mV) and low internal impedance (4.2 ohms), which means their coils have relatively few turns, thus lower mass, thus faster response time.

Sweet, Smooth, Detailed Sound: I installed the Kiseki Purpleheart N.S. in my Kuzma 4Point tonearm,

installed on my Continuum Caliburn turntable, and ran it through two phono preamplifiers: a Ypsilon VPS-100 with MC-10L step-up transformer, and a Lamm Industries LP2.1 Deluxe (also reviewed in this column). Kiseki recommends loading the Purpleheart with 400 ohms, which follows the rule of thumb for loading: about 10 times a cartridge's internal impedance. With no loading plugs, the Ypsilon MC-10L presents a load of 400 ohms, the same as the Lamm LP2.1's fixed input load for moving-coils, so both were appropriate for the Purpleheart. After break-in, I found the Purpleheart to track best with a VTF of 2.5gm.

The Purpleheart N.S. produced a rich, inviting harmonic palette directly out of the box, but after some 50 hours its suspension became more supple and responsive, which improved its tracking of heavily modulated piano recordings and smoothed out some harsh-sounding sibilants. Broken in and tracking at 2.5gm, the Purpleheart tracked most anything I threw at it.

Unlike my original Kiseki Blue, which always sounded too soft and rolled off on top, the Purpleheart's tonal balance was subjectively linear;

if, in reality, it's not linear, it did an admirable job of hiding its deviations from linearity. The result was a rich, supple sound with a tube-like tonality and musical flow. Yet when I played anything that should sound hard and edgy, the Purpleheart reproduced enough of those qualities to make me hear what the recording's producer intended me to hear.

The perfect introduction to the Purpleheart N.S.'s riches was the lush-sounding *Sine Qua Non: Serge Gainsbourg Re-imagined* (2 180gm LPs, Coup Perdu CPLP001). This 69-minute instrumental album (the first 1000 copies also include a 48-minute bonus LP, *Sine Qua Non Plus*) was recorded in Abbey Road's famed Studio Two, where the Beatles recorded most of their music. You don't have to know Gainsbourg's songs to luxuriate in Ros Stephen's languidly paced arrangements for a small ensemble (also named *Sine Qua Non*), mostly painted with saxophone or piano leads against backdrops of lustrous strings. It's available only directly through Coup Perdu's website (www.coupdarchet.com). The price is £50, which with currency conversion

and shipping ends up costing about \$150, but it's a late-night listening treat that the Purpleheart brought to life.

Where appropriate, the Purpleheart's rich tonality was bolstered by its generous delivery of vivid instrumental textures and three-dimensionality. The cartridge didn't have a sonically unpleasant bone in its body, but when the *recording* did, the Kiseki gave me enough of it to communicate it effectively, though not with the full measure of possible unpleasantness. It didn't hold back the deliberate sonic horror that is Bruce Springsteen's *The River*, but a more revealing cartridge like the Lyra Atlas, which costs almost three times as much, lets you hear all of the reverberant, icy mess that invades the stage on many tracks.

The Purpleheart's moderate transient speed meant that the music's hardest edges were somewhat softened, and that its less-than-full expression of macrodynamics didn't allow it to produce the full thrust of the most explosive recordings. But more than making up for what it nips and tucks in those regards was the Purpleheart's lush yet transparent midrange. If there's a more clogged, reverberation-

drenched, *busy* recording than “Wah Wah,” from George Harrison’s *All Things Must Pass* (3 LPs, Apple 7 98025 1), you’ll have to tell me about it. The Purpleheart’s ability to sort out this track’s many reverb-drenched electric guitars produced a new perspective on an old favorite. A reissue of Jeff Buckley’s *Grace* (2 45rpm LPs, Columbia/ORG 194) was particularly stirring through the Purpleheart, as was his dad, Tim Buckley’s, *Goodbye and*

Hello (LP, Elektra EKS-7318), which hearing *Grace* had moved me to spin after a decade’s rest on the shelf.

The cartridge the Purpleheart most reminded me of was Sumiko’s wood-bodied Palo Santos Presentation (\$3999), which has an equally lush, pleasing midrange and, for \$700 more, a somewhat more generous expression of dynamics.

Overall, the Kiseki Purpleheart N.S. is a physical and sonic beauty. It will

reproduce all musical genres well, but I found it especially suited to acoustic jazz and classical. In today’s world of crazy-priced cartridges, it offers a sophisticated sound well beyond what you’d expect at its \$3299 price, and though it thrives on classical and jazz, it handled rock and other electronic music as well as if not better than some other, more costly cartridges that have a lush midrange but a softer sound overall.