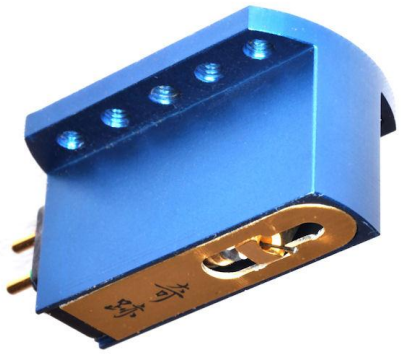
Out of the Blue - The Kiseki Blue NOS Cartridge

Neville Roberts



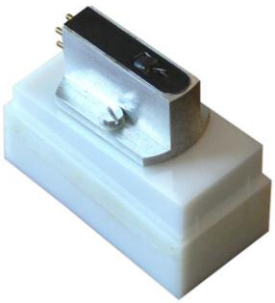
The Kiseki Blue had an enviable reputation in the past, but in recent years the mysterious Kiseki brand seemed to have disappeared– until now! Neville Roberts has managed to get his hands on a new limited edition of this famous cartridge.

Back in 1979, it is said a certain Japanese gentleman, namely 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 world-wide. 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. Furthermore, the magnets were charged after the yokes had been connected to them in order to maximise the strength of the field.

This is indeed the stuff of which legends are made. However, as with most legends, there has been a certain mystery surrounding the elusive Mr Fokadu over the years, culminating with reports of his untimely death and the consequential closure of the company in 1996. Rumours then started that Mr Fokadu did not exist at all and was actually invented by a certain Dutch audio entrepreneur! This Dutch gentleman started by distributing the Koetsu brand of cartridge and then, so the rumour goes, thinking that he could improve on these, he decided to launch his own brand of cartridge to his own design that he had custom-made by Dynavector! It is claimed that he created Mr Fokadu to give his brand name of Kiseki some 'street cred'! Oh – and the coil-winding machine? Well, that may have been the result of an association with a Professor Tominari from Tokyo University!

I am delighted to now be able to reveal the truth of the matter, which is that the Kiseki cartridge is, in fact, the brainchild of a certain Herman van den Dungen! This Dutch audio entrepreneur is, as many will already know, the man behind the Ah!, PrimaLuna and Mystere range of audio products, notably high-end valve amplifiers and CD players. Some have even been quoted as saying that he is the Netherlands' answer to Keith Richards!



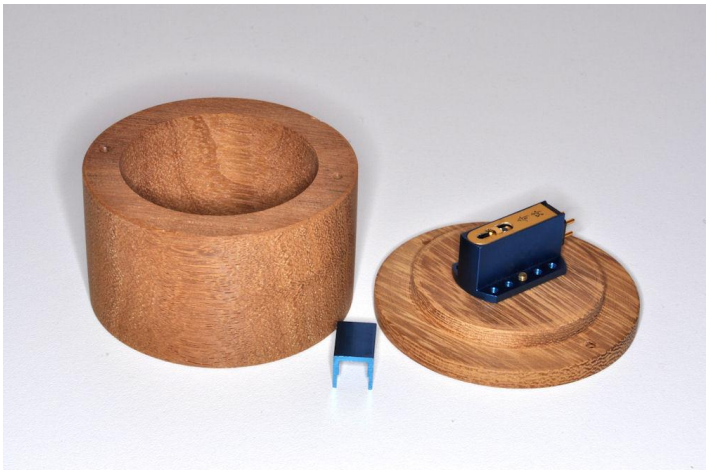
Back in the last century, a company called Audiophile Products was formed by Herman van den Dungen in Holland which, as Durob Audio, was the European distributor for Koetsu cartridges. Audiophile Products still exists today as the holding company for DÉ HifiWinkel in Beek-Ubbergen and Durob Audio in 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, but at a lower price. 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 "Atarashii kadode", 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 "Kiseki" 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 great 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 '90s (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!

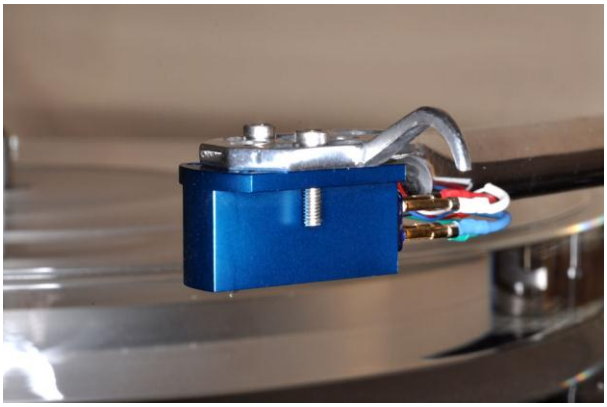
Once in my hot little hands, out came the tools and the Lyra Clavis DC cartridge in my ISO1000 (an OEM Rega RB1000) arm was swiftly replaced by the Kiseki Blue. The next job was the not-so-swift calibration and alignment of the cartridge in its new home!

Calibration and alignment

Unsurprisingly, the specifications of the cartridge are very similar to the original Blues and are as follows:

Specifications	
Body:	aluminium alloy
Colour:	blue
Cantilever:	solid boron rod 0.28mm diameter
Stylus:	nude line contact diamond, mirror polished
Stylus tip radius:	5 x 120 µm
Vertical tracking angle (VTA):	20 degrees
Coil:	pure iron cross coil
Weight:	10.8g
Output voltage:	0.4mV at 3.54cm/sec
Internal impedance:	12 ohms
Frequency response:	20 to 20,000 Hz +- 1dB
Channel balance:	better than 0.5db
Channel separation:	better than 35db at 1KHz
Tracking ability:	80µm at 315Hz and 2g tracking force
Dynamic compliance:	15 µm/mN
Recommended loading:	100 – 47,000 ohms
Recommended tracking force:	1.7 – 2.0g
Optimum tracking force:	1.7 - 1.8g
Recommended tone arm mass:	medium
Optimum working temperature:	23°C
Break-in period:	50 – 100 hours

Armed with this information, I carefully set up the cartridge in the tone arm using an alignment protractor and set the VTA approximately correct by having the tone arm parallel to the record. Final adjustment of the VTA can only be accomplished during the listening tests. If the arm is too high (VTA too great), the sound will be harsh and thin with poor imaging. If set too low, the sound will be dull with 'boomy' bass, lacking detail and again with poor imaging. I then set the tracking force to 1.75g using a digital stylus balance.



The first parameter to check was the tracking ability using my copy of the Vinyl Essentials test record. This confirmed the quoted figure by tracking the 80 microns test track but failed on the 90 micron track. This is a pretty good figure in any case and was an improvement on the Lyra, which could only just manage 70 microns.

Tonearm-cartridge resonance was measured at 8Hz, which is very satisfactory. If it is around 14Hz, this is too close to a real-world signal, such as a very low organ note. Below about 6Hz and the resonance will produce sub-sonic noise where the harmonics are likely to interfere with the audio frequencies.

Set-up complete, it was now time to settle down and listen!

Music to my ears

One particular recording I haven't played in a long while is Louis Fremaux and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra performing 'Saint Saens Organ Symphony No. 3' on the HMV Greensleeve label (ESD 7038 – stereo/quadraphonic). One problem with this recording is that it suffers from audible hiss, which may be tape hiss, a consequence of the SQ matrix quadraphonic encoding or both, but otherwise it is a really fabulous recording. In particular, the second movement has some amazing 16Hz organ notes (I know them to be 16Hz as I can measure them from the groove modulations and work out the frequency from the diameter of the groove and the rotational speed of the record – how sad is that?!) These notes 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.

It 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 focussing 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-1 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. I mentioned this to Herman and he confirmed that the midrange should certainly open up after a good 50 hours of running and I have to say it 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 you in the stomach as though you had 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 a really 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 and clear, but not in any way harsh. All this from a cartridge that had not fully run in!

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. Until now! 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!

Conclusions

Some may consider that the simple lines of the cartridge lack visual style and the stylus is a little difficult to see underneath the cartridge if you prefer to do all your cueing manually, but these are very minor issues in the grand scheme of things.

The cartridge has superb tracking ability and an extended and well-controlled bass that packs a punch when required. The top end is startlingly clear, but without any tendency to become harsh, even when pushed during loud passages of music.

The promise for 2011 is a new cartridge to be called the Kiseki Blue NS (New Style) which will have a smaller body and be constructed from only new components, for obvious reasons. There is little doubt that 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 real winner. In the meantime, I can whole-heartedly recommend snapping up an NOS while you can.

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