

KUZMA STABI TURNTABLE & STOGI TONEARM

Guy Lemcoe

Kuzma Stabi: suspended subchassis, belt-drive LP turntable. Speeds: 33.33rpm, 45rpm. Plinth: solid oak. Subchassis: Medite. Platter: 9 lbs. mass, precision-machined solid aluminum. Removable dustcover: smoked glass in solid-oak frame. Resonance of subchassis: 4.7Hz. Motors: one, 24-pole synchronous, 110V, 50Hz. Speed adjustment: $\pm 0.5\%$. Power supply: external, quartz-controlled. Dimensions: 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ " H (with dustcover closed) by 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ " W by 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ " D. Weight: 46 lbs. Warranty: 5 years. Price: \$2200.

Kuzma Stogi tonearm: Construction: main assembly and headshell machined from

solid aluminum blocks. Internally damped armtube is made of specially treated aluminum. Internal wiring: van den Hul. Arm mount: Linn-compatible. Effective mass: 12.5 grams. Length: 229mm. Weight: 850gm. Warranty: 5 years. Price: \$950.

Both: Approximate number of dealers: 25. Manufacturer: Kuzma Audio Komponente, KAT Kranj d.o.o., Hotemaze 17a, 64205 Preddvor, Slovenia. Tel: (386) 64-43391. Fax: (386) 64-43388. US distributor: Muse Electronics, P.O. Box 2198, Garden Grove, CA 92642. Tel: (714) 554-8200. Fax: (714) 554-5643.

I first learned of the Kuzma Stogi at the 1993 Winter CES. In VPI's room at the Sahara, a portly, black tonearm was sitting proudly atop the new VPI TNT Series 3 turntable. Pointing straight at me from the center of its massive, exceptionally stout frame was a tapered armtube the diameter of a swollen thumb. The fact that this unknown (to me) tonearm was chosen to sit atop a turntable as respected as the TNT told me I was looking at a *serious* new product. VPI's Harry Weisfeld was standing nearby, beaming as usual, to answer the barrage of questions that sprang from my lips as I leaned over for a closer inspection. Who? What? Where? When? Why? How much?

As I tried to inconspicuously wipe the drool from my lower lip, a now smiling Harry told me that the tonearm I was ogling was the Stogi Reference, which is manufactured in the small Eastern European country of Slovenia by a company known as Kuzma Audio Komponente! That was the last I heard or saw of the Kuzma Stogi.

Until the 1994 WCES, when I strode into the Acoustic Sounds room to chat with Chad Kassem. It was there, in this vinyl-lover's Tiffany's, that I spotted the less-expensive Stogi mounted on a beautiful, solid-oak-plinthed Kuzma Stabi turntable. The combination was serving as the source for some of the most natural, compelling, and visceral sound I've ever heard from a pair of Sound-Lab electrostatic speakers. I stayed—to enjoy not only Chad's recent reissue of Lightnin' Hopkins' 1963 bare-to-the-bones blues on *Got'n' Away* (Prestige Bluesville, now Analog Productions AAPB 014—just buy it!), but the striking naturalness of its presentation. That sound remained in my memory for months after the last audiophile-approved AC-power cord had been

unplugged from a wall outlet in a small room somewhere in the Sahara Hotel's bi-level complex.

Not long after my return home from Las Vegas, I phoned Tom Norton in Santa Fe and Kevin Halverson to arrange the loan of a Stabi and Stogi for review.

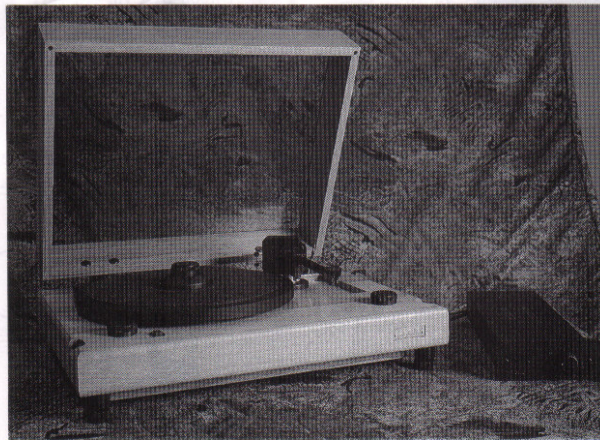
SETUP

Within a few months, a large carton arrived at my door in San Diego. As I eagerly but carefully unpacked the boxes and sorted and identified the parts, I recalled Kevin Halverson's assurance that setup of the Kuzma Stabi was a snap. It was. In fact, the most time-consuming aspect of the operation was the adding, drop by drop, of the viscous silicone oil to the four spring reservoirs (it took about half an hour). I used a toothpick as a depth gauge to ensure that the surface of the oil was the recommended distance (10–15mm) below the top edge of the reservoir.

I encountered no problems in this or

subsequent stages of setup. The instructions were clear, and the many illustrations will guide even hamfisted audiophiles error-free through the process. The pre-drilled mounting board rendered installation of the Stogi tonearm similarly stress-free.

The 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ " W by 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ " D top shelf of a RoomTune ClampRack was just the right size for the Stabi centered on the top plate of a Bright Star Big Rock. With the Stabi so situated, it took only a few minutes to level it via its three pointed feet, route the tonearm cables, fine-tune the suspension, and adjust the tonearm and cartridge. I located the power supply, which controls the turntable and is connected to it via a long cable terminated in a five-pin DIN plug, on the lowest shelf of the ClampRack. This placement ensured that I'd get some exercise, since each time I wanted to change or flip records I had to bend down to turn the motor off, stand upright to make the change, and bend down again to turn the



Kuzma Stabi turntable with Stogi tonearm

I've asked Muse Electronics' Kevin Halverson to send me a sample, on which I'll report in a Follow-Up.

motor back on. During the course of my evaluation, I figure I went through this routine more than 4500 times. Funny thing, though—my waist size has remained the same.

With a record clamped in place, the platter's height should be adjusted to where it rotates between 1.5mm and 2.5mm above the plinth. I settled on 2mm (the thickness of seven *Stereophile* business cards), and made final adjustments by turning the motor on and twiddling with the four top-mounted spring assemblies until the bottom of the platter was just touching the top of the stack of business cards as I moved them around its circumference.

The Stabi's record clamp is one of the most effective I've used. A 1"-diameter, hard-plastic (Delrin?) washer with a convex top surface is placed over the threaded spindle and left there. When you go to play a record, you place it on the platter, where it teeter-totters over the washer until the 3/4"-diameter, saucer-shaped record clamp is screwed down, forcing the record down on the washer and flat against the composite material covering the surface of the platter. Different record thicknesses and severities of "dish" determine the degree of clamp tightening. Most of the records I played required from five to seven half-turns. With the exception of a hopelessly edge-warped Thelonious Monk LP, every record I played in this evaluation became a flat record.

The Stabi's motor has sufficient torque to keep the platter turning even during a heavy-handed cleaning of a record with a Discwasher preener. Changing speeds is as simple as turning the speed-control knob on the power supply from 33 to 45—neat and foolproof, since there are no drive belts to move about on a pulley, or any other such ministrations. Fine-speed adjustments are controlled by a DIP switch inside the power supply, accessible by removing the power supply's front right rubber foot. With a strobe disc on the platter, speed is adjusted, in small stages, according to the position of the switches.

Cartridge installation and alignment went without a hitch, due to the Stogi tonearm's straightforward design. I used a Dennesen Soundtractor protractor to set overhang on all the cartridges used in this review. This step was facilitated by the small etched circle in the top of the tonearm frame identifying the exact pivot point of the arm.² Tracking force

² I wish other tonearm manufacturers would follow this practice. In my experience, few pivoted tonearms indicate just where the arm's pivot point is, making cartridge overhang an educated guess at best.

was easily set using the one-piece counterweight, secured by tightening one of the three small set screws. Checking settings against my Shure SFG-2 stylus-force gauge indicated that accuracy within a fraction of a gram can be obtained by following the guidelines set forth in the instruction manual.

I adjusted bias using a simple nylon thread and sliding counterweight arrangement. Kevin Halverson and the manufacturer recommend (and I concur) that bias be set with the stylus actually riding in the tracking bands of a test record instead of on the surface of the usual blank band. Adjust bias until you get equal mistracking from each channel on the heavily modulated bands, and you're set.³ Another adjustment and a tweak—both of which can be made to the tonearm without fuss—are, respectively, cueing height and removing the finger lift.

Arm height and/or VTA is adjusted by loosening a set screw in the tonearm base and physically raising or lowering the arm. Unfortunately, fine VTA adjustments made while a record is playing aren't possible with this arrangement. However, you can make repeatable VTA settings with little effort. Here's how I did it: After reading in the instruction manual that raising or lowering the tonearm pillar approximately 3mm (1/8") will change the angle between the record surface and stylus by 1°, I established a zero-point reference, with the bottom of the tonearm parallel with the surface of a "standard" record. Using a General No.300 stainless-steel machinist's rule, I measured (and made a note of) the distance from the surface of the armboard to the top of the armrest.

This was my zero-point reference, which I marked on the arm pillar with a red Sharpie Ultra Fine Point marker. I then added 1/8" to this initial reading, raised the tonearm the prescribed amount, and marked the pillar with a black Sharpie. By so doing, I had marked the pillar, indicating the height to which the tonearm should be raised to change the VTA by 1°. I continued to raise the tonearm and mark the pillar in 1/8" increments until I had increased the VTA by 3°, then repeated the process on the negative side of the zero-point reference. Finally, I made marks between the 1/8" steps. When finished, I had a scale on the tonearm pillar indicating changes in VTA in 0.5° increments from -2° to +3°.

The Stabi's substantial dustcover is easily removed, though after playing records with and without it and hearing

³ I found that an additional counterweight was needed to optimize bias on cartridges weighing less than 6gm.

no appreciable difference in sound, I left it on and down for all subsequent listening sessions.

SYSTEM

Before the Kuzma arrived, my analog reference was a fully tweaked Well Tempered Turntable (see my review in Vol.17 No.10) and the superlative Roksan Shiraz MC cartridge. In the course of this review, I also had occasion to listen to two new entries in the under-\$1000 MC cartridge sweepstakes: the Dynavector Karat 17D2 Mk.II and the Benz-Micro Glider.⁴ Since I'm currently in the middle of a survey of phono preamps, I had a variety on hand from which to choose: Ensemble's Phonomaster, Rotel's RHQ10, Sonic Frontiers' SFP-1 Signature, and, most recently, Michael Yee Audio's PFE-1. I relied heavily on the SFP-1 Signature for my evaluation of the WTT Fountainhead base, so used it for initial comparison purposes. Subsequently, the majority of my listening for this review was done with either Ensemble's Phonomaster or Michael Yee Audio's PFE-1.

For the past year and a half, my reference electronics have been Ensemble's extraordinary Virtuoso preamplifier and Corifeo stereo power amp.⁵ In recent months, I've also put into service Rotel's high-end stereo power amps, the RHB10 and RHB05, and their RHC10 passive controller. My entire system is wired with TARA Labs' new RSC Master Gen.2 interconnect and speaker cable, although Synergistic Research's Alpha Sterling interconnect, of which I've just gotten samples, threatens to displace it.⁶

Loudspeakers used were Bright Star Audio Altair Pros, Thiel CS1.5s, or Unity Audio Signature 3s. The only room-treatment products I use in my 11' by 12' acoustically challenged listening/living room⁷ are a pair of Deluxe RoomTunes to control early side-wall reflections, four CornerTunes, and four EchoTunes. (In case you were wondering, the Clamp-

⁴ Reviews of each of these cartridges, as well as the long-overdue review of the Roksan Shiraz, are forthcoming—I promise.

⁵ The synergy between these products and the rest of my reference system is so good that I'm hesitant to make a change anytime soon. And, yes, you'll read about them—soon!

⁶ This stuff sells for less than half the price of TARA Labs' best. Its performance not only continues to impress me as it ages in the system, but presents a strong challenge to all of the other, much costlier cables I've used in recent months.

⁷ With the recent introduction of RoomTunes's Mini-TunePak, which is designed for treatment of smaller rooms, I can now compare the sonic effects of the original, larger room-acoustic treatments to their smaller counterparts. I have therefore requested a Mini-TunePak from Ultra Systems, Inc., and will do a Follow-Up on my findings.

The
Cryphon
Intellion
Amplifier

Presence
Audio
Soundstage-1

Acoustic
Messenger
A Loud-
speaker

Alomeca
Sphisto
Support

Rack is located in a corner of my bedroom with the preamp outs going through the wall to the amp, which sits on a shelf between the loudspeakers.)

The only other accessories I used were a couple of Bright Star Audio's Little Rocks, a Little Rock II, and a Big Rock III.

SOUND

I was totally unprepared for the magnitude of difference I heard between my longstanding reference WTT and the newly installed Kuzma. Every sonic parameter that I placed stock in in assessing the performance of the WTT was redefined by the Kuzma. To say I was astounded would be an understatement. By the end of the first day of listening, I also felt the early tinges of guilt setting in, as I knew that the backlog of reviews I had promised JA were going to be even further delayed. I had favorite records with which to reacquaint myself first!

A then-frequent listening buddy and I were rendered speechless after the fine-line stylus of the Shiraz settled into the first grooves of my mint, promo copy of the *El Norte* soundtrack (Antilles IVA-4). I guess the silence from which the music arose struck us first—a silence which the WTT conveyed, though not to the same degree as its replacement. The lowered noise-floor of the Kuzma rivaled that of CD reproduction, yet what we heard (or, more accurately, *felt* and *didn't* hear) was significantly different from what we'd grown accustomed to with that format. *This* silence seemed *darker*, with more “there” there. It was less two-dimensional, less sterile—more, if you will, tangible. Uh-huh!

I know all you doubting Thomases will think I'm speaking in tongues or have spent too much time bareheaded in the California sun when I discuss a seemingly easily grasped concept such as silence using such words as “darkness,” “thereness,” and “tangibility.” How can I describe a sensory phenomenon denoting an absence of sensation using qualitative terms? Simple. I just learned to listen more with my senses than my intellect. It works. In listening to *El Norte*, for example, it was easy to “visually” differentiate the several venues in which the recordings took place—the soundstage, the field, or the church—by the sense of “silence” unique to each of them, felt when the instruments or vocals stopped and the last decay of the notes faded away. Hmmm. I guess what I'm trying to say is that the Kuzma, more than any other turntable in my experi-

electronic music), completely natural (any Water Lily Acoustics recording), or somewhere in between (much popular music), I felt I was privy to the event not as a voyeur, but as a participant.

The Kuzma's soundstaging was as broad and as deep as I've heard, outperforming the WTT. If the WTT presented a view seen through a 28mm lens, the Kuzma widened the field of view to that of a 21mm lens. On all but the best “audiophile-approved” recordings, the WTT sounded congested compared to the Kuzma. With the latter as my analog source, I became keenly aware on recording after recording (audiophile or not) of musical information coming at me from well to the sides and far beyond the loudspeakers. It didn't take long for me to realize that playing records on the Kuzma was akin to doubling the size of my modest listening room! The question as to whether or not that presentation was “accurate” didn't enter my mind—I was too busy listening to and enjoying my records to worry about it. All I can say is that, given the spatial and sonic limitations imposed by my listening room, I never felt that the scale of a performance was sacrificed. Compromised? Perhaps. Nevertheless, the musical gestalt was always preserved.⁸

Instrumental, vocal, and other images within the soundstage had well-defined outlines and were exceptionally well-focused. They were rock-solid and unwavering, presented in a near-holographic manner. For example, the opening drum-whacks on “Huanyo de Zampona,” from *El Norte*, emanated from a precisely focused spot waaaaay back in the soundstage.

Just about any cut from the *Jemeral Forest* soundtrack (Varèse Sarabande V 81244) provided an object lesson in image specificity. The kaleidoscopic array of instrumental and vocal textures captured in the grooves of this magnificently recorded album hits your ears from all over, under, around, and through the huge soundstage. Each sound, be it a human voice or one or more of a myriad of strange and exotic Amazonian Indian percussion instruments, could be pinpointed in the mix with accuracy and ease—as if composer and musician Junior Homrich had handed me a placement diagram. Fine

⁸ Moving to larger quarters would help restore the bloom and grandeur (which I miss) to large-scale orchestral works! So would moving into my own house, where I could set the gain to concert-hall levels without

details were retrieved like crayfish being lifted out of murky pond-water in a nylon net.

I've listened to the title song on Andreas Vollenweider's *Caverna Magica* (. . . *Under the Tree—In the Cave*. . .) (CBS FM 37827) many, many times—not so much for the music content as for the sound. This recording is a box of sonic truffles, delighting the audiophile's ears much the same way the fungi equivalents delight the gastronome's palate. Neither the WTT nor the VPI Mk.IV (which preceded it in my system) drew me into the introductory "fanta-scape" as compellingly as the Kuzma did. I felt as though I was arm in arm with the anxious (and no doubt giddy) travelers as they entered Andreas's moist, mysterious grotto.

What *really* knocked me out, though, just as the effects ended and the music began, was my sudden awareness of the presence of a small thing, located about 2' above and in front of the right loudspeaker, that "fluttered" directly in front of my face and over to the left loudspeaker. That got my attention, and that of my two cockatiels, who, perched on my shoulders, were sharing that particular listening session with me.

Bass reproduction on the Kuzma was as good as I've ever heard in the past in my system—robust, full-bodied, and

taut. Bass extension seemed limited only by the program material itself. For instance, the well-chosen notes of Charlie Haden's plucked acoustic bass on Rickie Lee Jones's early-'90s *Pop Pop* (Geffen GEFD 24426) rolled out of the loudspeaker's drivers to fill the room with rich, vibrant sound.

Pitch definition, articulation, and control were such that I could easily visualize the languid vibrations of the acoustic bass's worm-sized, dusty, low E-string. Here again, the Stabi easily upstaged the WTT in this regard, the latter sounding somewhat woolly and undernourished by comparison. Speaking of articulation, I clearly understood for the first time just what happened in the alley with the two-by-four midway through Stevie Ray Vaughan's "Tin Pan Alley," from his hard-driving 1984 *Couldn't Stand the Weather* (Epic FE 39304).

CONCLUSION

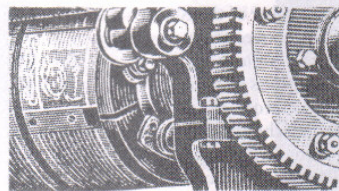
With the ready availability of compelling and important new popular music on LP⁹, a virtual endless supply of excellent, inexpensive used LPs of all genres—and the superb Classic Records, Analog

⁹ For those willing to put aside their CD players' remote controls and pick up the phone, vinyl editions of many of the albums making waves these days are waiting on dealers' shelves all over the country.

Productions, Mobile Fidelity, Cisco Music, and other reissues—music-lovers convinced of the virtues of vinyl playback have an unprecedented opportunity to indulge their passions and bask in the warmth and honesty of today's cutting-edge analog reproduction.

I know of no better way of taking advantage of this vinyl renaissance than with the Kuzma Stabi/Stogi combo. For three grand and change you get a superior-sounding, no-nonsense turntable willing and able to convey all the dynamics, dynamic range, rhythm and pace, nuance, and finesse which are the stuff of music. And, it's built to last into the next ice age.

If you match and mate the Kuzma combo with a good medium-output MC cartridge and a great-sounding, relatively inexpensive phono preamp such as the Ensemble Phonomaster or Michael Yee Audio PFE-1, you'll hear what's given rise to all the brouhaha. **S**



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