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Analog Focus



Kiseki PurpleHeart NS Moving-Coil Phono Cartridge

The Heart of the Music

Jim Hannon

Many years ago, when my original Kiseki PurpleHeart Saphhire moving-coil cartridge finally expired after several years of faithful service, a lot of the magic in my audio system disappeared. I purchased it several decades ago, based on the strong recommendation of my local dealer at the time, dB Audio, and a quite favorable mini-review in a moving-coil cartridge survey in TAS (Issue 34, Summer 1984). HP found it to be “a great cartridge” and remarked on its ability to produce a “very, very wide and deep soundstage,” as well as its excellence at reproducing low-level information in complex passages. He also praised its neutrality and transparency.

I hadn’t planned on such a splurge, but I trusted the dealer, and after hearing it I had to have it. My Kiseki was set up expertly by John Hunter (who eventually moved on to Sumiko and later to REL). To say I was in heaven with its performance would be an understatement. Here was a moving-coil cartridge of moderately low output (0.4mV) that had a captivating harmonic richness without any sacrifice in overall transient speed and clarity, along with an ability to dig deep into the grooves to extract fine details. It also produced a wide and focused soundstage and the most

image depth and width—to the back and side walls of the stage—of any cartridge in my experience. The soundstage was holographic.

Like all moving-coil cartridges eventually do, my original Kiseki PHS spit the bit after several years of demanding use. Brian Hartzell of The Analog Room arranged to get the Kiseki “re-tipped” by AJ Van den Hul, and I was able to squeeze several more years out of it until it finally gave up the ghost. I moved on to a Koestu Black Goldline cartridge, a wonderfully musical performer, but some of the Kiseki’s most appealing attributes, notably its transient speed, transparency, and image depth, were missing. Over the years, I have tried and appreciated several other excellent mid-priced moving-coil performers from Clearaudio, Ortofon, and Benz, but I have never been able to recapture the magic offered by the Kiseki PurpleHeart Sapphire.

While reviewing some of the initial PrimaLuna Dialogue electronics, I came to learn from Upscale Audio’s Kevin Deal that PrimaLuna’s Herman van den Dungen was the driving design force behind the Kiseki, and I politely, but insistently, “begged” both of them to bring it back. In 2012, I snagged one of the first new Kiseki’s available and was a very happy camper until recently, when the cartridge’s suspension started to sag. Kevin offered to exchange my 2012 Kiseki PurpleHeart for a “new and improved” version of the reissue.

Happily, this “new” and most recent Kiseki PurpleHeart (\$3199) captures all the magic of the original—and then some. At the same

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time, the newest version is quite different from the original. While they both use boron cantilevers, the latest has a different mounting method for the diamond, and on the newest version (compared to my earlier 2012 one) the coils are wound from gold instead of oxygen-free copper. The latest Kiseki uses a new, innovative method of winding the coils that does two things according to Kevin Deal: It increases transient speed and frequency extension, while also eliminating any sense of harshness and sibilance. I concur with Kevin’s assessment, although I never detected any sense of harshness or sibilance in any version of the Kiseki PurpleHearts that I’ve owned. I might also add that in the latest iteration of the cartridge, I hear even better bass performance and power, and transparency is simply stunning.

Additionally, the newest version of the Kiseki PurpleHeart gets closer to the sound of the mastertape. There’s a harmonic naturalness and freedom from distortion that sucks one into the music. I found myself relaxing into the sound, as I do when listening to mastertapes on a great reel-to-reel deck, like the United Home Audio Phase 12.

Analog Focus Kiseki PurpleHeart NS Moving-Coil Phono Cartridge

Specs & Pricing

Type: Moving-coil
Body: Purpleheart wood, 30mm long
Cantilever: Solid boron
Stylus: Nude line-contact diamond, mirror polished
Stylus tip radius: 4 x 120µm
Vertical tracking angle (VTA): 20 degrees
Coil: Pure iron
Weight: 7 grams
Output voltage: 0.48mV at 5cm/s
Internal impedance: 42 ohms
Frequency response: 20Hz–30kHz ±1dB
Channel balance: 0.2dB
Channel separation: 35dB at 1kHz
Tracking ability (at 315Hz at a tracking force of 2.6 grams): 80µm
Dynamic compliance: 16µm/mN
Recommended loading: 400 ohms
Recommend tracking force: 2.0–2.6 grams
Recommended tonearm mass: Medium
Break-in period: 50–100 hours
Price: \$3199

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Associated Equipment

United Home Audio UHA-Phase 12 tape deck; Conrad Johnson GATS2 preamplifier, ART150 amplifier, TEA1-S3 phonostage, and Audio Alchemy PPA-1 phono preamplifier; Modwright-Oppo BDP-105 digital player; Mytek Brooklyn DAC; MFA Venustian (Frankland modified) and BAT VK-33SE preamplifiers; BAT VK76SE and PrimaLuna DiaLogue HP monoblock amplifiers; Zellaton Stage, Wilson Audio Yvette, and Quad ESL-57 (PK modified) loudspeakers; Silver Circle Audio TCHAIK6 power conditioner; Shunyata Research Alpha Digital power cable; Nordost Tyr2 cables and power cords; Schnerzinger interconnects and speaker cables, AudioQuest Niagara interconnects and Metro speaker cables; Critical Mass Systems amplifier stands, etc.

On the Telarc Omnidisc, the Kiseki performed at the highest levels on a series of tracking torture tests using musical examples.

bass, and sparkling (but not bright) highs. As the audience applauded, I felt like I was in the concert hall. Moreover, listening to the new Reference Recordings reissue of *Nojima Plays Liszt*, I could swear I was listening to the mastertape on my UHA Phase 12 tape deck. The surface noise was so low using the Kiseki—the lowest of any of the cartridges I have owned—that I was fooled.

Fortunately, my local dealer, Pearl Audio, set up the Kiseki in combination with the latest Tri-Planar U-2 tonearm and upgraded Merrill-Williams REAL101.3 turntable. John Loranger and his team at Pearl did a masterful job! The cartridge tracking force was set at 2.4 grams. I tried loading the Kiseki at the recommended 400 ohms, but I preferred it at 525 ohms on the brilliant Conrad-Johnson TEA1-S3B phonostage.

On the Telarc Omnidisc, the Kiseki performed at the highest levels on a series of tracking torture tests using musical examples. It easily navigated the five canon shots on Tchaikovsky's *1812* Overture, the massed chorus singing in Orf's *Carmina Burana*, the initial attacks of the piano on Chopin's Tarantelle in A-flat major, and the timpani/bass drum/double bass passages on Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. There was also

no breakup as the trumpets entered on Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. (Undoubtedly, the Kiseki's outstanding performance was also owed to the precision Tri-Planar U-2 tonearm.)

Female vocals can be utterly mesmerizing via the Kiseki. With *The Wonderful Sounds of Female Vocals* [Analogue Productions] as a reference, there was no hint of added sibilance and the voices floated on a cushion of air, with richness, body, and clarity. Previously unheard fine details emerged that helped create the illusion of the performers being in my listening room. On another recording of female voice featuring the recently departed Mirella Freni, *French and Italian Opera Arias* [EMI], there was no hint of sibilance even on her soaring and dynamic high notes. Her vocal timbre was gorgeous with stunning transparency and explosive dynamics. Fine details emerged effortlessly—like her delicate breath, the saliva in her mouth, the leading edges of consonants, etc. Massed strings and horns were also beautifully rendered. I was swept away into the heart of the music.

On Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* [Reference Recordings], instruments were arrayed across a wide and deep stage and the effect was thrilling. Timpani strikes made me shudder, and there was no audible distortion or mistiming. Massed strings were naturally rich yet detailed, and the bass power was visceral but articulate. There was not only a lot of air around the performers but also emanating from them. If you attend live concerts, you know what I mean. The air hits your breastbone on loud passages,

The Kiseki PurpleHeart excels at reproducing all genres of music, from intimate solo and chamber works to big band jazz, heavy metal, and powerful orchestral pieces. I listen to a lot of solo piano recordings, and the Kiseki reproduces the dynamics, power, and percussive attacks of that instrument as well as or better than any cartridge in my experience. For example, on the live piano recital Sokolov: *Salzburg Recital* [Deutsche Grammophon], the piano had harmonic richness, amazing clarity, powerful and articulate

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and you feel it. This cartridge excels at both micro and macro dynamics without losing its composure. I don't think I've ever sat through a more thrilling experience listening to this piece, except in a concert hall. I was glued to my seat.

Did I mention that the Kiseki can also rock? Listening to Mobile Fidelity's remarkable new Ultradisc One-Step pressing of *Fragile* by Yes, I thought I was at a live concert, except the sound was less distorted and more articulate than what

one typically hears through a speaker system at a rock concert. It had all the fine detail you might want, yet there was no stridency in the vocals. Admittedly, Rick Wakeman's Hammond organ got a little close to the hairy edge, but it was recorded that way.

It's difficult for me to find any sonic fault with the Kiseki PurpleHeart. Unfortunately, my only experience with expensive, reference-quality phono cartridges has been at industry trade shows.

A few of these high-end cartridges arguably may outperform the Kiseki on certain attributes, like tracking ability or top-end extension, but most do not. However, they all come at a significant price premium. I must defer to my esteemed colleague and friend Jonathan Valin on the best of the reference cartridges, but the Kiseki is a definite contender.

Some commentators think that image depth is an artifact of the recording process, but I don't care. I love having the 3-D effect this cartridge produces, and it's what I hear in live concerts in good halls. I don't mind bathing in the third dimension.

According to Kevin, the Kiseki's parts are from the Netherlands, Japan, and Switzerland, with final assembly in Europe. I hope Kiseki will be able to keep up with demand without sacrificing quality. The build-quality of all three versions I have owned over the years has been superb, and I have tried all three with a variety of turntables and tonearms. Though the Kiseki worked marvelously with my Graham 1.5, ET-2, and SME V tonearms, I prefer the cartridge in my current setup with the Tri-planar U2 and Merrill-Williams 'table. It gives my reel-to-reel deck some "real" competition, and both have a freedom from distortion, coloration, and dynamic compression that helps me relax into the music.

Is the new Kiseki PurpleHeart N.S. as good as the original? Absolutely. In fact, it is even better. Are current production cartridges better than the initial release in 2012? Yes!

Kiseki in Japanese means "miracle" and it is a fitting name to associate with the PurpleHeart NS. This moving-coil cartridge is relatively easy to set up, tracks everything I threw at it, has a relaxed yet detailed sound, and puts the performers in the listening room when mated to superb speakers like the Zellaton Stage, Wilson Audio Yvette, or the original Quad ESL-57. I am so taken with this cartridge that I'm already saving for another Kiseki PurpleHeart as a backup. I can't be without this miracle cartridge ever again. **tas**

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