

Eastern Block

Kuzma's revisionist Stabi turntable and reference Stogi arm.
Ian Rankin reports on £1,500 worth of Eastern promise.

The Yugoslavian manufactured Kuzma Stabi turntable is a massive piece of goods. Let me make that clear from the outset. That's not chipboard and veneer you can see in the picture: it's solid oak. And a perspex lid? Forget it, we're talking plate glass and yet more oak. The lid of the Stabi could double up as a coffee table, should you be so inclined, and it's held on with what look and feel like gate hinges — sturdy gate hinges at that. These are a necessity, since the lid weighs about the same as a complete Rega turntable! What's more, the Stabi is too big for a regular sized medite board or equipment tabletop. Its three adjustable spiked feet hung cleanly off the sides of my own board, and, not being able to find a larger board that satisfied me sonically, I ended up with the Stabi sited on two medite boards, themselves sited on side-by-side equipment tables from Origin Live.

Phew! A quick mop of the forehead and cup of Darjeeling were needed already, and all I'd done thus far was locate the turntable in my listening room. But don't be put off, for the Stabi is a *fun* product. Everything is made fairly simple, and setting up is the proverbial piece of *kolacha* (Serbo Croat for 'cake'). The Stabi is a suspended subchassis design, with four oil reservoirs holding the necessary springs. These springs can then be adjusted using the four rotary controls on the plinth, without the need for a Linn jig or any such peripheral equipment. Turning the rotary controls anticlockwise loosens the springs, while clockwise tightens them again, and in this way a nice bounce of the platter and armboard can be attained. However, a word of caution: the oil reservoirs will, as a certain tension is reached, start to rotate of their own volition, so when adjusting the controls, it's best to hold one hand beneath the plinth to secure the reservoirs while the other hand adjusts. This may sound complicated, but is actually very straightforward and easily learned by either a reading of the instruction manual or a process of trial and error!

The instruction manual itself is pretty well comprehensive, and takes the owner through everything from setting-up to fine speed adjustment. Fine speed adjustment itself is controlled by the external power supply... which brings me to this article's *raison d'etre*. After all, the Stabi is not a new product, and the Stogi is not a new arm. We first reviewed the original Stogi way back in September 1987, and the Stabi/Stogi combination was tackled by Chris Frankland in August 1988. However, changes have been made. And thankfully these are changes for the better, with the original strengths of the Stabi turntable remaining unchanged. The subchassis is still made from layered laminate medite, the armboard is still medite with allen bolts to facilitate arm-changing, platter and sub-platter are aluminium, and the belt is neoprene.

The Stabi however now boasts a bearing modification and, most importantly, that exter-



£699 + £199 S&P FOR STABI + P.S.

nal electronic power supply. Without power supply, the Stabi will retail at around £575; add the £199 power supply and your bill comes to £774. So you will need serious pockets if you are to contemplate this combination. The power supply (retrofitable, incidentally) is based around a quartz oscillator which supplies a clean 2x50Hz sine wave, having a ninety degrees phase delay. 2x20Watt Class A amplifier voltage is amplified to the necessary value needed by the synchronous motor. Frequency (speed control) can be adjusted plus or minus 0.4% via a switch inside one of the power supply's rubber feet (this wasn't necessary during my time with the Stabi). There's an on/off switch to the rear of the power supply, and a tiny red light at front to indicate whether the supply is switched on. At front there's also a simple black knob which allows one to choose between 33 and 45 rpm running speed, with a third possibility of stand-by. The sturdy case is secured by allen screws, and is vented on its top face. (In use, the power supply got warm, but never dangerously hot.)

The turntable connects to the power supply by way of a rather cheap looking DIN plug, and this was almost the only disappointment of my inspection regarding build quality. Looking at the attention to detail in other areas (eg: all those bolts; Van Den Hul cable and interconnects between turntable and amplifier; etc), the DIN comes as a deflating surprise.

Finally, the Stabi comes with a large record clamp (looking rather like the combination lock on an old safe!) and a small washer. The dish-shaped washer is to be placed over the central spindle, and then the record placed on top of this. The clamp then screws down on top of the

record, until the edges of the disc press flat against the platter. In principle, this is excellent news: the record stays flat, giving the arm more of a chance of doing its job properly. In practice, however, things are more problematic. Screwing and unscrewing the clamp quickly became a chore, as did the necessity (in my eyes) of stopping the turntable in order to facilitate this. So, sonic differences aside, I preferred to leave the clamp off. (In fact, in sonic terms, the clamp if anything tended to homogenise the various recordings.)

The Stogi arm retails at £349. However, for the purposes of this review I had been sent the Stogi Reference, costing a whopping £699. The Reference is a completely new design, with the exception of the chunky carrying element around the pivot. With this unchanged, the Reference looks like it belongs to the Stogi family. The arm tube, however, is now shaped as a tapering cone, and machined out of a solid piece of aluminium to its final shape. Such is the diameter of this cone towards the rear of the arm that the arm itself needs to be raised and locked into place at a good height above the level of the armboard. The headshell has been reinforced and glued onto the tube using "special technique and materials". A newly designed pivot mechanism is claimed to utilise the best and highest precision bearings currently available, while the counterweight is smaller than on the original Stogi and silicon damped. The bias adjust is a neat thread/counterweight affair (requiring a fair measure of trial and error to get it right). Internal as well as external Van Den Hul wiring is standard and Wonder Solder is used throughout the signal path.

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There are no numerals on the counterweight itself, just a series of red dots, each one representing 0.1g. Once playing weight has been fixed, the counterweight can be locked into position by tightening a series of tiny grub screws around the circumference. Ingenious. And to top things off, Kuzma's UK distributors, Audiofreaks, had provided a top-flight cartridge from Swiss manufacturer Empire. This was the MC-2, marketed under the company's "Benz-Micro" trademark and retailing at £599. The MC-2 boasts a new strong neodymium-iron magnet and a newly designed damping/suspension system. The cartridge's 0.27mm diameter ultra-thin and low mass boron cantilever is fitted with a nude, square orientated micro-edge diamond tip. The literature with the MC-2 pointed out that it was designed to achieve "demanding goals", and who am I to argue with that?

All told then, this is a £2,072 front end. Linn's top combination of LP12/Ekos fitted with Troika cartridge costs £2,113, offering extremely stiff competition. I fitted the Stabi/Stogi/MC-2 (on two tables remember) into my system of Exposure X integrated amplifier and Linn Kan loudspeakers. The speakers were sited on Kan stands, loudspeaker cable was Exposure's own, and a run-in and fine tuning period of one week was allowed (mainly for the sake of the cartridge, it must be said: from up and running the Stabi/Stogi partnership was impressive).

First onto the Stabi was an old favourite: *Today and Now* by Coleman Hawkins, and the track *Love Song from 'Apache'* (nothing to do with The Shadows, incidentally). My very first impression was of a massive sense of atmosphere. The band sounded like they were playing in a club, completely *together* in their approach and with a breathy, sensual feel to Hawkins' sax. Information retrieval was excel-

lent, a faultless piano accompanying a faultless saxophone. Transients were given just enough time and space, and if I closed my eyes I found it an effortless experience to follow what each player was doing — a real acid test of any turntable's abilities.

This was a fine beginning, but I had very slight reservations as a few other jazz recordings followed. After some thought, I swapped the Kans for Epos ES14s (on their own dedicated stands), and was much happier. Bass opened out a little more, and a new three-dimensionality was born. Musically, the Stabi/Stogi is more aggressive, more stridently 'forward' in its approach than an LP12/Ekos combination. Luckily, though I own an LP12/Ittok combination, Chris Frankland's LP12/Ekos/Troika was accessible (ie: momentarily in the office), and I threw a coat over it, smuggled it into my car, and had it installed at home almost before he could ask where it had gone. An A/B comparison proved enlightening, showing the two front ends to be dissimilar in aims, yet quite close in terms of the success of their presentations. Both deserve full marks for involvement: my toes were tapping, hand slapped against knee, and head nodded a beat of approval. Though when the music merited a lump in the throat or a tear in the eye, both decks proved well able to provide the emotional goods.

No tears necessary on Tommy Smith's fine debut album *Step By Step*, though the opening number, *Ally the Wallygator*, is a slow, almost morose piece. Things start with an insidious bass riff from Eddie Gomez, as light of finger as a professional pickpocket. Lights-down percussion from Jack DeJohnette joins proceedings, before the sax slides into play like a hand into a velvet glove. Such sureness of touch and confidence of approach deserve a turntable of equal ability, even if the production isn't the cleanest I've heard. The Kuzma/Empire part-

nership dealt ably with this tune, Smith's plaintive, accentuated tenor crying above the understated backing without ever obliterating it. Cymbals were clean, if not perhaps as sharply etched as on the LP12/Ekos. Simply put (which doesn't mean it was easy to differentiate!), the Linn gave a clearer sense of what DeJohnette was up to with his sticks. However, it would — and did — take a lot of careful A/B testing to elucidate this.

Meantime, the Kuzma was simply enjoying the song. Mitch Forman's piano, which entered proceedings later on, had a sparkle and detail which I enjoyed, but overall I still felt that the musicians were "better placed" when the LP12 was in play. This is very difficult to put into words: these were differences I *felt*, and emotions are never easy to concretise! It's fairly easy to say "I can hear the cymbal here and not there" or "I can hear what the bassist is doing with this arm, but not with the other". These are quantitative *and* qualitative differences. With the Kuzma/Empire front end, the differences tended to be qualitative only.

Before I get too cerebral, I should just say that the Kuzma is an extremely enjoyable turntable. (I've probably said that already, but it bears repeating!) And on this point, a lot more listening followed. Having given jazz its due, I moved on to "rock" in the form of Deacon Blue's second album *When the World Knows Your Name*. My favourite track here is *Fergus Sings the Blues*, especially when it's played good and loud, and the Kuzma delivered a powerful opening punch. An infectious riff from bass and keyboards heralds a tune which builds and builds. The Kuzma captured the essential verve of this piece. It was never too analytical, yet not at any time overblown or wallowy. Simply, it gave the music leeway without getting in the way. Of course, there probably isn't a turntable in the world that doesn't have a "personality" — otherwise people in blind tests would think a Linn was a Roksan, wouldn't they? And it's true that the Kuzma has its idiosyncracies, though by this I don't mean that it has flaws. It is fundamentally a good, well constructed record deck that does the job *right*. And over the course of the Deacon Blue album, I forgot all about testing and just enjoyed the listening.

Which is, when all's said and done, what it's all about.

The Kuzma/Empire partnership fared equally well when faced with the classical repertoire. Choices ranged from Bach's sublime *Brandenburgs* to the power of Mozart's *Requiem*: there was never a dull moment. Speed stability proved very good indeed, and the Kuzma dealt with the quietest of passages, the lightest of renderings, as commendably as it did the raging choruses of Orff's *Carmina Burana*. On folk and acoustic music, unaccompanied voice, thrash metal, punk, opera... the Kuzma did not waver.

Coda: this is a very fine turntable and arm combination indeed. Switching an OC9 cartridge for the MC-2 did not noticeably lessen the level of performance. In matters of aesthetics, I was impressed by the Stabi/Stogi initially, but eventually found it just a tad too overpowering. Opening and closing the lid over the course of a week gave me improved biceps and a few nervous moments. More importantly, though, during that time the Kuzma gave many moments of musical pleasure. Nuff said.

