

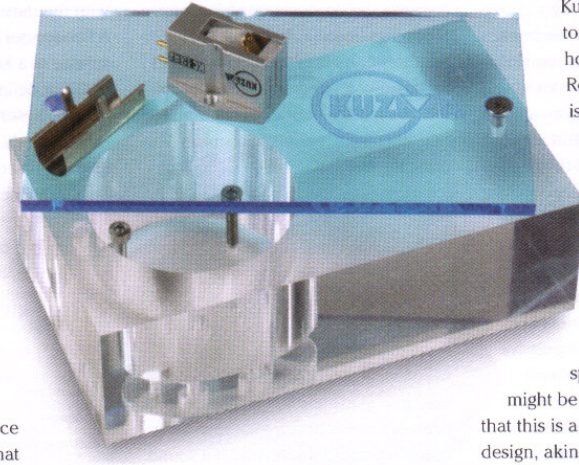
Kuzma KC-REF Moving-Coil Cartridge

by Roy Gregory

Barely a week seems to go by without the appearance of a new high-end cartridge, or a new one from an established manufacturer. In this case you're getting a little of both. Kuzma have long been recognised for the excellence and value of their turntables and tonearms, products that first reached the UK around 20 years ago. Now, Franc Kuzma has completed his analogue front-end by offering his first cartridge, a low-output moving-coil. Actually embarking on in-house cartridge manufacturing at this point in time would constitute confidence verging on the foolhardy. Instead, analogue old-boy Franc did the sensible thing and used his extensive contacts to tap into the vast experience in cartridge production that exists in Japan. That's where the KC-REF is built, to his exacting (and slightly unusual) specification. Made in Japan this is very much a Kuzma product.

It's an attractive and beautifully built cartridge. Not many pick-ups can stand blowing up to full-page size, what looks intricate held in your hand all too often appears crude close up. But not the Kuzma, its superbly machined aluminium body and carefully shrouded stylus assembly are the very model of a precision instrument. And it's not just a pretty face. As soon as you set up a VPI JMW tonearm you can instantly appreciate that Harry Weisfeld has incorporated all the features that he

always wanted in the arms he'd used before. In exactly the same way, the KC-REF is clearly the product of an analogue aficionado, and it's a joy to set-up. The connecting pins are colour coded and the mounting holes tapped. You get two sets of different length allen bolts for mounting, and a nice square nose that helps with initial



alignment. The flat bottom likewise helps establish initial vta. You even get a safe and simple to use stylus guard. In fact, the only complaint I can possibly make is that the cantilever itself could be a little more visible, rather than tucked under the unit's nose. Final alignment gets a bit tricky compared to the likes of Lyra and Clearaudio with their more exposed cantilevers, but that's really splitting hairs, and if it wasn't for the sheer practicality of the package as a whole it wouldn't even have occurred to me.

Internally, the KC-REF is as particular as it is sensible on the outside. The generator uses samarium

cobalt magnets, a soft iron armature and oxygen free copper coils. The cantilever is formed from aluminium clad boron and is tipped with an elliptical stylus rather than the more fashionable micro-ridge type. Output is a healthy 0.5mV, generous for a low-output design, and compliance is a low 9 cu, ideal for the heavier

than average effective mass of Kuzma's Stogi Reference tonearm, but equally at home in the Tri-planar. Recommended loading is 100 to 2000 Ohms, and tracking weight 1.8 to 2.0g. I settled on 1.9g, which offered the best balance between life and solidity, although even at the lower limit tracking was never an issue.

Read those specifications and you might be forgiven for assuming that this is a rather old fashioned design, akin to something like a Supex. Certainly it stands in stark contrast to the likes of the Lyras, both technologically and sonically. Listen to the Kuzma immediately after listening to something like the Clearaudio Accurate and your first impression could easily be that it lacks speed and clarity, virtues in which the Clearaudio excels. But that only goes to show the dangers of direct comparison and first impressions. Sure, comparison tells you what the differences are, but not which is better or more natural, with exaggeration in particular catching the ear. Listen longer and you'll realise that this is exactly what's happening with the KC-REF. It's unforced and even presentation ▶

▶ might sound dull initially, shorn of all the fashionable moving-coil fireworks, but the longer you listen the more you'll appreciate its easy grace and unfailingly natural balance.

Take speed and pace as examples. There's none of the obvious zip that you get from some cartridges. The KC-REF doesn't sound overtly fast. But listen to the easy loping bass lines on *Farmers Market Barbeque* and you'll soon appreciate that the notes are perfectly placed, their pitch and the steps between them immediately clear to hear. The gentle plod of 'St Louis Blues' never drags for an instant, the bass line slotting unerringly into an easy groove that carries the track beautifully, and it's then that you realise that the Kuzma's neither fast nor slow: it's spot on. Carry through to an up-beat track like 'Lester Leaps In' and it picks up its skirts with the best of them.

Why then the first impression? Most fast sounding products achieve the effect by paring away instrumental weight and curtailing harmonic development. The Kuzma does neither, exhibiting none of the leanness or etching that can sound so impressive on first acquaintance. Instruments portray their correct character and sound, their speed appropriate to their frequency, so that bass notes do develop slower than bells or other high-frequency instruments. It creates a soundstage in which instruments are correctly placed and inter-related, and in which they don't wander or step forward. Indeed, the Kuzma's soundstage is one of the most natural that I've come across, with excellent perspectives and decent depth without that false, ultra focussed high-definition quality favoured by some high-end companies. By getting the harmonic and spatial relationships between instruments correct, the structure and chemistry of the original performance is preserved.

Listening to the KC-REF is a remarkably easy and relaxing

experience exactly as it should be. Part of this is down to its innate balance of instrumental forces. It gets weight and speed spot-on and that means that it also delivers power. Not the kind of slap you in the face dynamic impact that CD so loves, the instantaneous bang that pins cinema goers into their seats. This is the deep-seated swelling solidity that reminds you just how many people there are in a symphony orchestra, and just how much acoustic power they can actually generate. It has far more to do with convincing on a musical level than any number of artificial, short, sharp shocks. Ask it deliver the drum cannonades from *Gladsome Humour And Blue* and it'll not disappoint in terms of weight and impact. But it integrates the drum set into the musical fabric, its contribution into the music, rather than simply firing the beats at you out of the blue.

There are, however, provisos to extracting this level of performance from the Kuzma: One concerns the loading, the other the vta. Despite having a theoretically less extreme stylus profile the KC-REF is extremely sensitive to correct vta. Not tonally, which is the assumption that people tend to make, but rhythmically. This cartridge needs to run ever so slightly nose down. Run it level and it'll sound dull and disconnected, musically disinterested. Conversely, run it too high at the back and things start to sound forced and hectoring. Of course, the Tri-planar and JMW tonearms make optimising vta a piece of cake. Unfortunately, they're the exception to the rule, but to put this in perspective, the ideal performance window in the Tri-planar encompasses around ten units on its micrometer scale! And that's not very much – at all. When it comes to loading, the manufacturer's recommendations are spot-on. It'll depend a little on the system, but I'd go lower rather than higher, with the KC-REF matching the 100 Ohm setting on my Groove perfectly. Less damping

again led to a lazy and slightly bloated sound.

In other words, don't be fooled by the warmth of the sound or the less than extreme stylus profile. You can get it wrong with the Kuzma just as easily as you can with any of today's other top-end cartridge designs. Because that's exactly what the KC-REF is. It might not enjoy a prestige name, or the price-tag that goes with it, but you'd be a fool to dismiss it. Anybody seeking a top-flight transducer to complete a serious analogue front-end should add it to their list. It combines the tonal qualities of Ortofon's MC7500 with the musical coherence of a Dynavector and the power and solidity of a Koetsu. Nor does it lack detail or definition. Placing musically natural presentation firmly ahead of the merely hi-fi spectacular, Kuzma's first cartridge is one for the connoisseur.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low-output moving-coil
Output Level:	0.5mV
Compliance:	9 cu
Cartridge Weight:	9 g
Coil Material:	Oxygen free copper
Cantilever:	Aluminium clad boron
Stylus Profile:	Elliptical
Tracking Force:	1.8 – 2.0 g
Recommended Loading:	<100 Ohms
Price:	£2000

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