

Small Wonder



Neville Roberts tells the strange story of the enigmatic Kiseki Blue NOS moving coil cartridge, and tries a brand new limited edition...

Back in 1979, it is said a certain Japanese gentleman, Mr Goro Fokadu, formed a company called Audiophile Products in the Netherlands. The story goes that he had been experimenting with a wide range of audio products, one of which was the silver wired moving-coil transformer MCT-1 for low-impedance moving-coil cartridges. He used a winding machine that he invented for this purpose and then later developed it for winding coils for moving-coil cartridges...

Unfortunately for a number of interested manufacturers, Mr Fokadu decided not to sell this winding lathe to them as he preferred to manufacture his own cartridges, which had the brand names of Kiseki (which means 'Little Miracle') for the elite range and Milltek for a more affordable range of high-output cartridges. The Kiseki Blue was the first moving coil cartridge made by Mr Fokadu and was a low output, low-impedance design, which soon joined the ranks of the elite, being considered a reference cartridge by audiophiles worldwide. It subsequently underwent a number of improvements over the years to become the Blue Silverspot and later the Blue Goldspot. In addition to the unique winding lathe, high quality oxygen-free copper was employed for the coils and a special fluid was used on the coils to minimise the effect of room-temperature changes. The magnets were charged after the yokes had been connected, to maximise the strength of the field.

This is the stuff of which legends are made – quite literally – as it never happened! In truth, Mr

Fokadu did not exist at all and was actually invented by a Dutch audio entrepreneur who decided to launch his own brand of cartridges to his own design that he had custom-made by Dynavector! The Kiseki cartridge is in truth the brainchild of Herman van den Dungen, the man behind the Ah!, PrimaLuna and Mystere range of audio products.

Back in the last century, a company called Audiophile Products was formed by Herman in Holland which, as Durob Audio, was the European distributor for Koetsu cartridges. Audiophile Products still exists today as the holding company for DÉ HifiWinkel in Beek-Ubbergen and Durob Audio in Vlijmen. However, following supply and quality control problems with the Koetsu cartridges, Herman decided to produce his own high quality cartridges to compete with Koetsu. He prepared hand drawings for the body of a cartridge and some of his associates prototyped six aluminium bodies. These bodies were then sent to three cartridge manufacturers in Japan to make six prototype cartridges for him to assess. Of these, one was chosen and the first of his new cartridges was born.

In choosing a name for the new cartridge, he asked one of his Japanese friends to translate into Japanese, "I make a new start". The answer was 'Ata ra shii ka do de', which was a bit of a mouthful as a brand name, to say the least. He then tried "little miracle" and that came out as 'ki se ki' and hence a new brand was launched and the rest is history!

What about Goro Fokadu? Well, he was actually Mr Goro Fukada,

Herman's cartridge maker at that time, but Herman decided to modify his name to preserve Mr Fukada's anonymity and to enable Herman himself to effectively own the name! Curiously, Herman's business partner at the time who knew about Mr Fokadu/ Fukada thought that the name 'Kiseki' (which he pronounced as 'qui sait qui') meant 'who knows who'!

Anyway, the good news for the hi-fi industry is that Herman has now decided to resurrect the brand, starting with the launch of a 'signature edition' of the Kiseki Blue in the form of a limited run of 100 Kiseki Blue NOS (New Old Style) cartridges. This new cartridge has been manufactured using a few of the original components that comprised the top of the range Kisekis of the nineties (and because no better parts are available now) plus some other components where new technology offered significant improvements. According to Herman, the resultant cartridge has all the 'romance' of the original cartridges, but will be the last of its type as many of the original components are no longer available, hence the limited run of 100 cartridges. One of the original components is the lovely turned wooden presentation box. However, it has a hand-written serial number on the box, with a matching number on the cartridge – in my case, No. 026.

Once in my hot little hands, out came the tools and the Lyra Clavis DC cartridge in my ISO1000 (an OEM Rega RB1000) arm was swiftly replaced by the Kiseki Blue. The next job was the not-so-swift calibration and alignment of the cartridge in

SPECIFICATIONS:

Body: aluminium alloy
 Cantilever: solid boron rod
 Stylus: nude line contact
 Tip radius: 5 x 120 µm
 VTA: 20 degrees
 Coil: pure iron cross coil
 Weight: 11g
 Output: 0.4mV, 3.54cm/sec
 Impedance: 12ohms
 Compliance: 15 µm/mN
 Tracking force: 1.8gm
 Load: 100 – 47,000ohms
 Tonearm mass: medium

its new home! I carefully set up the cartridge in the tonearm using an alignment protractor and set the VTA approximately correct by having the tonearm parallel to the record, then finely tuned it by ear [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE].

SOUND QUALITY

The first recording I played was Louis Fremaux and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra performing 'Saint Saens Organ Symphony No. 3' on the HMV Greensleeve label (ESD 7038 – stereo/quadrasonic). A really fabulous sounding disc, in particular, the second movement has some amazing 16Hz organ notes which are a great test of the bass response of a system. So this was the first record to grace my turntable with the new cartridge fitted. The Blue NOS certainly had the wow factor; the sustained organ note was clearly reproduced and was felt more than heard. At the same time, the strings of the orchestra were crystal clear and there was no sense that the cartridge was focusing on the bass frequencies at the expense of everything else.

Moving onto some jazz, a direct-to-disc live recording from the 1970s of 'Lincoln Mayorga and Distinguished Colleagues Volume III' (Sheffield Labs LAB-I SL5/SL6) the Kiseki gave a sparkling performance with crisp percussion and a deep and throaty saxophone that was exceptionally convincing. One small criticism was that the image placement was not as precise as I am used to with this recording and the positioning of Lincoln Mayorga's piano was a little far back. I put this down to a slightly constrained midrange which was the result of the cartridge not being fully run in, and can confirm that things certainly seemed to open up after just a few hours of playing.

At this point, I just had to try it with Side B of the first disc of the three LP set of Laurent Garnier's 'Tales of a Kleptomaniac' (Pias Recordings PIASR 160 TLP). As I have mentioned in a previous article, this recording has an astounding techno bass line with some acoustic saxophone, trumpet, trombone and guitar, topped off with a triangle for good measure. This is a real test for any record deck, arm and cartridge combination as it has incredible power and complexity in the music. Even though the bass line hit me in the stomach as though I'd been winded with a bowling ball, it was incredibly well controlled, tight and punchy. As with the Saint Saens, there was no tendency for the bass to swamp everything else and the

triangle had no trouble making itself heard through it all – no mean feat!

Calming things down somewhat, I tried the Kiseki out on a solo instrument – in this case, a harpsichord. 'J S Bach Partita No 1' by Trevor Pinnock (from an Archiv 2-LP set 415 493-1) demonstrated a lot more detail and clarity than I have experienced with other cartridges, but in no way was this at the expense of smoothness and polish to the performance. A full baroque orchestra was equally revealing – with an excellent recording of the Vivaldi Concerto in D for violin and strings (Telefunken Das Alte Werk 6.42355 AW), the cartridge gave a fast and lively performance that was crisp but not in any way harsh.

To round off proceedings, I finished off with the infamous Telarc 1979 digital Soundstream recording of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture (Telarc DG-10041) with live cannons that very few cartridges can track. Indeed, this record has been gathering dust recently as the only cartridges I have owned in the past that could track it successfully were the Shure V15 MM and a Dynavector Ruby Karat MC. Impressively, the Kiseki had little problem staying in the groove during the live cannon cracks. The thud of the cannons did not mask the cacophony of all the bells in the conclusion and, as with the Laurent Garnier, you felt the power of the propellant as very much a force to be reckoned with. It's a clear, crisp, precise and poised performer the Kiseki, one which belies its real world (for a moving coil, at least) price.

Indeed, it's very hard to criticise from a sonic point of view; the cartridge worked consummately well in my reference system. One niggle was that the stylus is a little difficult to see underneath the cartridge if you prefer to do all your cueing manually, and I suppose it wins no prizes for good looks – but that's being picky.

CONCLUSION

This Kiseki Blue NOS is a fascinating postscript to a long running story in hi-fi, one that's become the

stuff of legend. Certainly, audiophiles of a certain age will know the brand and feel it has real kudos; the Lamborghini of moving coils to the Ferrari that is Koetsu? So the chance to hear a refreshed but still genetically fairly 'pure' Kiseki was hard to resist. The result was a characterful cartridge with superb tracking ability, an extended and well-controlled bass that packs a punch when required, and a startlingly clear treble and upper mid, but without any tendency to become harsh, even when pushed during loud passages of music. As such, it's highly recommended.

The trouble is that prospective purchasers won't have the chance to buy one for long, due to the limited nature of the production run, so the promise for this coming year is an all-new cartridge called the Kiseki Blue NS (New Style) which will have a smaller body and be constructed from only fresh components. The Kiseki Blue NOS will be a hard act to follow and if the NS is as good as the limited edition NOS, then it will be a winner. In the meantime, I can wholeheartedly recommend snapping up an NOS while you can.



VERDICT

An enigmatic classic moving coil reborn. The result is a powerful, punchy yet precise performer with character to spare.

KISEKI BLUE NOS 1,450 Euro

Durob Audio

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FOR

- excellent clarity and detail
- lack of harshness
- extended, punchy bass
- superb tracking ability

AGAINST

- difficult to see stylus for manual cueing

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the Blue was remarkably flat on outer grooves our analysis shows. The MC generator has no loss in the upper midband and there's little sign of a peak caused by stylus tip mass resonance, probably because of good damping control. The small +1dB lift above 9kHz will be enough to ensure treble is well stated, but the Kiseki will sound smooth and well balanced tonally, with no treble spit. Stylus tracing loss on inner grooves was a little higher than some of the best geometries, but with output flat to 14kHz this will be little apparent.

At 2.2gms downforce tracking was very good, if not quite up with the best, with 60µm peak amplitude cleared at 300Hz and 23cms/sec velocity cleared at 1kHz. The Kiseki didn't like the top torture tracks of 90µm and 25cms/sec.

Output was low at 0.5mV at 5cms/sec rms so a preamplifier with plenty of gain is needed. Channel separation was high, although generator alignment wasn't perfect, with a 12dB difference in crosstalk levels between channels.

Distortion levels were very low all round just 0.6% on lateral modulation and a very low 1.3% on vertical modulation, due to Vertical

Tracking Angle perfectly set at exactly 22degrees, measurement showed.

The Kiseki Blue is a very precise cartridge and is up with the best, giving good results in nearly every areas. NK

Tracking force	1.6gms-2.2gms
Weight	11gms
Vertical tracking angle	22degrees
Frequency response	20Hz - 20kHz
Channel separation	32dB
Tracking ability (300Hz)	
lateral	60µm
vertical	45µm
lateral (1kHz)	23cms/sec.
Distortion (45µm)	
lateral	0.6%
vertical	1.3%
Output (5cms/sec rms)	0.5mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

