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Kiseki Blue NS Moving Coil Phono Cartridge

Kiseki's Blue NS moving coil cartridge simply let me enjoy the music.

Review By Tom Lyle

There aren't many opportunities for audiophiles to borrow phono cartridges from dealers to audition in their own systems before making a purchase. In many cases audiophiles tend to stick with brands they know, or sometimes they'll heed a dealer's recommendation, or follow the advice of another audiophile. Every so often they'll read a review that will convince them to take a



chance on a new or otherwise unknown product. And sometimes it's a combination of all or some of the above. And because the Kiseki Blue NS reviewed here is a new product I will do my best to describe this phono cartridge so you can consider it and see if it's a cartridge that would best suit your needs.

First of all, most readers are well aware that I am a certified vinyl-loving audiophile. There are some who enjoy certain aspects of vinyl records, such as collecting different versions of different pressings, or the ritual of placing the record on the platter, cleaning the stylus and lowering it to the record surface, or flipping the record over between sides. Yes, I like all of those things, but my real passion is *listening* to records (although I have a huge record collection, I'm not much of a "collector", as I'm OK with one copy of each title) . Despite the gains in digital playback, to me, records simply *sound* better than even the best digital. Sure, I have a hard drive filled with music files, and on my system digital does sound great—and unquestionably better than it used to sound. Of course for portability's sake digital wins every time. But I've always been and I probably always will be an analog kind of guy. I consider myself lucky that I get to hear new analog products on a regular basis.

Infamous

The Kiseki Blue NS is brought to us by the infamous Herman van den

Dungen. I say infamous because this is the same gentleman who designs and sells the PrimaLuna brand of tube electronics which are world-class amps built with some of the best internal and external parts available, yet are affordably priced. An added benefit is their excellent quality, both in sound and construction that places them in a class way beyond their meager asking prices. Mr. van den Dungen has been marketing a version of the cartridge under

review in the past, so the "NS" of the Kiseki Blue NS moniker denotes New Style as opposed to NOS, or New Old Stock cartridges that branded the older units. It took almost two years for this new style to be finished, and he claims that much of this time was to ensure that the Kiseki Blue NS had absolutely zero sample-to-sample variation. This is much more difficult than it might seem, a phono cartridge is an intricate contraption. Compared to the NOS model the Kiseki Blue NS has a more conventional appearance, and its body is shorter because he felt that a shorter body is easier to use with most of the arms that are currently available on the market. Its body is machined from a billet of solid aluminum, and Mr. van den Dungen says that the motor is built from the "best available parts today". The shape of the Blue NS's body is based on a design that had already been used in past designs, and he has had much sonic success using that configuration. The Blue NS's internal design is also based on the NOS design, but all the parts are from current production supplies. The body of the cartridge is made from a "highly resonant-free aluminum", but again, shorter than the NOS design. One problem with such an exacting design is that quantities are limited. In the future this constraint many change, but for now there are only a limited amount of cartridges for sale. They advise that if one is considering this cartridge to buy one as soon as possible.



Lucky

I was lucky enough to have two turntable/tonerarm assemblies on hand during the initial portion of the review period. This made it very easy to switch back-and-forth for comparisons between the Kiseki and my reference Lyra Kleos. No, I didn't perform a shoot-out between the two cartridges. The Lyra cost only a tad more than the Blue NS, but I quickly learned that these are two different types of designs that have different goals in their reproduction of sound. It was nice to hear how each stressed different portions of not only the frequency spectrum, but their approaches to transparency, color, etc. I mounted each cartridge on both of the turntables/tonerarms as to at least remove this variable as much as possible. The turntable that was present for the beginning of the review was the [Blue Note Award](#) winning Oracle Delphi MK VI turntable with SME V tonearm which I reviewed in the [April 2014 issue](#). The other analog rig is my long term reference, the Basis Debut V with a Tri-Planar 6 tonearm.

Each turntable took its turn on the top of an Arcici Suspense equipment rack which has a 70 pound slab of stainless steel located under the top acrylic shelf. Holding up the steel plate and acrylic shelf are a trio of inflatable tubes that float the top plate on a cushion of air.

Both the tonearm's cables used to test the Kiseki Blue NS were connected to a Pass Laboratories XP-15, which is very flexible phono preamp, especially when it comes to cartridge loading options. It was recommended that the resistance loading value for the Blue NS could be set anywhere between 400 and 1000 Ohms, but after measuring the results (with my ears) I settled on a resistance of 500 Ohms. The SME V tonearm used a Van den Hul tonearm cable, and the Tri-Planar is hard-wired with Discovery cable terminated with Cardas RCAs. The Pass Labs phono preamplifier was connected to a LKV Research Line One linestage (which I reviewed in the [October 2014 issue](#)), a Balanced Audio Technologies (BAT) VK-3iX, or a BAT VK-33 (review forthcoming). The beginning of the review linestage was connected to a pair of PrimaLuna Dialogue Six tube monoblocks which powered a pair of Venture Audio Encore speakers (reviewed in the [May 2014 issue](#)), but when my reference Sound Lab Dynastat electrostatic hybrids were returned to my system I powered them with a Pass Labs X350.5, a 350 Wpc solid-state muscle amp. Both speaker systems' deep bass was augmented with a Velodyne HGS-15b subwoofer. The Oracle Delphi MK VI is powered by its own Oracle Turbo II power supply, but the Basis turntable is connected to a PS Audio P300 Power Plant AC regenerator that sends either a 60 Hz sine wave (for 33.3 rpm records) or an 81 Hz sine wave (for 45rpm records) to power its AC synchronous motor. The preamplifiers are connected to a separate PS Audio Power Plant that is larger than the one that powers the Basis turntable, and the power amps are connected directly to the Virtual Dynamics wall receptacles of the listening room's two dedicated AC lines. The subwoofer and the speaker's power cables are connected to a Chang Lightspeed power conditioner. Interconnect, speaker, and power cables are a mix of Virtual Dynamics, MIT, DH Labs, and Audio Art cable depending on the length I need for each component and which cable sounds best for that particular function. The listening room's acoustics are treated with Echobuster Acoustic Treatment panels, LPs line the walls on custom designed LP shelves built by Gotham Cabinet Craft, and the floor is covered by industrial grade carpeting.

The Kiseki Blue NS is easy to set-up, largely because of the parallel sides of its more or less rectangular body. Those who fear breaking off a stylus on the grounds that it protrudes from the front of the cartridge's body, as some very popular models being marketed today, will be relieved to find that the stylus of the Blue NS pokes out from the bottom of its body. Despite the fact that this makes it a bit more difficult to set a perfect overhang spec, I for one felt a bit of relief that there was less of a chance I would inadvertently swipe the cantilever from the body when otherwise innocently reaching past the cartridge to make an adjustment elsewhere on the turntable. Even better news is in regards to the sound of the cartridge once it was fully broken in. Initially, one will likely notice the strong bass foundation of the Kiseki Blue NS, and as time goes on this impression is likely to stay with the listener for quite a while until one becomes accustomed to its bass prowess. Regardless of which record I chose, the deep, pitch-stable, stentorian bass of the Blue NS remained one of its salient features. The bass frequencies were never exaggerated, yet at first it did draw attention to itself mainly because it sounded so fantastic. Folks love to state that one of the traits they love about digital sound reproduction is the way it reproduces the deepest bass frequencies. I

suppose if one were to base these opinions strictly on measurements, digital would most likely win this battle, and the would especially be true if one only listened to electronically generated test tones. But if the rules of this contest awarded more points to which one sounded more like music, the Blue NS would surely win.

After being wowed by the bass, one can turn to the Blue NS's mids, which were surprisingly neutral. I say surprisingly only because I have been so accustomed to my long term references, the cartridges designed by and sold by Lyra. These cartridges have a crystal-clear midrange combined with other qualities that have made this brand very popular. The Kiseki Blue NS rivals this midrange purity, and at the same time puts some distance between instruments that I did not notice with the Lyra. The space between instruments in its large soundstage gave me a better sonic view of the details of the each instrument, but also seem to allow the intensions of the musicians, producers, and engineers who were responsible for the recording. Yes, this description sounds a bit obtuse, but it was if I could "see" further into a recording, and in doing that could perceive elements of certain sounds I never heard before even on records I've heard many, many times before.

I don't live in a cave. Well, not a real cave, so I logged onto the Internet so I could read some reviews of some other Kiseki cartridges, although I'm sure that none of these were exactly the same model as the one I'm reviewing here. In spite of some praise lauded on these cartridges, there were also some criticisms. Although I agree with some of these complaints, even if what they were describing was close to what I heard with the Kiseki Blue NS I certainly don't concur with the extent of any of these criticisms. In fact, after the first few LPs that I listened to after carefully setting up and adjusting my brand new sample of the Kiseki Blue NS, I was a bit worried that these reviews *did* reflect the treble characteristic of the Blue NS, and I was going to be stuck listening to a less than stellar cartridge for the remaining time in the review period. Put very simply: the treble of the Blue NS *before break-in* isn't that good.

Voicing

Terms such as "sibilant", "rolled-off", "and wispy" cropped up, and I forced to agree with them when describing my sample of the Blue NS's treble when I first mounted it on my tonearm. After about 50 hours of play the treble of the cartridge became much more neutral, and I would not have recognized it as the same cartridge that I unpacked only a short time ago. The treble of the Blue NS might not have the same resolving power as my reference Lyra Kleos -- it is not as adroit at distinguishing between slight differences in timbre on instruments with a great deal of upper-treble energy--yet the Blue NS has a warmth that the more clinical sounding Kleos does not possess. The Blue NS's musical sounding treble was still able to separated different instruments and sounds that congregated within these frequencies in its soundstage, and placed a dynamic distance between them, In other words, when two instruments are playing at the same volume it places them in a separate field of not only the soundstage, but of the mind's ear.

It seems a bit absurd breaking down the sound of the Kiseki Blue NS into separate frequency regions. That's just not how we hear music. Yes, as audiophiles we love analyzing components in fine detail, but when

describing the music it is reproducing it would make more sense if we simply described how well, or how it doesn't, sound like the real thing—and how close it can come to that unattainable Holy Grail—that the music coming from our speakers is indistinguishable from the real thing. Since that's not going to happen (or if it does, it doesn't happen often enough, or with the type of consistency we'd like), the best we can hope for is how well a component, in this case a phono cartridge, can translate the physical into the electrical, and how it passes that musical signal to our phono preamps and beyond -- without mucking things up while it's doing it. A good component can be judged on how well it translates the musical event, and translates to us the intentions of the musicians, producers and engineers who made this recording. This is where the Kiseki Blue NS shines.

Sure, it's been voiced to be as neutral as possible, but there are still some shortcomings from preventing it from becoming a paragon of transparency. This is largely because there have to be choices made in construction to build it to a price point, and these choices are reflected in its sound. But when I'm playing a record this isn't what I hear. Actually, the results are quite amazing for a cartridge at this price. The Kiseki Blue NS is so good that at times my records almost disappear as a sound source, and if it weren't for the occasional click or pop I sometimes forgot that it's a record that is making this music. No, not on every track on every album, but again, this is marvelous for a cartridge at this price; and this isn't even Kiseki's top model! As far as sounding like the "real thing", there are times, with the right record, with the right music, with the right sound engineer and mastering engineer, it became quite frequent. In fact, the feeling of the sensation of disbelief started happening more frequently than any cartridge at this price that I've ever heard in quite some time. This comes back to the Kiseki Blue NS's warmth, its non-analytic treble, its very transparent midrange, and its adroitness with deep bass, all adding up to a lifelike timbre when reproducing sounds that are pressed onto a record sourced from real people playing real instruments in a real space.

About half way through the audition period I played side 2 of the early 1990s re-issue of Stravinsky's ballet score *Petrouchka* on Athena Records, a re-issue that sounds better than the fine Decca original. This 1957 recording conducted by Ernest Ansermet and his L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande might be one of the best sounding orchestral LP's in my collection. This is quite an old recording, so there is some tape hiss, but it is it hardly a distraction because of its near demonstration sound quality etched into the grooves of this record. Some might argue that Ansermet's version might not be "authentic" as others, but it is a fine reading, nonetheless. Side two of the LP begins with *Tableau III: The Moor's Room*, as tympani rolls and horns introduce the movement. A piano on the side of the stage placed behind the winds and the horns, thanks to the Blue NS's wide and deep soundstage, share the theme. Then things settle down as a *pp* theme in miniature is played by the winds, piano, above a softly stroked bass drum foundation. The Blue NS separates each instrument in space, and even though the instruments are played softly in this part that introduces us to the movement the Blue NS treats each instrument, each note, and each musician who is playing each note, as the most important in the score, up until the next note that is played. It's a relatively sinister theme; even though we are at a fair it is obviously a precursor to something otherworldly about to occur.

The bass drum is beating as if it is a heartbeat, not loudly, but still loud enough that the low frequencies can be felt through the soles of one's feet,

vibrating the air and sending tremors through the floorboards ever so slightly. More importantly, though, is that while these notes are played by each musician – the wind players, the pianist, the percussionists – the semblance of real musicians playing in a real space is heard, in this case Victoria Hall in Geneva. It is as if one can hear the musty air around each musician as he plays (yes, *he* plays, other than the harpist it is doubtful there are any women in this late fifties fossil). After a short oboe melody, without warning, rolling tympani whacks accompanied by horns awaken us, followed by the oboe theme once more, and then the tympani growls and dissonant horns blare, this time abetted by quadruple forte bass drum wallop. I've become accustomed to this jolt, but even with other cartridges in the system I've had guests literally jump a foot into the air from the listening seat. It was even more effective with the Kiseki Blue NS installed.

Even though I used all this space describing the sound quality of the Blue NS reproducing the sound of real musical instruments played by humans, this cartridge does a fine job with other genres of music. So, can we say that the recording studio is a real space? Is an electric guitar a real instrument? How about multiple microphones placed around a drumset, with some only inches from the drums surface? Is a microphone placed a foot or so away from a singer a true representation of the human voice? Can any of the recordings that use the multi-track recording method on about 99% of the records in the "rock" category of my collection be used to judge a piece of high-end equipment? As an audiophile, I sure listen to lots of music that's recorded in this way. Therefore, if the gear I use can't give me a sense of what the musicians, engineers and producers intended their work to communicate it really is of no use to me. I'd rather not be so blunt, but I remember the bad old days when most high-end equipment could only perform acceptably on classical and some jazz. These days that type of equipment doesn't make it to market that often, I suppose because the type of music audiophiles listen to has changed. But as I mentioned above, the Kiseki Blue NS sounds great when playing rock and electronic records.

Take for example The Sword's 2012 *Apocryphon* album. This Austin, Texas metal/stoner/riff-rock band's album was recorded in Baltimore at Maggie Cage, a studio that I have visited a few times to observe their mix of analog and digital recording techniques that result in an honest sound that is very listenable, even if played on less-than-stellar gear. Yet when played on a high-end system the music on this record enters through the entire body, not just through the relatively tiny orifices that are one's ear canals. What I like about this particular recording, and what comes through the Blue NS is that very little compression seems to have been used. This is obviously evident on drummer Santiago Vela III's drums and cymbals. I dare anyone to be able to tell whether the drums were recorded digitally or on analog multitrack or some of both before bouncing it to ProTools. But the entire mixdown was to analog tape before it was pressed onto vinyl (making the SPARS code on a CD seem more than antiquated when a disc is denoted AAD, ADA, AAA, etc. It isn't that simple anymore). This cartridge makes the cymbals in his kit sparkle and splash with a very natural sound, so when on the title tune he rides on the bell of the cymbal it is in-the-room real. Yes, practically all percussion can easily be used to perform stereo system parlor tricks, even on less than stellar equipment, but it is the adeptness in how the Blue NS treats the initial transient of the drum-stick hitting the cymbal, the bell's ring, and the waning tonal decay that sets it apart from the average cartridge.

Still, the Blue NS might not have the upper-treble discrimination as other

such as the higher priced Lyra Kleos. The Lyra can differentiate between very similar shades of treble timbre as no other cartridge in its price class, and quite a few above its price. But the Kiseki Blue NS has a warmer sounding treble, and this trade-off is one that many other cartridge manufacturers should envy. It is rather noticeable in the sound of the cymbals, whether played individually or *en masse*, and results in very natural, unfatiguing sound. The treble is certainly not perfect; there is still a hint of sibilance and thinness that was evident in the unbroken-in Blue NS. And what I'm also getting at is that the warm, natural treble of the Kiseki is the cartridge's *weakest* point. And that it really isn't so bad speaks well of this component. The music on this LP can overwhelm with sound -- the midrange whomp of the distorted Marshall-stack guitars, the chest pounding drums and growling bass, but I usually like that sort of thing. I was still able to clearly comprehend Kyle Shutt's sometimes abstruse but often personal lyrics through the din. Still, it forced me to play the double album a few times before I could fully absorb it all. In other words, this record as played by the Kiseki Blue NS rocks. I felt that I was hearing exactly what the band wanted me to hear, that the level of transparency of the Blue NS is at a level that one should consider it a bargain at its asking price. In fact, when I first received this phono cartridge I assumed it was closer in price to my reference Lyra, but only later discovered that it costs more than 25% less. Of course personal taste will come into play whether one wants a warmer sounding cartridge such as the Blue NS or a more analytical one such as the Lyra Kleos, but the price difference might make one's decision for them, yet I wouldn't consider it a great compromise by any means.

Enjoying

One of the last records I played before I started writing my review was the recently released double-45rpm ORG reissue of John Coltrane *Coltrane Jazz* that was originally released on Atlantic Records. It captivated me with the way he seems to reveal everything he learned in the previous decade before launching into his next, more exploratory 60's epoch. His tenor sax didn't necessarily enter my listening room, but the Kiseki's excellent

midrange response was able to transport me into the studio as I was a fly on the wall, taking advantage of this fantastic pressing which removes layers of glassy murkiness that are present on previous issues that I hardly noticed until I heard it stripped away. The cartridge was also able to take advantage of the near total absence of surface noise on this LP, so only the tape hiss remained. Perhaps the Blue NS's less analytical treble had something to do with the quiet surfaces, I'm not sure, but it was nice to hear the sound of the recording process and the slightly noticeable studio ambience rather than record noise. Some fans of John Coltrane don't



















immediately like this LP. I can understand that, it's certainly not as groundbreaking as his previous album *Giant Steps*. At this point in time he was able to record anything he wished, but he was also under a bit of pressure from the management at Atlantic to put out *more* records. Some think he might have been placating some earlier fans with an album that wasn't as "far out" as *Giant Steps*. Regardless, we are able to enjoy the fruits of this prolific period with the help of machines such as the Kiseki Blue NS, which not only rendered Coltrane's horn with a credible sound that is easily recognizably as his own, but the rest of the band on the album also sounded great, which on one tune features future band-mates pianist McCoy Tyner and drummer Elvin Jones, so we're hearing at least two different recording sessions. It hardly matters. I'm happy to say that the Blue NS performed admirably throughout. I sometimes use the cliché "it got out of the way and let me simply enjoy the music" when describing components such as preamplifiers and such, yet here with the Kiseki Blue NS it was also patently true. It let the music flow with a very transparent-to-the-source sincerity.

Superbly

Here I go again, painting myself into a corner with praise of a high-end piece of equipment. Although the Kiseki Blue NS performed superbly, it isn't anywhere near Kiseki's top-of-the-line. But many LP-loving audiophiles might find this mid-priced phono cartridge all they need to achieve analog nirvana -- as long as they can survive its rather long break-in period. When I was listening to the Blue NS I certainly wasn't thinking of its heritage, construction, its price, whether it was "good enough" or anything else that would distract me from everything that it does right. It is a transparent transducer, reading the physical and converting to electrical signal and in the process acting as the proverbial sonic time machine. With it mounted on my tonearm I listened to records recorded as far away as fifty years ago and as recent as fifty days ago, and music as far ranging as orchestral, solo voice, and industrial electronic music, and as long as it was a competent pressing the results were the same – I felt as if I was hearing everything that the musicians, producers and engineers had intended me to hear and feel. Recommended.

Ratings (my ratings tend to be very conservative. A rating of 3 is excellent, a rating of 5 is the best I've ever heard).

Tonality	
Sub-bass (10Hz - 60Hz)	
Mid-bass (80Hz - 200Hz)	
Midrange (200Hz - 3,000Hz)	

High Frequencies (3,000Hz On Up)	
Attack	
Decay	
Inner Resolution	
Soundscape Width Front	
Soundscape Width Rear	
Soundscape Depth Behind Speakers	
Soundscape Extension Into Room	
Imaging	
Fit And Finish	
Self Noise	
Value For The Money	

Specifications

Type: Stereo moving coil phono cartridge

Body: Aluminum alloy, 25mm long

Cantilever: Solid Boron Rod: 0.28 mm diameter

Stylus: 0,12 x 0,12 Nude line-contact diamond, mirror polished

Stylus tip radius: 5 x 120 µm

Vertical Tracking Angle (VTA): 20 degrees

Coil: pure iron coil

Weight: 10 grams

Output voltage: 0.44 mV at 5 cm/s

Internal impedance: 40 Ohms

Frequency response: 20 Hz to 25.000 Hz (±1dB)

Channel balance: 0.4 dB

Channel Separation: 35 dB at 1 kHz

Tracking ability at 315 Hz at a tracking force of 2.4 grams: 80 µm

Dynamic Compliance: 16 µm/mN

Recommended loading: 400 Ohms

Recommend tracking force: 1.8 – 2.6 grams

Optimum tracking force: 2.4 grams

Recommended tone arm mass: Medium

Optimum working temperature: 20 °C
Break-in period: 50 to 100 hours
Price: \$2199

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