

KUZMA STABI

The Kuzma Stabi S offers an unusual array of elements, visually, but rock-solid performance at an affordable price

by JAMES M HUGHES

It wasn't quite what I expected. When Audiofreaks' Branko Bozic called to say there was a 'baby' Kuzma Stabi on the way, I had mental images of just that: a smaller version of the standard Stabi. What eventually arrived was a turntable quite different in concept and design. Despite having the same platter, belt, and motor, the new Stabi S is very much a design in its own right, not a compromised version of the bigger models.

The standard Kuzma Stabi is an elaborate design that's labour-intensive to build. Its sonic characteristics are inextricably linked to its solid, weighty construction and the use of selected hardwoods. It wouldn't be easy to scale down. So instead, designer Franz Kuzma started with a clean slate.

Quite apart from price considerations, perhaps the principal benefit of the new Stabi S is its fantastic simplicity. Beyond a few basics there's virtually no setting-up involved. Most suspended sub-chassis turntables are sensitive to things like spring height and torsional tension, not to mention arm cable dressing — these need to be just right in order to achieve an even bouncing movement without yaw.

But the Stabi S has no suspension so it's easy to put together. Simply

place it on a suitable flat surface, position the motor, fit the belt and outer platter, and that's it. Of course you'll need to take care over aligning the arm and cartridge, but that's true of any turntable.

It's uncanny the way a turntable's appearance so often reflects its sonic character. The Stabi S looks functional and elegant, its elegance coming from the economy and simplicity of the basic design. It sounds much as it looks: tidy, controlled, clean, focused and tight.

Speed stability is excellent, and there's a welcome absence of that subtle yet annoying pitch vagueness that one finds to a greater or lesser degree with many suspended sub-chassis turntables.

The Stabi S offers a single speed, but those wanting 45rpm as well as 33rpm could add Kuzma's electronic power supply for this facility — and get improved sound by virtue of a cleaner power source for the motor.

Of course, by having the motor only lightly decoupled, the Stabi S runs the risk of noise being transmitted via the support base to the pickup stylus. Yet grasping the brass housing that carries the 24-pole AC synchronous motor I could feel very little vibration. So the phasing capacitor is clearly doing a reasonable job. Nor could any



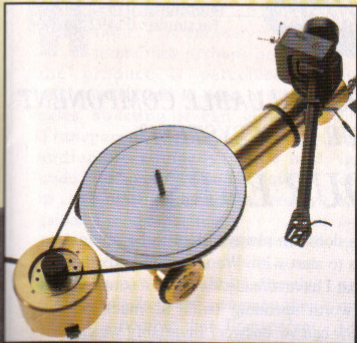
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breakthrough be detected through the loudspeakers, even at high volume levels.

The use of solid brass for the T-shaped chassis and motor housing gives the unit a luxury quality as well as creating a good solid support base. The main section is 49.5mm diameter, no less, and feels impressively heavy and rigid. Kuzma offers two finishes: natural, with the brass satin-polished and lacquered [as shown here]; or black.

The entire unit weighs around 13Kg including arm, with the platter assembly accounting for about 4Kg of the total mass. One direct benefit of all this mass is the stability it creates. The Stabi S sits on three rubber O-rings which afford a surprising degree of isolation. For a non-suspended turntable, the Stabi S is remarkably insensitive to vibration. True, isolation is not as complete as with a standard Stabi, but the degree

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of vibration immunity is much better than many turntables of this type. However, because there's no sprung suspension to maintain isolation, this model is perhaps more influenced by different support surfaces than the bigger model.

Although some parts are used from the standard Stabi (outer platter, motor and belt), the Stabi S has a redesigned main bearing and inner platter. The new deck has an 11mm diameter bearing shaft with a pointed tip, and the finish is excellent. As with other Kuzma turntables, the fit between bearing and shaft is snug but deliberately not as tight as with some turntables. Unlike the all-metal bearing on the standard Stabi, the Stabi S has upper and lower sleeves made from a proprietary Teflon-type material.

The tonearm fits into a substantial brass block drilled to accept an arm base of approximately 25mm diameter. This block supports the arm-base pillar along its entire length, and the whole assembly can be raised or lowered to adjust VTA. For arms like the Rega, which have a pillar slightly smaller than 25mm, Kuzma can supply a tight-fitting

brass sleeve.

The motor can be placed in a number of positions around the platter, but best results are achieved with it immediately opposite the main brass section that supports the arm. It's interesting to compare the sound with the motor set at different points. Clarity, separation, and dynamic range definitely worsen if the motor is placed, say, at 11 o'clock: the position most turntable manufacturers choose for the motor. Reposition the motor at seven o'clock, and the sound improves noticeably.

This is because vibration from the motor transmits to the stylus/cantilever along its front axis, rather than at the side. So it reaches the stylus at a point where it's not sensitive. If you think of the motor 'driving' the stylus, vibration becomes spurious movement which leads to a loss of information. By placing the motor at the seven o'clock position, such vibration is rendered less troublesome.

The problem tends to be more acute with suspended sub-chassis designs, where motor and stylus can easily move laterally in relation to one another.

With a 'solid' design like the Stabi S, I would have predicted that motor positioning would have much less effect on sound quality. Using one of Kuzma's external power supplies should reduce the effects of different

motor placements, since it makes the motor itself run more smoothly.

Users might also notice slight changes in sound quality when the belt tension is altered, by moving the motor closer or further away from the inner platter. Basically, the tighter the belt, the crisper and more focused the sound becomes. The total movement possible is restricted, of course, but there's sufficient for listeners to fine-tune the sound of the Stabi S to their personal tastes. I preferred to have the belt quite tight, as I felt this improved clarity and dynamics slightly.

Audiofreaks offers the Stabi S on its own at £699 (including acrylic dust cover), or as a package with a Rega RB-300 tonearm and a Shun Mook support platform for £990.

There will, in due course, be the first Kuzma unipivot arm design to match the turntable — it will be below £250. The Shun Mook platform offers no isolation as such, but its dense maple construction helps by giving the chassis a rigid surface on which to sit that's essentially non-resonant at low frequencies.

I began by listening to the Stabi S with a Rega RB-300 and Benz Glider cartridge. This combination gave a crisp, lively sound, with excellent detail and clarity. The tonal balance was sharp and forward, rather than rich or warm, but the result was musically very positive and engaging.

The Shun Mook support board, as well as creating a firm platform, imparted an extra degree of depth and spaciousness to the sound that was very welcome.

I later replaced the Rega tonearm with a Kuzma Stogi, and this further improved the sound as one would expect. Bass became fuller and more dynamic, while the treble was sweeter and more spacious, as well as being more detailed. I also felt clarity and separation were enhanced by the use of a QR Developments Ringmat, the bass especially then becoming clearer and more dynamic.

All in all, the Stabi S impressed with its combination of clarity, detail, and stability. It sounded very clean but not clinical or cold. It has a CD-like precision and focus yet with the naturalness of analogue. Although quite reasonably priced as top-class turntables go, it offers very high standards of performance, superb build quality and finish, and could very happily partner arms and cartridges of the highest quality. If the package appeals, you should certainly investigate further... †

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