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Kiseki Purple Heart NS Moving Coil Phono Cartridge

The sound of sonic art.
Review By Tom Lyle



Phono cartridges occupy a revered place in an audiophile's arsenal. The Kiseki Purple Heart NS (new style) moving coil phono cartridge reviewed here is a good example. Their significance, however, is often under-appreciated by neophytes who don't understand that cartridges have a shorter lifespan than other components. The manufacturers are not to blame; after a few years, even the most robust stylus wears out or the cantilever breaks. The uninitiated – or the financially strapped – will frequently opt to replace those elements (re-tipping), but the DNA of a true audiophile relentlessly demands upgrading to a better phono cartridge. Luckily, a large majority of manufacturers are willing to credit the purchase price of an older cartridge towards a newer one in their line.

That brings us to the subject of this review, the Kiseki Purple Heart NS moving coil phono cartridge. In November 2014 I reviewed the excellent Kiseki Blue NS, priced about a thousand dollars less than the Purple Heart. Those who read the review know that Kiseki cartridges are manufactured by Herman van den Dungen, the same innovator behind the excellent and quite popular PrimaLuna brand of tube components. With Kiseki, he has created an air of mystique by being a little cagey with the cartridges' specifications. Those with a basic knowledge of phono cartridges can glean much from the info he does provide, but after that, little else is known. Yes... sometimes I'm overly prone to skepticism. From the Kiseki-USA website we know that van den Dungen set out to market a cartridge with as little sample-to-sample variation as humanly possible. He's also kept a tight rein on the number of dealers, presumably to ensure the selected few are always well-stocked. But specifications and marketing uncertainties don't mean much to me...as long as the product's sound quality is up to par. While I found the affordable Blue NS superb, especially considering its price-to-performance ratio, the Purple Heart plays – literally and figuratively – in an entirely different league.

Recommended

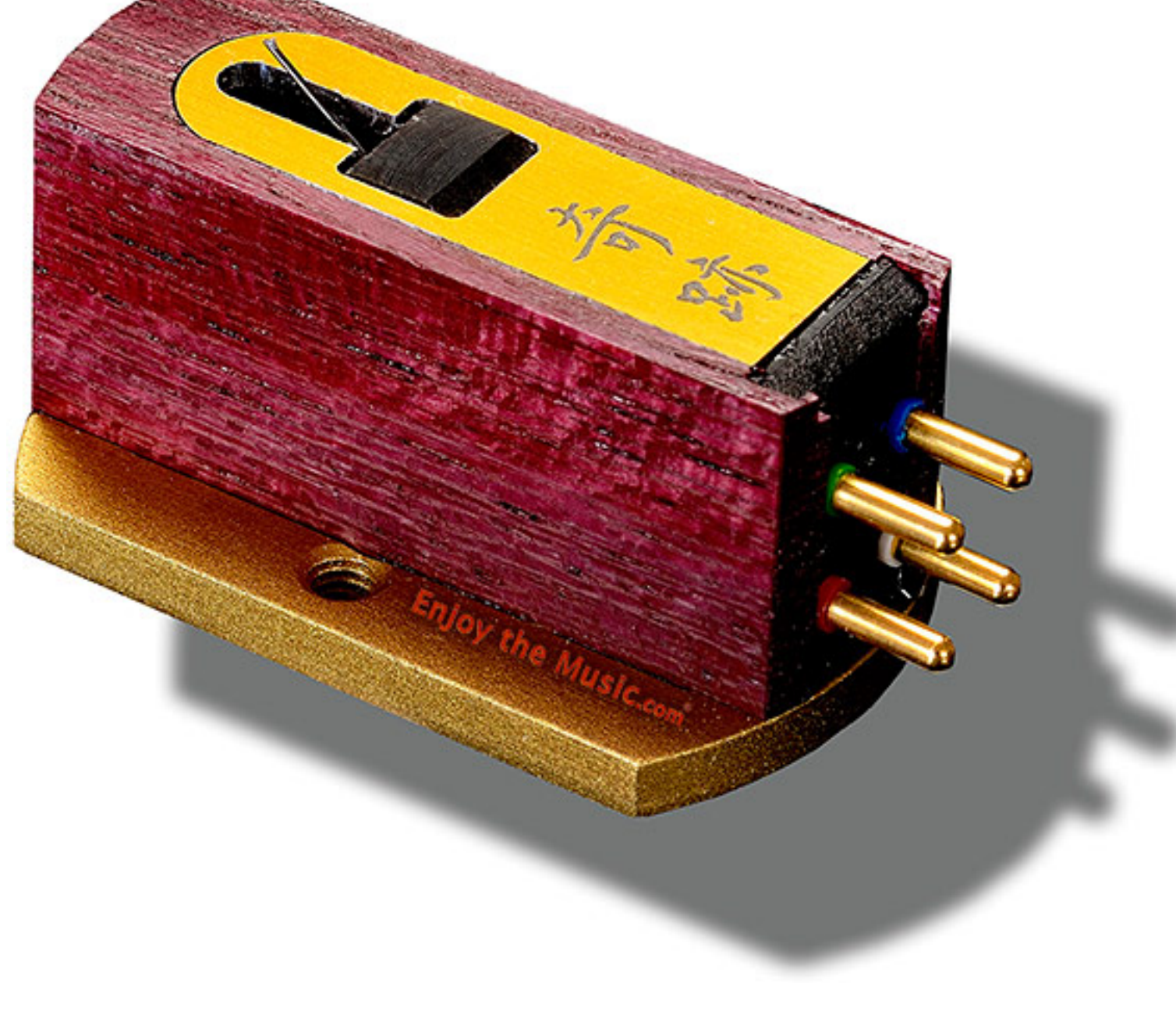
Upon initial observation, the Purple Heart NS possesses a simple, well-crafted wooden body that somehow hues purple in just the right light. OK... cool. Beyond that however, its specifications and construction don't appear to distinguish it from other cartridges at this price point. It has a boron cantilever, a nude line-contact diamond stylus that is mirror polished, and an output of 48mV, which is common for a Moving Coil (MC) cartridge. I mounted it on my recently rewired and updated Tri-Planar tonearm without effort, and sent the loading on my [Pass Laboratories XP-15 phono preamplifier](#) reviewed [here](#) at the recommended 400 Ohms. (I experimented with other loading options but always ended back at the prescribed settings.) Kiseki recommends a tracking force between 2.0 and 2.6 grams; I found the best results at a few thousandths less than 2.4. It should be noted that for about a week during my review session, I discerned my Pass Labs for a Merrill Audio Jens that cost four times as much. (See [Ron Nagle's April review](#).) The Purple Heart NS deftly rose to the pairing, with a sound discursively superior to the coupling with the Pass Labs XP-15. However, that side trial also made me appreciate even more my Pass Labs unit: it fits my system to a tee, is super transparent, and rarely leaves me wanting for more.



Apparant

I hold a unique, long-standing fondness for Coltrane Jazz and when I played The Master's two 45rpm LPs from ORG (originally released by Atlantic), it was immediately apparent that the Kiseki Purple Heart NS phono cartridge was allowing me to hear it as never before. There's no shortage of opinions regarding the prolific number of albums John Coltrane released from 1960-1962, and even though Coltrane Jazz is rarely mentioned as a favorite among critics (the champion is – and will remain – *Giant Steps*), I believe it singularly reveals how Coltrane honed his already prodigious skills. And revealing is exactly how I'd describe the Purple Heart's sophisticated character, providing a transparent sonic window into the recording session, with virtually all mechanisms of reproduction disappearing. The cartridge passed silently through my clean copy's grooves, but excellent tracking is just one of many traits that enabled me to feel as though I was there, a fly on the studio wall, listening to Coltrane's brilliance simultaneously soar above and mesh with bandmates McCoy Tyner, Elvin Jones, Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers, and others. And despite the fact that I'll never in a million years unravel the genius that Coltrane was able to harness during these sessions, the cliché "I was able to just sit back and enjoy the music" was never truer than when the Purple Heart was part of my analog playback system.

Mention must be made of the Purple Hearts treble reproduction prowess. This is one very detailed cartridge, but never did it sound inordinately analytical. Its paradoxical character was quite apparent when reproducing the cymbals of Elvin Jones and Jimmy Cobbs. Their styles are distinct and although Jones plays only on the second track, it perfectly blends with the others. That's probably because it is John Coltrane who is the constant, and his brilliant leadership is obvious (as is the engineering expertise of the renowned Tom Dowd and Phil Lehle). The Purple Heart's treble proficiency not only allows for distinction between the type and size of cymbals in the drum kit, but the area where the cymbal is struck, the velocity of the drum stick hitting it, and the emotion of the drummer wielding the stick. Can a cymbal sound musical? Through the Purple Heart, it sure can.



One track that stands out in this brilliant collection is "Like Sonny," a tribute to fellow saxman Sonny Collins. Coltrane was performing it live at the time, tinkering with much of it, especially his solos, which intentionally reflect Rollins' influence. The Purple Heart renders Coltrane's horn as an exact replica of what was laid to tape. Just as importantly, it captures the gestalt of the musician and his instrument. Yes, obtuse descriptions are just that, but the Purple Heart easily made Coltrane's sound not just like a saxophone but *like a saxophone that is being played by a living, breathing human being*. On Coltrane Jazz, despite the fact that the instruments are panned to the left and right speakers, this cartridge allows this record to create a striking example of how a recording studio can be a perfect place to capture real instruments being recorded in a real place (and can therefore dismiss the tired objections of old timers that it wasn't recorded live in a concert hall).

Another excellent example of the Purple Heart's seemingly limitless frequency extension is the 12" EP of Kraftwerk's tune "Radioactivity." Relatively rare, this four-track – the original song and three remixes – emanates from the song found on their 1991 album, *The Mix*, which itself was something akin to a demo-disc of the style that ushered in the great electronic-dance scare of the '90s. The Purple Heart reproduced the very prominent yet bass parts with appropriate fierceness, which were EQ'd on these mixes to ensure that they could bombard the dance floors with maximum subsonic intensity. The bass frequencies I heard were handled with exceptional control, not only because I designed my system and listening room to avoid runaway low end frequencies, but because of the components in my system... namely the Kiseki Purple Heart NS. It reproduces bass tones with seemingly limitless frequency extension, and did so with exacting pitch control and the precise timbre chosen by the programming producers. The manner in which the Purple Heart separates the bass sounds from the synthetic kick drum is, frankly, astonishing. Additionally, although the directionality of these bass sounds was quite difficult to localize (the nature of the beast!), I could easily detect that all the low-end drum sounds were recorded on different tracks and that they also were being reproduced as distinct sounds in my listening room.

Clearly, the Kiseki Purple Heart NS was designed to handle more than the bottom-heavy bombast of a dance record or a recording in a smoke-filled studio with baffles between musicians, so out came my favorite orchestral and jazz albums. In 1960 Dimitri Shostakovich wrote his *String Quartet No. 8* and his motivation immediately fell under intense scrutiny and debate. Space constraints prohibit a full discussion, but there is no doubt that he left us with a fantastic piece of music that can withstand anyone's interpretation. My reference recording of this work is played by the Borodin Quartet, and is expertly pressed onto vinyl by King Records of Japan, a 1980s reissue of the Decca/London recording originally sold in 1963.

I played the Shostakovich quartet uninterrupted – and it never sounded better. The Purple Heart effortlessly exposed the recording venue: a small auditorium or rehearsal hall. (In fact, during the last movement traffic can be heard coming from outside the venue.) As I played the record, I became engulfed in sound, the quartet wrapping around me as if I was surrounded by the musicians seated in a semi-circle, the air and environs of the hall placed within the soundstage behind and way to the sides of the cello and first violin. The street noise seemed to be coming from the far left side of the soundstage, creating the sonic illusion that it was emanating from the suburban street outside my home. The quartet goes from soft to loud and back to soft again within a measure or two, and sometimes within the same measure. The Purple Heart breezed through this with a kind of "foresight," reproducing the artistry as though it could anticipate which notes were to come next.

During the section with rapid-fire, equally spaced down-strokes (that many have interpreted as gun shots), I realized that Coltrane-moment and was again transported to the venue itself; I could "see" the players' frayed brows and a cloud of rosin surrounding them, mixing with the cigarette smoke and clouding the players. The Purple Heart's ability to reproduce the macro- and micro-dynamics that were engraved into the vinyl was unparalleled, yet with all this appraisal and dissection of sound quality, I never lost sight of the genius of Shostakovich; that this is one of the best examples of his later years, when these compositions were personal statements rather than public. Emanating from my speakers was a semblance of a string quartet recorded over 50 years ago, but transpiring in my listening room as though it was happening in real time.

Instruments

I would be negligent if I didn't write of the way in which the Purple Heart was able to separate the instruments or groups of instruments of a large ensemble, regardless of the size and volume in which they are playing. A perfect example of this is on my Classic Records vinyl reissue of the Mussorgsky/Ravel masterpiece *Pictures At An Exhibition* with Fritz Reiner conducting. This old warhorse definitely has some miles left on it. It is a fine record to test the sound of audio equipment, but often I find myself playing this record for enjoyment on a regular basis. It'll be brief, though, and just say that when playing the second side – where the tympani is pounding and the horns are blaring and all heck is breaking loose – the Purple Heart kept its composure. When reproducing instruments that were playing at the same volume this phono cartridge was somehow able to place these instruments or sections into discrete areas of the soundstage, creating a dynamic distance between them.

Near the end of the review period, for comparison's sake, I returned my Lyra Kleos to its position mounted on the Tri-Planar 6. The Lyra is no slouch; it is beyond question that it is one of the best cartridges in its price class. When asked for a recommendation more often than not I recommend an appropriately priced Lyra cartridge. The Lyra brand is popular for a reason. At first I thought that it might not be fair to compare the Purple Heart to the Kleos since the Purple Heart costs so much more than the Kleos – so it would be much more appropriate if I were compare two cartridges closer in price. In addition, it would also be more appropriate if I remembered to remember that I have a crummy memory, as a result almost fell off my desk chair when I realized that these cartridges cost nearly the same amount of money. The Lyra is a fine cartridge. I could easily live with it for all eternity (that is, if I could resist the upgrade ascent). But if one were to simply sit down and listen to the Kiseki Purple Heart one could easily forgive me for mistaking it for a much more expensive cartridge. The differences live largely in the midrange of the two. Compared to the Kiseki Purple Heart, the Kleos sounds a bit coarse; its midrange doesn't have nearly as much refinement. And when directly compared to the Purple Heart the Kleos' treble has an almost whitish character, and is also a bit unrefined. I once praised the Kleos for its treble – the way in which it is able to differentiate between different treble sounds, but it might simply be that the lower treble sounds more than a bit pumped up compared to the Purple Heart, and on that account more realistic sounding. When switching cartridges (as quickly as I could, but carefully) the upper midrange of the Lyra also seemed a bit boosted and less refined. Just for fun, and to make sure I was hearing what I was hearing, I find the Lyra in place for a week. I became accustomed to the Lyra once more, and could easily see why I feel in love with it in the first place four years ago. But all my findings in regard to the superiority of the Kiseki Purple Heart were confirmed when I re-installed the Purple Heart.



Are there any negatives in regards to the Purple Heart's sound? Only one that I can think of. Even though I stated that the Purple Heart's sound is detailed but not over-analytical, there were some records I played where this cartridge was able to peek behind the curtain – many recordings, especially "classic rock" records from the 1960s and 1970s, it was fairly obvious that some engineers and producers were still learning from their mistakes, or were experimenting, and these experiments might have not turned out exactly as they planned. Lest I get into arguments over personal taste (or lack thereof) I won't point to any records in particular. But I was surprised that some records that I never considered poor recordings were revealed as such with the Purple Heart as part of my analog front-end. Don't get me wrong, by listening to these records through the Purple Heart they weren't "ruined"; it simply revealed them for what they were. I was still able to enjoy them, but more for their artistry than their sound quality. I suppose this might not be thought of as a negative by more than some – this is the risk one takes by having such a transparent cartridge in one's system.

One Of The Best

The Kiseki Purple Heart Moving Coil phono cartridge as reviewed here is the best six thousand dollar phono cartridge I've ever heard. But the Kiseki Purple Heart doesn't cost six thousand dollars because it does it a move: it redefines what is possible. But I'm not recommending it just by proclaiming that this is the money well spent. After living with the Kiseki Purple Heart most if not all vinyl-loving audiophiles will be amazed at what they can hear hidden in the grooves of their favorite records, and how it can turn these mere sounds into the works of art the musicians, producers and engineers intended for us to hear. It certainly amazed me as soon as this cartridge was broken in and correctly set-up. Yes, care must be taken in setting up this phono cartridge as accurately as possible. This makes sense, as this cartridge is not only a refined piece of electronic equipment, but a work of art. And all fine works of art require special handling.

As usual I have painted myself into a corner. Of course the Kiseki Purple Heart isn't the best cartridge out there – even though at present it is the best cartridge that Kiseki manufactures – and after all, many experienced audiophiles would consider this cartridge only "mid-priced." If one is able and willing to spend more on a cartridge, make that a lot more on a cartridge, there is no doubt that better can be had. And I hope to one day soon audition a cartridge that is better than the Kiseki Purple Heart. But Kiseki has set the bar awfully high. The Kiseki Purple Heart is revealing but never analytical sounding, runs silently in the grooves of the record, and its frequency response and frequency extremes coincide with reality – or an altered reality when required, as it reproduces exactly what is pressed into the grooves of the record with no editorializing of the program material, and turns these sounds into sonic art. I would lead in to marvel at its delicate micro-dynamic detail, and a split second later it could knock me off my listening seat with its powerful bass and controlled macro-dynamic slam. When playing some records it would impress me with its ultra-realistic, lifelike reproduction, and on some records could seduce me with its near scientific rendering of man-made studio creations. Do I recommend the Kiseki Purple Heart? Absolutely.

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: Moving coil (MC) stereo photo cartridge
 Body: Purple Heart Wood
 Cartridge Length: 30 mm
 Cantilever: Solid boron rod
 Stylus: 0.12 x .012 nude line-contact diamond, mirror polished
 Stylus Tip Radius: 4 x 120 µm
 Vertical Tracking Angle (VTA): 20 degrees
 Coil Body: Pure iron
 Weight: 7 grams
 Output Voltage: 0.48 mV at 5 cm/s
 Internal Impedance: 42 Ohms
 Frequency Response: 20–30,000 Hz ± 1 dB
 Channel Balance: 0.2 dB
 Channel Separation: 35 dB at 1 kHz
 Tracking Ability at 315 Hz at tracking force of 2.6 grams: 80 µm
 Dynamic Compliance: 16 µm/mN
 Recommended Loading: 400 ohms
 Recommended Tracking Forces: 2.0 – 2.6 grams
 Optimum Tracking Force: 2.4 grams
 Price: \$3299

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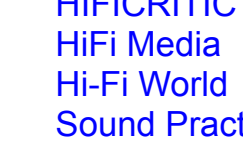
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