



# Kuzma Stabi S and Stogi S

by Jimmy Hughes

Entry-Level products are usually a compromise. Can it be otherwise? A company starts by producing the best product it knows how, and to hell with the price. With the item in question established as a reference, attempts are then made to cheapen and simplify the design to make it more affordable.

But is it possible to simplify and scale back a well-designed product, and still have it work effectively? Answers on a postcard please...

Certainly, if a product has many 'extras' and added refinements to gild the lily, it might be possible to lose a few baubles and bring down the price without compromising performance.

The danger, for those of us forced by limited funds to choose the less expensive alternative, is that such economies may result in a product that looks, feels, (and probably sounds) like second-best.

And who wants that? There's a difference between a product that's been compromised to make it cheaper, and one that's skilfully designed from the outset with economy in mind.

And Kuzma? I seriously believe Kuzma are temperamentally and biologically unable to make the kind of compromised Entry Level product outlined above. Rather than take one of their more lavish designs as a starting point, and then go on to cheapen it, they take a clean sheet of

paper to try and create a fully-fledged product in its own right - not a scaled-down version of something else.

The Stabi S turntable is a perfect example of this. It bears very little physical resemblance to Kuzma's more expensive Stabi and Stabi Reference turntables, nor does it follow similar design principles. Instead, form follows function, creating a product of striking elegance and simplicity. As a consequence, simplicity (and economy) become virtues rather than limitations.

Compared to the Stabi, the Stabi S is not so much inferior as different. Instead of having the Stabi's suspended sub-chassis and heavy plinth, the Stabi

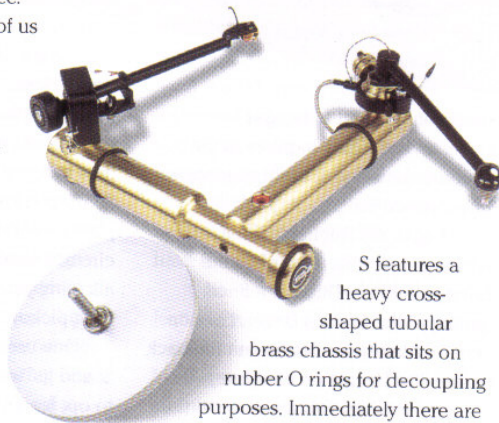
has a smaller diameter main bearing, and a brass record weight rather than a screw-down clamp.

These differences are reflected in the sound. The Stabi, with its heavy wooden plinth and suspended sub-chassis, gives a full, rich, warm, and weighty, rather vibrant, sound, with strong powerful bass. By comparison, the Stabi S sounds leaner and drier, with a brighter more crystalline kind of sonic presentation. It's perhaps a bit more CD like: Taut and lucid, rather than relaxed and warm.

The Stabi S was launched some years back, and at the time Kuzma promised a uni-pivot arm would soon follow to match - the original Stogi arm being a shade expensive for those on a tight budget. The new arm is superbly finished and looks reassuringly expensive with its black and brass solid metal construction. It definitely doesn't look like an Entry Level model! Nor does it sound like one...

Once again, by comparison to the more expensive Stogi, it's not so much a question of better or worse, as different. The control of unwanted torsional motion has clearly been uppermost in the designers' mind, with high stability as the main goal. To this end, the uni-pivot is placed high in the roof of the arm's central turret, while the main counterweights are low-slung.

This keeps the centre of gravity low, minimising the destabilising effects of lateral force. Finally, there's a dashpot filled with viscous fluid to damp torsional motion. Fluid damping is common with arms of this type, and used judiciously it greatly increases



S features a heavy cross-shaped tubular brass chassis that sits on rubber O rings for decoupling purposes. Immediately there are cost savings; no plinth, no lid, not to mention much reduced assembly time.

Rather than attempting to simplify the Stabi's sprung suspension system, the Stabi S dispenses with it altogether. The result is a simple yet surprisingly solid, inert, structure that offers excellent rigid support for arm and turntable. Both designs employ the same turntable platter, but the Stabi S

● EQUIPMENT REVIEW

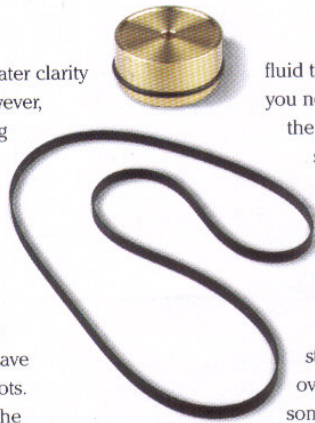
▶ stability, giving greater clarity and firmness. However, too much damping can rob the sound of life.

Interestingly, the last couple of arms to come my way (the Graham and VPI's JMW Memorial) have both been uni-pivots. But in each case the amount of damping has been fairly minimal - that's to say, fluid which isn't overly-viscous and a damping trough that offers limited contact with the moving section to be damped. The Kuzma design is different; it's clearly intended to provide heavy damping.

The fluid Kuzma supply is quite viscous, while the dashpot is unusually large at about 5cm in diameter. The underside of the arm structure (the bit that sits in the fluid bath) is 4cm in diameter with a flat base. This ensures that spurious side-to-side movement is checked, while still allowing the arm to freely rotate around the pivot in order to follow the groove.

Is heavy damping a good thing? Actually, a lot depends on your choice of cartridge, and to a lesser degree on personal taste. Some pickups seem to benefit enormously from being damped; others respond less positively. You just have to suck it and see, increasing or lowering damping till things sound right.

Potentially, then, the Kuzma arm allows a higher degree of damping than most of its rivals. However, there's nothing that says you have to fill the



fluid trough to the brim. Nor do you necessarily have to stick with the thick silicone fluid Kuzma supply. Those with the dedication and patience can experiment with degrees of damping to find the optimum value.

Increased damping levels undoubtedly improve the stability of the arm, but over-doing it may lead to a somewhat thick dull sound.

Too little damping makes it possible for the arm to oscillate on its uni-pivot (torsional motion), reducing stability and



precision. Instead of images being locked firmly in place in the stereo soundstage, a slight vagueness becomes evident.

I began my listening with a cartridge that loves damping; the London Jubilee. This is a refined variant of the famous Decca/London series of cartridges that began life back in the '50s. Having no cantilever (the sensing coils are close to the

stylus tip), the London Jubilee is very sensitive to shocks and spurious lateral movement. It's also a

very microphonic pickup that produces fairly high needle-talk.



All Decca/London cartridges are notoriously difficult to please. So it speaks volumes for the Kuzma arm when I say it handled the Jubilee with aplomb. Detail was incredible; the 'positive scanning' stylus tip offers the sort of speed and transient attack most pickups can only dream about. Rhythmically, the presentation was remarkable for its drive, momentum, and subtle shades of emphasis.

Like other London pickups, the Jubilee proved rather prone to picking-up induced hum. The Stabi S employs the ubiquitous Phillips 24 pole synchronous AC motor, which produces reasonably high stray hum fields. It's no problem for most pickups, but the London is different. And while the alloy platter provides some shielding, it doesn't totally screen the pickup from noise.

With most turntables that use this motor, you've got to accept things as they stand. However, with the Stabi S, the motor is fitted into its own separate brass housing that's free-standing and thus independent of the turntable itself. So it's possible to choose where it's placed (within reason) around the circumference of the centre bearing - allowing you to place it for minimum hum pickup.

One useful side benefit of the Stabi S, and its' unusual chassis, is the option to opt for a version that accepts two tonearms, the Stabi SD. My review sample came supplied with the Stogi S uni-pivot and a standard Stogi for comparison purposes. Of course the latter arm is more expensive, so it should sound better. However, for much of the time I felt the dearer arm wasn't so much better as different.

The cheaper arm has that wonderfully airy, smooth, spacious ▶

► presentation that's the hallmark of good uni-pivot designs. There's a sense of the music floating on air, such is the relaxed ease of its sonic presentation. By comparison, the Stogi wasn't quite so effortlessly spacious or refined.

The sound wasn't quite as smooth.

It's almost as though arms with conventional bearings suffer from a tiny amount of bearing 'chatter' that uni-pivots eliminate. Alternatively, perhaps the fluid helps damp some resonance from the tube and counterweight system. Certainly, damping helps hold the cartridge body 'still' so far as spurious movements are concerned, allowing the stylus to do its job without loss of information.

Be that as it may, there were other times when I felt the Stogi sounded more lucid and focussed than its uni-pivot stablemate. One LP that highlighted key differences between the two arms was that old hi-fi demonstration standby *Computer World* by Kraftwerk. The Stogi's presentation seemed more alive and three dimensional, putting space, width, and depth around synthesiser lines.

Given the sterile contrived nature of this recording, it's one of life's little mysteries that *Computer World* highlights differences in depth layering and rhythmic cohesion so superbly. Reproduced badly, it can overwhelm you with a welter of fast leading edges that fail to cohere into meaningful rhythmic patterns. But reproduced well, there are all sorts of subtle rhythmic games being played. And good equipment highlights this.

By the time I started making arm comparisons, I'd dispensed with the London Jubilee and was using the fabulous Koetsu Urushi Black. Initially I set the playing weight to about 2g, but on reflection this seemed a shade too



high. So, to help redress the differences in tonal balance, I tried lowering the playing weight slightly.

This had the effect of altering the relationship between bass/treble extremes, creating a slightly leaner brighter sound, and an increase in liveliness. Taking a little damping fluid out of the dashpot livened up the sound still further, without noticeably compromising the stability and solidity of the presentation.

By the end, the two arms were sounding far closer sonically - though something of the original difference remained. On balance I think the Stogi is a bit better - it seems to offer increased separation and sounds slightly more lucid and articulate. But there's a smoothness and control with the cheaper arm that's very beguiling. Can't decide? You'll just have to buy both!

Quite a few high-end turntables feature the 'open plan' style of construction adopted by the Stabi S. In many respects it's a good way to build a turntable; eliminating resonances caused by wooden plinths and suchlike. But I must say I miss not having a lid! Apart from keeping dust at bay, it affords protection against inquisitive little paws - whether human or animal.

Using the superb Benz Glider cartridge, with its open-body construction, wickedly-long exposed stylus, and lack of stylus guard, I was a little concerned the tip might

accidentally get damaged. And I say this as someone without children or pets to worry about. But such caveats could be levelled at quite a few turntables, some of much higher cost than this one. So my remarks should be taken in context.

Other than that - a superb turntable/arm combination,

one that gives a real taste of high-end analogue at an agreeable price. Naturally, you might still prefer to go for one of Kuzma's more expensive designs. And, given extra funds, why not? But if you do settle for their 'Entry Level' model, rest assured you won't be buying second best. No way. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Stabi S

Type:	Belt Drive Turntable
Speed change:	Manual
Lid:	No

##### Stogi S

Type:	Damped Uni-pivot
Effective Length:	229mm
Effective Mass:	11g
Mounting:	Unique
	Linn adaptor available

Price:	Stabi S + Stogi S	£1250
	Stabi SD + (1) Stogi S	£1650

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