

## World Premiere!

### Lyra Kleos MC Phono Cartridge

Able to handle any record that I threw at it.

Photo courtesy of Music Direct

[Review By Tom Lyle](#)

Before I begin, I should mention my personal bias in favor of Lyra cartridges. I rationalize that this bias might not be as severe as it may appear, and therefore it will not sway my neutrality as a reviewer. But facts are facts. So this disclaimer: In my system in the early to mid-1990s I starting using the now long discontinued Lyra Clavis, then switched to their Helikon model when it was first released in 2000. Although during that period I had short dalliances with similarly priced models from Van Den Hul and Benz-Micro, and even though both manufactures make fine products, in the end they only seemed to deepen my respect for the Lyra brand. But I'm not alone in thinking that the Lyra Helikon is an excellent phono cartridge. Its superb tracking, silent background, deep tight bass, lifelike midrange and treble, among many other positive traits that seemed nearly impossible for its relatively affordable asking price have earned it praise throughout the audiophile world. I have been using the Helikon and the lower output Helikon SL for about ten years now, that is, until I installed Lyra's newest arrival and the subject of this review, and their latest offering, the Kleos.



A short diversion: One probably is familiar with the constellation Lyra, its Greek name derived from the musical instrument the Lyre, so this name makes sense for brand of high-end audio gear. But the name Kleos is certainly less well known, and I'm here to tell you that I have discovered via my tireless research into the matter (looking up the Wikipedia entry) that "Kleos" is from the Greek that is often translated to "renown", or "glory". It is also related to the verb "to hear" and carries the implied meaning of "what others hear about you". A Greek hero earns *kleos* through accomplishing great deeds, often through his own death. That last part, at least to me, doesn't make a whole lot of sense as far as using it as a name for a phono cartridge, but the "to hear" definition certainly does. Plus, a product named Kleos does sound pretty cool. Now that we've gotten this out of the way, on to the cartridge.

I admit that compared to most other components it sometimes seems like phono cartridge manufacturing is a rather mysterious art. At worse I imagine lab-coat clad engineers with jeweler's loupes attached to their foreheads hunched over their work benches toiling in an industrial complex's dimly lit back room. So when reading about cartridges either on a manufacture's website or in their literature, I feel I can let them slide a bit when it comes to technical explanations. This is largely because sometime I just don't understand about half of what they're talking about. Lyra seems to steer clear of any exaggerated claims and instead tends to concentrate on what matters most, of course that being the sound one gets from playing LPs. They say that the Kleos was designed by American engineer Jonathan Carr, and each cartridge is hand built in Japan by Lyra's Yoshinori Mishima and his assistant Akiko Ishiyama, who are two of the few people on Earth that have earned the right to be called "Master Cartridge Builders". It is then tested by ear before it is packaged and shipped.

An important element of cartridge design was developed by the Lyra team when developing their entry-level Delos. Lyra realized that a problem occurs when placing the stylus of a Moving Coil cartridge on the record's surface – the tracking force pushes the coils of the cartridge out of alignment so the magnetic signal no longer aligns with the coils. This occurs on a nearly microscopic level, yet

this still affects the sound quality because this misalignment impairs the linearity of the signal coils and magnets. This problem might seem like a minor one, but Lyra found its implications in the final sound of the cartridge are far from minor, so the Kleos has also been designed with what Lyra terms "New Angle" technology. I thought that this technology simply compensates for this misalignment during playback, but Lyra's distributor explained to me that it actually corrects for the misalignment of the coil within the flux field. This technology was first used on their new \$1500 Delos and enabled it to perform well above its asking price. This cartridge has been very well received by both the public, and the reviews have been very positive. Of course Lyra applied this new technology to the more advanced design of the Kleos.

I'll spare you until the end of the review to tell you all the specifications that make up this cartridge, other than to say that it can be used in just about any popular tonearm, and in the sheet included with the cartridge it recommends a vertical tracking force of between 1.7 and 1.8 g, with a "preferred" force of 1.75g. The nice folks at Immedia, Lyra's US distributor, recommended that I go with a tracking force just slightly above this recommendation at 1.77 grams. After some experimentation I agreed with them. I was able to precisely dial in this weight on the tonearm by using my newly acquired, extremely affordable even by non-audiophile standards (\$79), Audio Additives digital stylus force gauge that accurately measures VTF to the thousandth (0.001) of a gram. I thought that I was ahead of the game using my once highly rated, way more expensive, fiddly, and less sensitive Winds gauge. I'll never look back.

Included in the Kleos' box is a full 5ml bottle, not just a sample, of Lyra's SPT (Stylus Performance Treatment) and its applicator brush. I've been using this stuff for years before this cartridge arrived with good results. Also included is an "accessory kit", which has a tiny Allen wrench, and three pairs of screws with different lengths to attach the body of the cartridge to the tonearm's headshell. I used my own Phillips head stainless steel screws, which when I was given them by someone I trust that said using these type of screws can improve the sound of the analog set-up. I took his word for it since I'd rather not spend my time taking a cartridge on and off the headshell performing A/B tests, and would rather be enjoying music. So I have been using these cartridge screws ever since. Another type of stylus cleaning brush is in the kit, the kind that is basically a pad on a short wand. I mounted the Kleos with no problems, set the VTF, azimuth, arm height (VTA), and anti-skating level, and I was just about ready to start playing records other than setting the phono preamp's load specs. The arm height had to be risen quite a bit more than the Helikon, which leads me to believe that I should take back what I said about the Kleos' use in "any" popular tonearm because those who cannot change the VTA of their tonearms, such as those made by Rega, might not be too keen on this model unless one is willing to install spacers to raise the arm up a bit more than they're accustomed.

I connected the Tri-Planar tonearm's hard wired cable, which I'm pretty sure uses Discovery Cable, to a Pass Labs XP-15 phono preamplifier which was a recipient of an Enjoy The Music [Best Of 2010 Blue Note Equipment Award](#). Although I'm well aware that there are mathematical methods of setting a phono preamp's loading options via computing the capacitance interactions between the Kleos and the phono stage with considerations as to the length and type of interconnect, in the manual Lyra agrees with me that listening is a perfectly fine method of choosing a setting, and that's what I did. It didn't take me long before I settled on a load of 100 Ohms, the same setting as the previous resident, the Helikon.

### **Judging The Kleos**

Of course I listened to the Helikon right up to the moment I started installing the Kleos, so it is likely that instead of judging the Kleos against an absolute, my first impressions were those of the improvement in sound of the analog rig with the new Kleos vs. the old Helikon. And indeed there was major improvement, even though I have always been very pleased with the performance of the Helikon. I like to think that my system can be considered a relatively resolving one, as well as possessing a very lifelike sound on most recordings. Still, compared to some others (as I have system envy, and most audiophiles should humbly admit this) I am aware that it is definitely not the most esoteric out there. So a good number of audiophiles would consider it a "modest" system at best. That is, other than the analog front-end, namely the combination of the Basis V turntable and the Tri-Planar VII tonearm, therefore a more sophisticated set-up might sound different, but the improvements might

only extend to a certain degree, as the long arm of the law of diminishing returns is going to be tough to outrun at this level. And some might rightfully point to the previous phono cartridge in the analog front-end of this system, and even though I've always thought that the Helikon is a mighty fine unit the rest of the analog rig was revealing enough so that I could hear its weaknesses, slight as they are. This was true especially in the upper range of the mid-treble, where I could hear a bit of opacity. Yet the treble was otherwise admirable, and in fact is one of its strong suits when compared to other brands of comparatively priced cartridges. Especially noteworthy was the way in which it could reproduce minute differences between sounds in this region that were similar, such as different sizes of cymbals, high winds at different pitches and locales in the soundstage, and even its sensitivity to slight dynamic changes within these frequencies. But the Kleos takes things to a much higher level in all aspects of sound quality, not only in the treble. It betters the Helikon in all areas that one would deem worth considering. So I'll try and judge it on its own from this point on. I said try.

I was told that the Kleos would need only a short break-in period, and this was true, only after about two or three LPs worth of tunes the Kleos started settling into its character (or lack thereof). I'm not exaggerating when I state that the sound of the Kleos is extraordinary, and because of the Kleos' short break-in time it didn't take long to realize this. Early on I played Syd Barrett's first solo LP recorded in 1970, *The Madcap Laughs*. I'm lucky enough to have realized that this album was worth purchasing when I was a lad, and this original UK pressing on EMI/Harvest is still in fine shape, considering that I played the thing on less than stellar equipment back in the day. Still, there are some minor scuffs on its surface, but one would hardly know it as the background of the album was silent; the only noise that remained was an occasional soft tick in the outer regions of the soundstage and tape hiss. The sound qualities (that is "qualities", not quality) change from track to track because of the time it took to record this album with different engineers and producers at the helm, but it is an excellent sounding album, especially as reproduced by the Kleos, and particularly the sound of Syd's voice and acoustic and electric guitars that are rendered as you-are-there documents of the sessions. Even though the production is a bit heavy handed with the reverb, there were still times that the ambient sound of the studio was scary real, as when I heard Syd turn the pages of his lyrics during "She Took A Long Cold Look". Most of the backing musicians were from the band Soft Machine, and they did a fantastic job of injecting a mood that was both psychedelic and laid-back. During "No Good Trying" Mike Ratledge's signature keyboard sound wails underneath the proceedings, yet some of the standout tracks contain only Syd and his guitar and yet because of his idiosyncratic delivery they are just as involving, and just as "confused" sounding because of his off-kilter delivery. The backing band must have had quite a time following Syd's rubato, and should be applauded for not only meshing with him musically, but making this album the classic that it is. When the full band was "rocking out", for lack of any other term, on some of the tunes it made me feel as if I was a fly on the wall of the recording studio's control room.

When I played the double LP *The Best Of Pharaoh Sanders* on Impulse, it was also a revelation, not only because of his version of jazz (the "his version" comment not intending to infer any disrespect) was so involving, and made me long for days of this type of imaginative playing, but mainly because of the excellent performance of the Kleos phono cartridge one can step into the proverbial sonic time machine. The first track on the record "Upper Egypt" (an excerpt from the *Tauhid* album) was recorded at Rudy Van Gelder's studio in suburban New Jersey in 1966. The soundstage can tend to get a bit crowded with lesser cartridges. With Sanders on tenor sax, percussion, and vocals – there is also additional percussion by Nathaniel Bettis, along with Dave Burrell on piano, Sonny Sherrock on guitar, Henry Grimes on bass, and Roger Blank playing drums. Sanders' compositions hark back to the later compositions of his mentor John Coltrane's late works, with an added hint of Afro-centrism, so including instruments such as a thumb-piano make sense. The loose free-jazz mixes with a mellower, almost spiritual swing, but can evolve to a noise-fest at any given moment. Pharaoh Sanders makes it work. Sanders' tenor had all the timbral accuracy as one would expect from a mid-60s Van Gelder recording. And as with other material that I've auditioned through the Kleos, every instrument on the session sounded patently lifelike, but of course it helped that this track was recorded so well to begin with. I became immersed in Pharaoh Sanders' sonic world.

The Kleos was able to handle any record that I threw at it. Even though the above musical examples are of relatively small combos, I really just chose these two at random. The Kleos was able to take any record from my collection, regardless of genre and, again I feel as if I'm perpetrating the cliché, make these records seem like they were the most important records from the collection. The Kleos is so transparent, its transient response so quick, its background supernaturally quiet, that its sound

seemed to only be limited by the recording it was reproducing. And when presented a first-rate recording pressed on first-rate vinyl, such as Classic Records' re-issue of Bartok's *Concerto For Orchestra* on RCA, that if given the chance I could easily fill up as much space describing its sonic and musical attributes in this review that at least half of Amazon.com's server farm would be needed to save the file. So I'll spare you any long winded diatribe, and just say that every instrument, and every instrument section not only occupied its own space in the huge soundstage that wrapped around and behind the speakers, but each instrument and instrument section had a reach-out-and-touch manifestation that had yet been achieved before in my system. All this, plus both intellectual involvement and sonic envelopment of both the score and its interpretation by conductor Frederick (a.k.a. "Fritz") Reiner.

It would also be fair to mention the Kleos' bass prowess. The low-end on rock and electronic records tested the limits of my system (and the frame of my house). Some examples? How about the slamming synth bass on the track "Piggies" on side one of the first disc of Nine Inch Nails' *The Downward Spiral*? It matters little if there is a good chance that this record was digitally mastered because even though it was a bit louder via the digital file (and the physical CD) the pumping bass couldn't come anywhere close to the grip, solidity, and subsonic fathomage that exploded from the speakers on the LP version. Ditto on "real" rock bass and kick drum, as on the 12" single on Australia's Missing Link Records of The Birthday Party's "Nick The Stripper" taken from their *Prayers On Fire* album from 1981. Tracy Pew's Fender bass had the requisite depth charge thump and growl, and at the same time Phil Calvert's kick drum could be heard as a highly discernible separate event, yet it combined with the bass guitar to provide a rock-solid foundation for the rest of the band, and of course Nick Cave's bewitching yowl.

The Lyra Helikon's rejection of surface noise earned it heaps of praise during its tenure (so much for my judging the Kleos on its own merits). The Kleos takes this positive trait to entirely new, stratospherically high (or should I say low?) levels. I would purposefully search out records in my collection that were either worn or just plain ole' old to revel in this newly found background tranquility. I more than once have been outbid on an original Blue Note of Jackie McLean's *One Step Beyond* to replace my copy because it was just a bit too worn. I can now save my money for some other record purchases. When I played this gem with the Kleos on the end of my tonearm this fantastic album not only had a vanishingly low amount of surface noise, it sounded the best I've ever heard it. Ever! Among many other reasons why I love this album so much, this is my favorite early appearance by drummer extraordinaire Tony Williams as a sideman, and I could now here nuances in his playing that were previously hidden. I also have some original RCA's in my collection that otherwise have superlative sound, such as my 1s copy of Prokofiev's *Fifth Symphony* conducted by Jean Martinon [LSC-2272] where the background noise would not be considered too distracting, at least not by a devotee of vintage LPs, but it is really the only criticism I can find of this otherwise stellar recording of this work. This LP has always been one of my favorites, the Kleos renders it just that much more enjoyable, which I always thought for all practical purposes an impossible feat.

## Convincing

For those who are skeptical that the Kleos is worth its asking price, and if this review hasn't won you over, short of an audition, a look at the diagram on Lyra's website might aid in convincing you that it is most likely a very labor intensive process creating one of these cartridges. On the diagram one will notice about fifteen component parts in a piece of gear that weighs less than three ounces with manufacturing tolerances that are measured in microns. And like I said in the intro to this review, each Kleos is hand-made, hand-measured, and personally voiced by the craftsmen that assemble these beauties. And for better or worse, like I said, as magnificent as the Kleos is, it isn't even at the top of Lyra's line. \$2750 is considered by some to be mid-priced, and an alternative to the more exotic offerings that are available today.

However, as with all equipment that is designed for an audiophile's use, matching it to one's system should be as important as any other consideration. If one is considering a MC cartridge at this price point one would assume that all other components of the system are in place, and that one isn't on a search for a cartridge to "fix" any shortcomings that the rest of the set-up might possess. The Kleos' transparency might end up being as much of a curse as it is a blessing, revealing colorations in the

rest of one's system. And even if the system in which I auditioned the Kleos isn't "perfect", and the Kleos did not make it so, as I often do when faced with writing a review of such a superlative piece of equipment, I fear painting myself into a corner with unequivocal praise. So one might want to put this review in perspective – and be aware that I did not have Lyra's nearly twice the price *Titani* on hand for comparison. Despite this, do I have any complaints regarding the Lyra Kleos? Sonically, none. After listening to the Lyra Kleos in my system for nearly two months, an improvement in sound is just about unimaginable. Bravo, Lyra!

### Specifications

Type: Moving Coil, coil and flux field centered design  
Output Voltage: 0.5mV  
Frequency Response: 10 Hz to 50 kHz  
Channel Separation: >35dB  
Diamond Stylus: 3x75µm Lyra designed Ogura long footprint Line Contact  
Overhang Alignment: 0.12mm Locator Hole Precisely Aligned over Stylus Tip  
Magnet(s): Dual disk neodymium  
Coil Former: 5N iron core & 6N copper coils  
Cantilever: 0.3mm Diameter Ogura Solid Boron Rod  
Tracking Force: 1.7 - 1.8 grams (1.75 Optimum)  
Dynamic Compliance: 12 x 10<sup>-6</sup> cm/dyn  
Internal Impedance: 5.4 Ohms  
Inductance: 9.0 uH  
Recommended Impedance: 91 - 47kOhms  
Weight: 8.8 grams