



Kuzma Stabi S Turntable with Outboard Power Supply and Stogi S Tonearm

Chris Martens

A soul-satisfying turntable and arm from Slovenia's Kuzma.

My dad, now retired, is a mechanical engineer, and from looking over his shoulder throughout his career I learned that the field could be a strange and wonderful marriage of art and science. Great designers have a flair for creating solutions where practical mechanics and pleasing aesthetics become one, and where invention flows freely from a seemingly endless river of fresh ideas. Such is the case with the turntable and tonearm designs of the Slovenian engineer Franc Kuzma. In fact, if you lined up Kuzma's products in a row they would seem so different in concept and execution that you might think each was the brainchild of a different man. Plainly, Kuzma is one of those rare individuals who can see and solve problems from many different angles.

Interestingly, though, it is one of Kuzma's least costly and most deceptively simple designs that first catches many enthusiasts' eyes: the minimalist Stabi S belt-drive turntable and Stogi S hydraulically-damped unipivot tonearm. This elegant turntable and arm

turntables to be dead quiet, and yet veteran analog enthusiasts recognize that there are subtle yet audible tonal-quality differences in the background silences that various turntables produce. About now, you might be wondering if silences can even have tonal qualities,

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look quite striking, but their appearance gives only a hint of what's in store when listeners hear them in action.

The mission of any turntable is to rotate records at precise and stable speeds without introducing (or sustaining) noises or vibrations that could disrupt the playback process. We want

but I would argue they can and do. (Picture in your mind the difference between, say, the quiet of a church sanctuary at midnight and the interior of a warehouse at that same hour, and you'll grasp my point.)

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quiet, ever-so-slightly-warm-sounding backgrounds that remind me of the profound hush you hear in a concert hall, just before the music begins. While the Stabi S may not be quite as quiet as top-tier Kuzma models such as the Stabi Reference or Stabi XL, it makes a highly satisfying alternative, and at a price point normal mortals can handle. Performance is no doubt helped by the outboard power-supply/speed-control box supplied with the deluxe version of the Stabi S that I tested. If the Stabi S's background silence were a color, I'd call that color a "warm black." By contrast, most Clearaudio 'tables I've heard, and many recent-generation VPIs as well, seem to produce an equally deep but colder silence that I would characterize as an icy "blue-black" background behind the music.

One could probably build a case for either background color, but I prefer the Stabi S's rendition of silence for two musically defensible reasons. Its warm black backgrounds are strongly reminiscent of those you might hear in live music venues. I find this quality helps promote listening for the overall gestalt of the music, which—in my book—is a good thing. And this is really important: I find that the way individual notes emerge from and then decay back into the Stabi S's noise floor sounds much more natural and continuous than does the notes-stand-out-in-sharp-relief presentation of the colder-sounding 'tables. Does this mean the Stabi swallows or obscures transient information or fine details? Certainly not. It's just that the Stabi S lets the information in the record grooves unfold in a natural way, without imparting even a hint of momentarily exciting, but ultimately fatiguing transient zing. There are more "lively-sounding" 'tables than the Stabi S on the market, but in many cases I can't reconcile their sound with that of live music.

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times what the arm does. It enables cartridges to produce bass that is energetic, deeply extended, and yet tightly focused. For instance, near the opening of “Overture—Cotton Avenue” from Joni Mitchell’s *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter* [Asylum], Jaco Pastorius strikes a subterranean, thunderclap-like note on an open bass-guitar string, and the Stogi S/Shelter combo captures everything that note has to offer, including its fierce attack, richly modulated envelope, and long, slow decay that rings with sustained low-frequency energy. Other good arm/cartridge pairs I’ve heard typically can’t produce bass like this—bass that hits with sledgehammer force, yet speaks with *vox humana* expressiveness.

At midrange and treble frequencies, the Stogi S facilitates the cartridge’s precise and invigorating retrieval of transient and harmonic details, while at the same time fostering an overall sound

that is graceful and smooth. I attribute this elusive combination of detail and smoothness to the Stogi S’s damping system, and it is pure magic. For me, it was a revelation to revisit classic CTI jazz recordings from the 1970s, such as Freddy Hubbard’s *Red Clay* or Jim Hall’s *Concierto*, and the Stabi S/Stogi S pair proved a perfect “time machine,” unlocking incredibly fine timbral and textural details in those old records in a way no analog rig from the ’70s could have done. Hubbard’s trumpet and Hall’s guitar just sound so right through the Stogi S/Shelter pair, with details pouring forth as from a natural spring, without any artificial edge enhancement to mar the presentation.

Finally, we come to my personal favorite of the Stogi S’s characteristics; namely, its ability to help cartridges create rock-solid images and spectacularly three-dimensional soundstages. Where some otherwise good arm/cartridge combos struggle to produce images that stay focused or soundstages that break free from the speakers or the dimensions of the listening room, the Stogi S/Shelter pair makes both tasks look easy. I almost fell off my couch when I first heard the huge soundstages the Stogi S produced, and then experienced the illusion of the near-physical presence of instruments and performers upon those stages.

This quality proved especially gripping on the Quartetto Italiano performance of the Dvorák *American* String Quartet in F, Op. 96 [Philips], where the voices of the individual instruments rang true, not just because timbres were accurately reproduced, but also because the sizes (and shapes) of the instruments were rendered with almost sculptural precision. The sense of being transported to the recording site was compelling thanks to a myriad small


More on the Stogi

The Stogi S arm is a simple yet effective unipivot design with a downward-facing spike that rests in a bearing cup whose pivot point is located in the plane of the record, minimizing warp-induced wow. The bearing cup is positioned in the center of a basin that gets partially filled with silicone-oil damping fluid upon which the understructure of the arm “floats.” The arm features two brass counterweights slung beneath a small tail-shaft; users rotate one or both of the eccentrically mounted weights for basic azimuth adjustments, or adjust a weighted trim-screw for finer azimuth tuning. The Stogi S provides a simple anti-skating mechanism that audibly improves cartridge tracking. **CM**

spatial cues that suggested I was in a space whose acoustics differed from those of my listening room. And the performers sounded eerily present and alive, in part because the arm/cartridge caught subliminal details that captured the players moving in their chairs as the performance progressed. The point is that the Stogi S helps cartridges do many small things well, and that together those small things add up to a heightened sense of musical realism—a greater willingness on the listener's part to suspend disbelief and simply get lost in the music.

Where does the Stabi S/Stogi S fit in the broader spectrum of available 'table/arm combos? At \$3300, the Kuzma slots in neatly between two likely competitors, VPI's \$2500 Scoutmaster and \$5500 Super Scoutmaster. Because the Stabi S 'table and Stogi S are minimalist designs it's easy to miss their underlying sophistication, but a side-by-side comparison between the Scoutmaster and the Kuzma pair proves revealing. The Scoutmaster starts out with a price advantage, but to get it to match up evenly with the Kuzma rig you'd need to add VPI's \$999 outboard SDS power supply (the Kuzma comes with an outboard supply), an aftermarket "drop counterweight" for the VPI arm (the Kuzma has "drop counterweights"), a dust cover (the Kuzma has one), and interconnect cables to connect the VPI to your phono stage (the Kuzma features generously long cables whose "wires run in one uninterrupted piece from the headshell to the RCA plugs"). The closer you look the more value you'll see in the Kuzma combo. And consider this: If you set aside the \$1900 you'd save by buying the Stabi S/Stogi S instead of VPI's brilliant but costly Super Scoutmaster, you'd be well on your way toward the price of a statement-class phono cartridge such as Shelter's 90X.

I thoroughly enjoyed the time I spent with the Kuzma Stabi S/Stogi S, and I'm not looking forward to the day

when it must be returned to its U.S. distributor. I'll admit that I was skeptical of the design at first (I kept look at the 'table and thinking, "Where's the rest of it?"), but the Kuzma's quiet, clear, and natural sound soon won me over, as did its ability to tap the enormous performance potential of top-tier phono cartridges—something not all 'table/arm combos in this price range can do. But maybe the most telling observation of all was that, when I started spinning LPs on the Kuzma, I never wanted my listening sessions to end, which is why I gave the Stabi S/Stogi S a TAS Golden Ear Award in this issue. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Kuzma Deluxe Stabi S turntable

Description: Suspension-less belt-drive turntable with outboard power supply
Speeds: 33.3 and 45rpm, electronically controlled

Kuzma Stogi S tonearm

Description: 9" hydraulically-damped uni-pivot tonearm with adjustable VTA, azimuth, and anti-skating mechanism

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Linn Sondek LV-12/Ittok LVII turntable/arm; Shelter 90X and Benz Micro ACE "L" phono cartridges; Musical Surroundings Phenomena phono stage; Supex SDT-722 cartridge step-up transformer; Musical Fidelity kW500 integrated amplifier; Rogue Audio Metis preamplifier; NuForce Reference 9 and Channel Islands Audio D-200 monoblock power amplifiers; Magnepan MG1.6 and Monitor Audio Silver Series RS6 loudspeakers; Cardas Neutral Reference and PNF Audio Icon/Symphony interconnects and speaker cables; RGPC 1200S power conditioner

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

THE MUSIC.COM

(800) 457-2577, Ext. 22

kuzma.si

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Prices: Stabi S turntable, \$2400;

Stogi S arm, \$900