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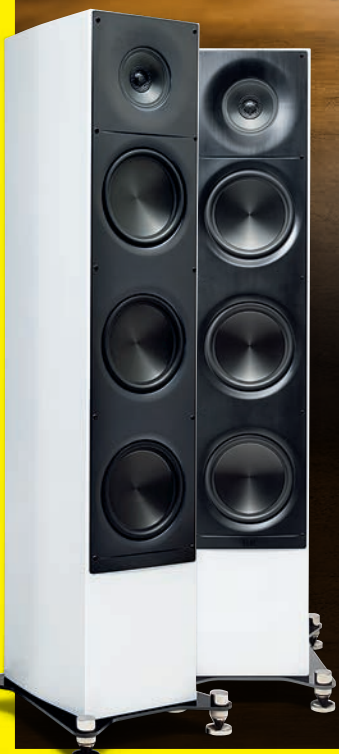
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Kiseki Blue N.S.

Kiseki's first all-new moving-coil cartridge since its return in 2011 isn't just a fine transducer, it's also affordable by current standards – enter the Kiseki Blue N.S.

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Back when moving-coil cartridges stalked the earth, Koetsu occupied the top of the heap, and did so for at least a decade. But this purveyor of hand-made cartridges did not go unchallenged and, to its credit, Koetsu opened the door for a plethora of Japanese artisan moving-coils with equally exotic-sounding names. Among the most highly-regarded were the various Kisekis, the name meaning 'miracle', which could be regarded as either cynical or optimistic, so great was Koetsu's dominance.

TRUE HIGH-END

Kiseki, however, did carve out a following, and the Blue N.S. – its first all-new design since the 2011 rebirth – should appeal to both newcomers as well as to the incurably nostalgic or romantic: its £1695 price, while still violently offensive to normal people, seems somehow 'affordable' in a world when you can drop in excess of £10k on a cartridge. This is compounded, much in Kiseki's favour, by the inescapable Law of Diminishing Returns, under which cartridges are almost as obscure as exotic cables. Just ask the happy owners of sub-£300 Denon DL103s. Or £35 Audio-Technica AT95Es.

Price, it must be said, simply cannot be taken into consideration when talking about anything in the universe of high-end audio because one must leave such matters at the door, just as one must accept heart-stopping price tags with Italian supercars, Grand Cru Burgundies and other luxury items. So, despite the 'relatively' economical price, the Blue N.S. is, like the original, indubitably an example of a true high-end MC of (mainly) Japanese pedigree. This is one

RIGHT: Tracking performance is good from the long (5µm x 120µm) line-contact diamond and moderate compliance, while the 600µV output is more generous than Kiseki suggests

of those inexpressible qualities that are as important to a certain type of vinyl addict as mechanical movements are to watch aficionados. Rather as the Swiss 'own' the high-end watch industry (with a few exceptions from Germany), so do the Japanese rule the world of the high-end moving-coil, Ortofon *et al* notwithstanding.

While it differs in many ways from the Blues of yore, it also delivers the kind of listening experience that evokes the Golden Age of Analogue, just before digital attempted to turn everything to doggie-doo. Kiseki actually describes the Blue N.S. as 'the first "New Style" Kiseki cartridge ever'. I'm not quite sure what that means, however, because – on paper, at least – it's an MC that could have existed at any time in Kiseki's history, with a recipe that almost qualifies as 'classic'.

Before discussing the ingredients, it's worth repeating what Kiseki feels is new about the, er, new Blue. I compared it alongside a Blue N.O.S., a limited-edition model that reintroduced the Kiseki brand in 2011, with each cartridge manufactured from new-old-stock parts. Visually, the N.O.S. (and therefore the original) and the N.S. are clearly different, the 25mm-long machined from solid aluminium-alloy

body of the latter substantially shorter and lighter than that of the 30mm original.

STRAIGHT TORQUE-ING

That said, the N.S.'s all-metal construction and flat top still allows torque freaks to tighten this to arm or headshell with Schwarzeneggerian force, but the row of holes along the 'wings' of the original have been replaced with a single, central threaded hole. Set-up is a doddle, as the pins are colour-coded and spaced

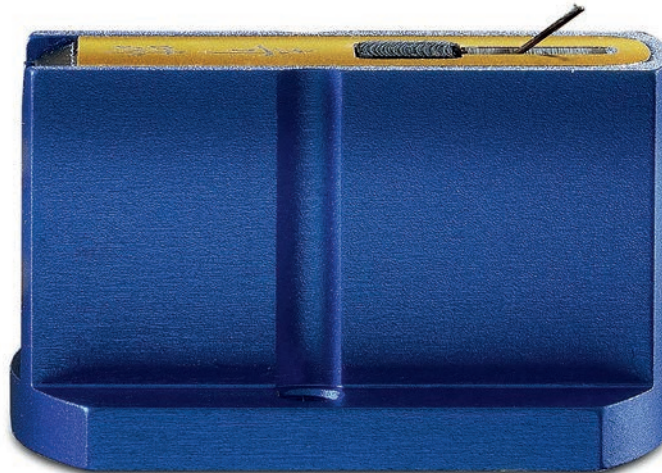
sufficiently to allow connection without tears. Do note, however, that the cantilever is placed well back under the body, so you should be careful when establishing the overhang and VTA.

Kiseki states that the generator 'is built from best available parts today' but I don't see anything radically new about 'pure iron cross coils' – no graphene, no carbon fibre, no silica, no nobtanium. Both the N.S. and the N.O.S. of 2011 are fitted with solid boron rod cantilevers, 0.28mm in diameter. Both employ nude line-contact diamond styli, mirror polished and with a tip radius of 5x120µm. Where they differ is in the specification and weight.

Tipping the scale at 8g, the Blue N.S. is some 2.8g lighter than the Blue N.O.S.

Its output voltage is quoted at 0.44mV for 5cm/s compared to the N.O.S. at 0.4mV [but see PM's Lab Report, p51]. Other differences include – with the Blue N.O.S. in brackets – an internal impedance of 40ohm (12ohm), a stated frequency response of 20Hz-25kHz ±1dB (20Hz-20kHz), channel balance of 0.4dB (<0.5dB), channel separation of 35dB/1kHz and a dynamic compliance of 16µm/mN (both unchanged) and a tracking ability at a force of 2.4g of 80µm/315Hz (also the same figure, but at a lower 2.0g).

'It's simply nice, and there's nuthin' wrong with that'





LEFT: The new Blue N.S. has a shorter 25mm body than the original Blue, and is better suited to modern medium mass arms. The threaded inserts allow a tight fit to robust headshells, but the 'set back' stylus is no boon for easy cueing

beer-soaked party-goers tend not to be the people I'd trust around a £1600 MC. Instead, I revert back to my usual stance of believing that music can be enjoyed out of context, although I would worry about anyone who listens to hip-hop, rave, grime, and suchlike for pleasure, away from a club or street-fight.

FEEL THE WIDTH

Via the Blue N.S. the bellowing of the saxes enjoyed better portrayal than some might argue they deserve, but that would be snobbery: in an ideal world, a system should treat Marilyn Manson with the same equanimity as Yehudi Menuhin. Where the new Blue actually played into Sam The Sham's hands was down below, for the bass was rich, powerful and just right for encouraging foot-stomping. This replaced the upper frequency brashness, designed to make it leap out of a cheap radio, with a hint of mass and depth, such as would defy a 2in full-range speaker in a pocket tranny.

Where the Blue N.S. shines is in the warm-and-cuddly midband. The blatantly nasal vocal delivery retained its wonderfully sleazy quality, especially with the now-questionable 'Li'l Red Riding Hood', which joins 'Aqualung', 'Good Morning, Little Schoolgirl' and 'Sweet Little 16' as post-#MeToo no-nos. That said, this mono

recording drips with atmosphere, meant to convey the menace of a walk in the woods, and the Blue N.S., by virtue of its VistaVision sound, even applies a sense of width to a single-channel LP.

While mono may be a self-indulgence on my part, killer stereo recordings are part-and-parcel of assessing all audio equipment, and 1960s stereo demo records are as good as they get. A particular fave, the *Living Presence Stereo Sampler* [Fontana SFXL52] is culled from the catalogues of Mercury, Philips and Fontana 'Living Presence' recordings, and contains bold, show-stopping tracks by Ray Davies & The Button-Down Brass, The Coffee Set and the Band Of The Scots Guards and others.

OK, so this isn't something you'd turn to for pleasure unless you're one who ↪

Recommended loading is 400ohm, so I set my EAT E-Glo all-valve phono stage by ear and found 300ohm to be just right. The rest of the system consisted of an SME 30/2 with SME V arm, Audio Research REF 6 preamplifier [HFN May '16], and REF75SE power amp, Wilson Audio Yvettes [HFN Feb '17], and wiring from Crystal and Transparent.

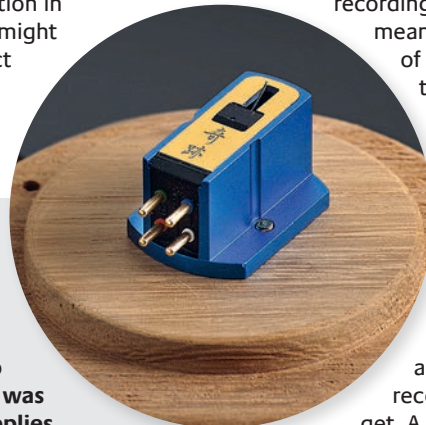
WHERE'S THE PARTY?

Unfortunately for me, the day before the Kiseki arrived, I had returned the Bel Canto e.One phono stage [HFN Jun '18], which would have been a natural for it given the price, but at least I had yet to return the test LPs to their respective library slots. It was straight in with the bombastic rock 'n' roll of Sam The Sham & The Pharaohs' mono 45s (2LP) collection, *The MGM Singles* [Sundazed LP5339].

While I readily admit that moving-coils are purchased by many for their lushness,

refinement and overall comportment and display of politesse, it doesn't hurt to shock a system every once in a while. (Try Motörhead through Quad ESL 57s or Dylan's first acoustic LP through Yamaha NS1000s and you'll see what I mean.) When asked to play 50-year-old mono recordings destined for AM radio, the Kiseki Blue N.S. turned them into something altogether more palatable to the fussy ears of an audiophile.

As deliberately raucous as is the band's biggest hit, 'Woolly Bully', the new Blue imposed on it a reduction in aggression. That, you might feel, defeats the object of a song conceived to fuel beer-soaked party-goers, but



HERMAN VAN DEN DUNGEN

Best known for PrimaLuna electronics, which did more to prove that Chinese-made valve amps could match those made in the West, and at lower price points, Herman van den Dungen is one of Europe's legendary distributors. A key player in importing American and Japanese exotica, he expanded into production, Kiseki preceding his efforts with PrimaLuna. Kiseki was born of necessity, when Herman was having problems with supplies of Koetsus. Being hand-made and artisanal (if ever a hi-fi brand could seduce hipsters, it has to be Koetsu...), deliveries were sporadic. So Herman sent a hand-drawing for the body of a cartridge to friends making tonearms, who quickly produced six aluminium bodies, which were then sent to three cartridge makers in Japan. Specifications and details were given – admittedly close to those of Koetsu's – and Herman tested the returned prototypes back in Holland. The winning design became the first Kiseki, the Blue, which was followed by the PurpleHeart, BlackHeart, Agaat and Lapis Lazuli ranges.

CARTRIDGE

LAB REPORT

KISEKI BLUE N.S.



LEFT: The machined alloy body of the Blue N.S. brings its weight down to 8.2g. The rear pins are colour-coded and well spaced to accept over-sized tonearm leads/connections

worships at the altar of Sousa, but it does put a system to the test. Brass is useful for taxing the treble, and – while the N.S. seemed a tad brasher than the N.O.S. – it has just the right amount of forward presentation to excite without jarring. This did not turn the already-vivid sound of the Yvettes into anything worryingly bright, but the N.S. does temper the sort of romance one might anticipate of a moving-coil if weaned on, say, early Ortofon SPUs.

NEW OLD SCHOOL

Blessedly, the delicious ‘sheen’ of the LP, which had convinced me last month of the Bel Canto phono stage’s prowess, was unaffected, and the glossy, almost comforting caress that LPs of the 1950s and 1960s retain, above most that have followed, reinforced the period feel of the new Blue. I realise that I am coming perilously close to branding this as an exercise in deliberate retro, but I doubt that is so, given Kiseki’s wont for declaring it ‘new’.

Where the sound is modernised comes from a hint more detail than was often the case for period phono cartridges. The beguiling softness and charm of the MCs of the 1970s and 1980s was not unlike that of valves, especially single-ended triodes and those Sultans of Softness the 300Bs.

Turning to well-recorded vocals, despite what some would describe as questionable practices in studios

of the era, I span-up female vocals from Linda Ronstadt and this year’s reissue from Mobile Fidelity of *Heart Like A Wheel* [MFSL 1-472]. In addition to her distinctive delivery are superb examples of A-list studio playing, and the Blue N.S. was adept at handling everything from acoustic guitar to punchy electric bass.

Critically, it conveyed the warmth of her voice, as well as the clarity. So it was somehow appropriate that this 2018 cartridge made its point with the sort of album its granddaddy would have been called upon to reproduce at hi-fi shows. At the risk of appearing indecisive, and not wishing to present a backhanded compliment, this cartridge is, simply ‘nice’. And there ain’t nuthin’ wrong with that. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Kiseki’s Blue N.S., despite alleged ‘newness’, is – as editor PM says – ‘old school’. For plenty of you, that’s high praise. Along with Ortofon SPUs, EMTs, Denon 103s and other long-lived yet current MCs, with lush sound and massive soundstages, it’s a perfect alternative to seeking out a 30- or 40-year-old MC in mint condition. The N.S. sounds faster than the N.O.S., if slightly less elegant, but at this price? A success.

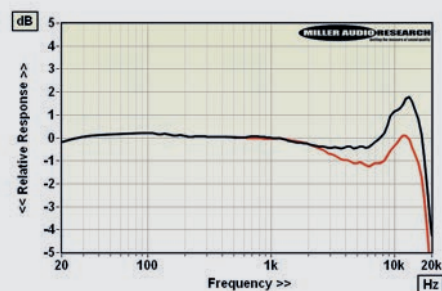
Sound Quality: 83%



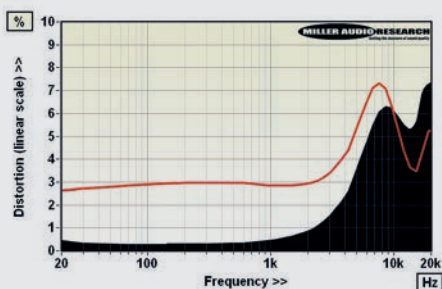
If the high compliance/low-tracking force Lyra Etna SL [*HFN* May '18] suggested that modern-day MCs might be headed in a new direction, then this striking-looking Blue N.S. from Kiseki is surely a blast from the past. The engineering is all contemporary, from its boron rod cantilever, 5x120µm line-contact diamond and finely-machined alloy body (keeping the overall bodyweight down to a manageable 8.2g), but the tracking force is an ‘old school’ 1.8-2.6g. Tested at a fairly hefty 2.3g the Blue N.S. did not quite meet Kiseki’s 80µm/315Hz ‘trackability’ specification with 65µm/70µm achieved via the left/right, respectively, just breaching 1% THD at +15dB (re. 315Hz/5cm/sec).

Its 18-22cu dynamic compliance is also a little softer than rated, aiding tracking but pushing the arm/cartridge resonance down below 8Hz with medium/high effective mass tonearms. If you have ported speakers, a phono pre with no subsonic filter and/or cherished LPs that are a little warped, then I’d avoid using high mass arms [inc. the Timestep, p44]. Otherwise the 600µV output (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec) is a useful +2.7dB higher than Kiseki’s rated 440µV, and channel separation superb at ~40dB through the midband, but channel balance was less impressive at 1dB.

The Blue’s response is sculpted for a rich bass, a mild upper mid/presence and a zing to the upper treble, though this 14kHz peak should not exacerbate vinyl noise. Generator symmetry is excellent and the lateral/vertical traces are well matched [black/red traces, Graph 1] suggesting the soundfield will be very uniform. Distortion has its own ‘character’ too – almost purely 2nd harmonic here – even if vertical cuts [red trace, Graph 2], indicate higher THD at the periphery of the soundstage. PM



ABOVE: Frequency response curves (–8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, black) versus vertical (L–R, red)



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, black infill) and vertical (L–R, red) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harmonics) vs. frequency from 20Hz-20kHz (–8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-coil / 8.2g
Recommended tracking force	1.8-2.6mN (2.3mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	600µV / 1.0dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	18cu / 22cu
Vertical tracking angle	26 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	65µm / 70µm
L/R Distortion (–8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.95–15% / 0.35–6.9%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	–5.5 to +0.5dB / –4.3 to +1.8dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	40dB / 28dB