





CINEMA TODAY RELIES TO A LARGE
EXTENT ON REISSUING GENRE
CLASSICS

Director's Cut

In the majority of cases it involves remakes that are outwardly different to the original, yet content-wise add very little. On the other hand, should another version of the film be re-released years later, with precisely the edit, choice of scenes, music and sound mixing that the director originally envisioned (usually ignored for commercial reasons), we talk of a Director's Cut. Very often such a version can raise the film to a whole new level.

Herman van den Dungen is the "director" behind the cartridge manufacturer Kiseki. In the 1980s he, with his company Durob Audio, held the European distributorship for the great Japanese cartridge manufacturer Koetsu. This he subsequently lost – Dungen's point of view on this high-end anecdote can be read in detail on his website. Subsequently with the founding of Kiseki, van den Dungen began to produce his own cartridges and made quite a name for himself among vinyl fans of the time with a range of cartridges of outstanding quality. Legendary models such as Purple Heart, Agate or Agate Ruby spring to mind; cartridges that had you flattening your nose against the hi-fi shops windows back in the '80s. Magazines with photos of these unattainable jewels led to a similarly high pulse rate as men's magazines featuring a scantily-clad or naked Nastassja Kinski on the cover.

With the conquest of CD, Kiseki disappeared in the 1990s along with a handful of illustrious names from the silver screen, acqui-

Test system

Turntables: two Bauer dps 3.iT

Tonearms: Schröder CB, Schröder Referenz **MC Cartridges:** Kiseki Blue Goldspot (used), Ortofin SPU Royal N, Lyra Kleos SL, Zyx R100 Fuji XL, Dynavector Te Kaitora, Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum, Lyra Helikon SL, EMT JSD 5, Ikeda 9TS, Denon DL-103 Pro in Lignolab Bronze headshell **Step-up transformer:** Air Tight ATH-2A **Preamplifier:** Air Tight ATC-1 HQ **Phono stage:** Cello RMM **Power amplifier:** Air Tight ATM-2, Air Tight ATM-1S **Loudspeakers:** Spondor LS3/5a "White belly" (15 Ohm), Celestion SL700 (Ltd.) **Stands:** Celestion, Music Tools **Cables:** StereoLab Draco & Diablo



Cartridge Kiseki Blue N.S.



Almost like in the 1980s: but the New Style Kiseki Blue has a shorter body that is compatible with the headshells found on modern tone arms

ring legendary status over the years. With the resurgence of interest in the analogue scene in the noughties, there were sightings of Kiseki stone cartridges such as Lapislazuli or Agate Ruby, which changed hands for the sort of money mere mortals might spend on a car. Many attempted to breathe a new lease of life into their vintage treasures by continually retipping them, but this seldom succeeded in recreating the magic of the original.

Finally a good three years ago Kiseki offered the so-called N.O.S. Series (“New Old Style” according to Kiseki), made from new old stock components left over from the original production

runs. The N.O.S. edition of the Kiseki Blue, the first reincarnation of one of the famous Kiseki series, pretty much evaporated into the vinyl scene. I can still clearly remember, as I became aware of the fact that Kiseki was back, feeling an irrepressible craving, visiting the website and realizing with dismay that I’d missed the boat: the Blue N.O.S. series was sold out, and I discovered that the master was working on a new edition of the Blue, that was to be equipped with modern ingredients and a shorter, more tonearm-friendly body.

It was to be a further 2 years until the Kiseki Blue N.S (New Style) finally hit the market. The reason for the long wait was, among other things, Herman van den Dungen’s expectations of quality, and his desire to create a product of all-too-rarely-found constant quality and vertical integration. Whenever I wanted to get one of these new Kiseki Blues, the answer was always “Sorry, out of stock”. All the more reason to rejoice now that I have one of these cartridges in its typical round wooden can in front of me,

slightly nervous hands as I wield the screwdriver to release the precious gem from its housing. The circular wooden lid – almost a work of art in itself with its engraving – and the cartridge underneath are fixed with 2 long and 2 short brass screws, which also serve as mounting screws – the finest one could use for mounting to a headshell, and whose inclusion with an MC cartridge is extremely rare.

The cartridge body is made from deep-blue anodized hardened aluminium, in the shape of a loaf pan and radiused front and back on the mounting flange. It looks very similar to its 80s predecessor, but is considerably shorter, so that it also fits modern headshells. As the mounting flange has tapped holes, mounting the cartridge by hand is really easy. The golden cover plate on the underside has the company name engraved in Japanese characters. No coincidence that this is strongly reminiscent of Koetsu. A rectangular cutout allows the delicate boron cantilever to protrude. The stylus tip is a nude line-contact natural diamond. On the top of the cartridge body is the serial number, written by hand in permanent marker. The gold-plated connections are laterally reversed in their polycarbonate carrier compared to the normal orientation, but the clear colour coding ensures that the hi-hat sounds on the first disc you play don't hit the wrong ear. With regard to the assembly, Herman van der Dungen has done a great job. The cantilever is completely straight in every dimension, for once you can actually use the cartridge edges as a guide to setup, which is a piece of cake

thanks to the body shape. As the stylus sits deep underneath the cartridge body and the underside has no angled bevel, in order to set a perfect set-up you need to be able to push the head together by the thickness of a postcard and simultaneously keep one eye targeted on the stylus. Here, as is very rarely the case, a tonearm with no azimuth adjustment is no disadvantage, as the stylus is absolutely perpendicular in this dimension.

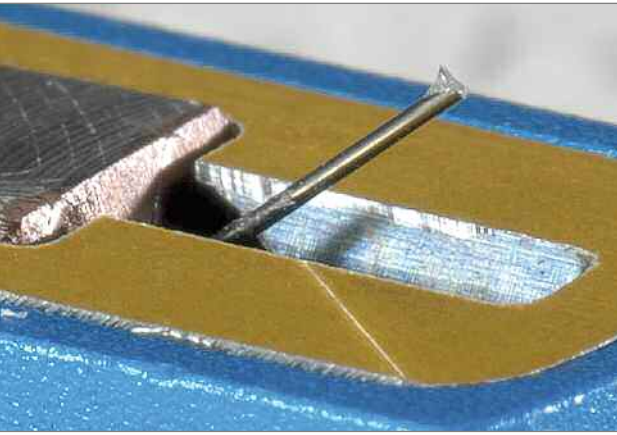
Fresh from the box with no running in, the Kiseki exhibits a certain graininess and tends towards sibilant, but this improves noticeably after about 25 hours. After the 50-hour run-in period it loses its slightly veiled and raw treble, also becoming more refined in the bass and as far as dynamics and microdynamics are concerned, takes on a demeanour very, very seldom found in this price class. After the run-in I get down to the fine adjustments. The quoted 16 $\mu\text{m}/\text{mN}$ compliance seems somewhat generous to me. My own measurements indicate something just above 13 $\mu\text{m}/\text{mN}$. I'm adjusting the cartridge on a Schröder Referenz with bamboo arm tube which, with a small aluminium plate for a headshell, has an effective mass of 13g. I achieve a resonant frequency of 9 Hz. The Blue N.S. is suited to light-middleweight and middleweight tonearms.

VTA is absolutely horizontal, and remains so for the duration of my listening sessions. The cartridge has an internal impedance of 40 Ohms, it's a high-impedance generator that delivers an output of 0.44 mV. This is begging for a transformer such as would be compatible with the Denon DL-103, which I use the Kiseki with first. When you consider that a classic DL-103 outputs 0.3 millivolts, it's easy to picture how well the Kiseki comes into its own particularly in a pure valve phono environment, where there is always plenty of amplification headroom. Kiseki recommend 2.4g tracking force, a value that is a great place to start; at the end of my tests I settle slightly lower at 2.3g. 0.1g can't make a huge difference, you may be thinking – but the Kiseki reacts markedly to tracking force adjustments, and therefore you can adjust very very fine to find a setting that suits your system. Ultimately it's the tracking force that determines how the treble integrates with the midrange, how fluent it sounds and how the microdynamic balances up in relation to the bass depth and drive.

The range of adjustment covers just 0.3g in the region between 2.3g and 2.6g. The tracking characteristics are no point of reference; the Kiseki tracks like there's no tomorrow. On James Blake's ultra-loud mastered eponymous debut album (James Blake: James Blake, Atlas Records 2011, 2 LP) for example, on which



Cartridge Kiseki Blue N.S.



many a well-reputed pickup has bitten off more than it could chew, the Kiseki moves as if it were a mere warm-up exercise – magnificent!

Despite repeated enquiries to the German distributor, I was unable to find out who was responsible for putting together the stylus and engine. It's safe to assume that we're talking about contract work. Though on the other hand, being blinded by a brand name can prove a barrier to an impartial review, so I decided to put a stop to my detective efforts and simply get on with listening unreservedly.

The Kiseki operates out of a great silence, is lightning fast, sine-wy and very dynamic. In the contoured, profoundly deep bass, that appears cheeky, elastic and tremendously agile, it's always possible to follow the bassline. Where many other cartridges simply generate impact, the Kiseki generates tone. The cartridge is rich in the midband, tending to the “nicer side” of neutral; to my sensibilities it is not quite coloured, yet anything but analytical. The points of presence are highly dynamic and jump out at you, which creates a tangible three-dimensional image. This pace reminds me of the old Amperex 12AX7 Bugle Boy long plate foil D-getter valves – ultra lively, agile, authentic and corporeal – great cinema! The treble is glittering, equally agile and minimally on the “forgiving side”, without being short on intensity in the slightest. Such treble is extremely rare: there is plenty of resolution, spatiality is wonderfully reproduced, micro-details appear so realistic that you could quite believe that the singer is with you in the room. Yet the Kiseki is almost entirely free of the typical MC treble emphasis. With a transformer the top end smoothes out somewhat. Both frequency extremes behave in a way that I have hitherto not experienced at this price level. In addition the wonderfully integrated “holistic” midrange contributes to the aesthetic impression considerably – truly a fantastic orchestration.

I cue up Silence is sexy by Einstürzende Neubauten (Rough Trade/Potomak, gh 002, 2000, 2 LP). On the title track Blixa Bargeld stands very close to the large diaphragm microphone and

Sensitive engineering: it's clearly visible how the stylus tip is applied to the boron cantilever

Unconventional pin configuration: no danger of confusion thanks to the standard colour coding and labeling

smokes a cigarette as he breathes the words forcefully into the mike. The igniting matchstick sounds so real it makes you jump. Then the first pull, you can hear the crackling as the tobacco and paper burn, the inhalation, then the exhalation, a swallow, labial sounds, a line of lyrics – I could enjoy listening to that ten times in succession with the Kiseki, it makes my hair stand on end and gives me goosepimples. When a pickup plays at this level, it's no longer simply reproduction of a recording – the acoustic event cut into the groove “demechanises” itself to some extent and transforms into flesh and blood in front of the speakers. A truly great acoustic direction, Mr van den Dungen!

And now it's time to entrust somewhat more complex tasks unto the blue thing in the headshell. On the Bauer dps's platter spins Decca's incredible recording of Solti's interpretation of Mahler's 1st Symphony (Decca SXL 6113, 1964). In the opening passage the violins play a complex interwoven theme, imitating the quivering air of a hot summer's day, buzzing and shimmering. On account of its positive impression in the top end the Kiseki's performance is very close indeed to the sound of real violins, which is extraordinary considering the complexity. As the symphony progresses there are various interwoven themes, including the “Brother Jacob” canon, from which Mahler creates a complex polyphony whose climax really pushes the pickup to its limits. To make the counterpoint really liveable requires bass definition and the ability to operate cohesively rather than analyzing and dissecting, even in the most complex passages. With the Kiseki it's a breeze to zoom in on individual voices in the score and then eavesdrop on the work as a whole again – a real delight! The string sounds – from violin to double bass – are so beautiful that you simply enjoy them to the full, without giving a second thought to HiFi.

In the course of the listening tests it became clear that the Kiseki doesn't have a “favourite” genre – it will happily reproduce anything from classical to pop, to hardcore electronica such as Tremøller, to jazz and distorted guitar without any sign of weakness. Jazz merits a special mention, for who hasn't heard Miles Davis' playing in certain situations, gritted their teeth and turned it down? The Kiseki's reproduction is always so clean, that even such critical trumpet passages are crying out for more, rather than less volume. It's capable of really gripping the listener, its dynamic lively character a constant guarantor of increased adrenaline release. One characteristic exclusive to top vinyl systems is the ability to offer a tactile treble: the seemingly “wet”, exquisi-

te sound gives you the impression of being able to reach out and touch this part of the music. Those who have experienced this effect will know what I am talking about – there simply aren't words to adequately describe it. With its sonic characteristics, the Kiseki is a representative for the high school of the classic vinyl sound, in fact it pretty much defines it. It doesn't go about things in a highly analytical fashion, and in the bass region it isn't one of those MC cartridges that induces fear into the heart of a very good CD player, but nevertheless, bass is one of its great strengths and it works optimally with a wide variety of light to medium-heavyweight tonearms, in particular arms such as an SME IV or V are recommended. In use it's unproblematic in the best sense of the word, as any kind of heavy damping in the vinyl chain is to be abjured.

Naturally, the six-million dollar question is: how does the Kiseki Blue New Style compare to its famous forbear? Is it a remake? Or is it effectively a Director's Cut? To this end I procured a well-preserved Kiseki Blue Goldspot from the late '80s. Obviously it's impossible for a 30-year old cartridge – despite its incredibly good condition and unusually low stylus wear (as seen under a microscope) – to sound like it did the day it was made. Dampers age, so the comparison should be taken with a pinch of salt. But I was champing at the bit – so I set up both cartridges on Bauer dps turntables with identical Schröder arms, hooked them up to the same Air Tight ATH-2A step-up transformer (which has 3 inputs) and tried to provide them with as



Cartridge Kiseki Blue N.S.

identical a set-up as possible. As the Blue Goldspot and Blue New Style are technically different, this meant providing each with its optimal prerequisites: the Goldspot is low impedance, the New Style, like the better Kisekis in their day, is a high-impedance design; also the older cartridge has a lower compliance and a different output voltage. The latter was the reason I had to resort to a Sonic Solutions Workstation in order to take digital LP recordings from the various genres and use a normalization algorithm to bring these to exactly the same level – as even a difference of 1 dB will always work to the detriment of the quieter sample in an A/B comparison. The result is quite clear: Herbert van den Dungen hasn't delivered a remake – this is most definitely a Director's Cut! Even if you give the Goldspot a 20/100 point advantage on the basis of its age-related wear, it loses out to its successor in every respect. The Blue New Style is more dynamic, quieter in the groove, it has – on a grand scale – clearly distinctive microdynamics, is more neutral and the bass is in a class of its own. The treble's impression is similar for both cartridges, although a touch more muted on the Goldspot. In terms of spatial presentation the new Blue is in a different league. The quoted 35 dB channel separation figure seems to me to be somewhat conservative.

It is really astounding how far you can get with an MC cartridge with neither exotic ingredients nor NASA technology nor the bleeding edge of material development, if you take extraordinary care, like Herman van den Dungen. And the Kiseki Blue N.S. is

the entry model in the Kiseki range. I need not emphasise how keen I am to compare it in a future report with the next higher cartridge in the range, the Purple Heart.

Kiseki's offering in this price range can be confidently viewed as a solid recommendation. Anyone who doesn't shortlist the Blue N.S. when looking for an MC cartridge at around €2,000 is clearly committing a sin of omission. Welcome back, Kiseki! □

Cartridge Kiseki Blue N.S.

Recommend tracking force: 2.3 grams

Output voltage: 0.44 mV at 1 kHz and 5

cm/s **Recommended terminating impedance:** 40 Ohm (transformer), 400–600 Ohm

(active) **Frequency response:** 20 Hz to 25

kHz (± 1 dB) **Channel separation:** 35 dB at 1 kHz **Channel balance:** 0.4 dB **Internal impedance:** 40 Ohms **Stylus:** nude line-contact diamond, mirror polished **Stylus tip radius:** 5 x 120 μ m **Dynamic compliance:** 16 μ m/mN (manufacturer's specification); approx 13 μ m/mN (as tested) **Cantilever:** Solid Boron rod, 0.28 mm diameter **Body:** Aluminum alloy **Vertical Tracking Angle (VTA):** 20 degrees

Tracking ability: 80 μ m (at 315 Hz at a tracking force of 2.4 grams) **Coil:** iron

Weight: 8 grams **Price:** €2000

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