



## kuzma

### Stabi S turntable and Stogi S unipivot arm

as reviewed by Francisco Duran



It has been a couple of years since I reviewed the Opera Audio 1.0 turntable. Prior to that an analog rig had not graced my system for a number of years. I sold my old and lovely AR ES-1/Primer MMT/Grace F9E to Brooks Berdan years ago for reasons that now escape me and probably wouldn't make sense anyway, even if I remembered them. In fact I think he probably still has that old rig in his famous back room that is full of trade-ins and acquisitions. It had also been quite some time since I last performed any kind of set up on a turntable. Truth be told, minor adjustments after cursory examinations were rarely ever made on my old AR table. Come to think of it, I have been relying on Brooks for longer than I realize for turntable set up.

How did I come to the decision of buying a Kuzma turntable? Good question. Looks, build quality, and just plain word of mouth were some of the factors that helped in making a purchase decision. But just listening to the Stabi a few times at CES was enough to make me realize that I had to have one. It also helps to be at the right place at the right time. That time and place just happened to be Ray Lombardi's

FRANCISCO DURAN'S  
SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS  
DALI Euphonia MS4.

ELECTRONICS  
Antique Sound Labs MG-  
SPM25DT monoblocks,  
Canary CA-301Mk-II  
amplifier, and Reference  
Line Prominence IA passive

Line Preeminence IA passive and Canary CA-601Mk-II preamplifiers.

#### SOURCES

NAD T531 and Antique Electronic Supply CD-1 (temporary) CD players, and a Taddeo Digital Antidote Two.

#### CABLES

Either JPS Superconductor+ and FX interconnects and a double run of JPS Ultraconductor speaker cables, or Analysis Plus interconnects and Oval 12 speaker cables, and Monarchy and various DIY AC cords.

#### ACCESSORIES

Balanced Power Technologies BPT 4SE, Brick Wall Series Mode Surge Suppressor, Audio Prism Quiet Lines and Noise Sniffer, Vibrapods, Black Diamond Racing Boards and cones, Final Labs Daruma-3II Isolation Bearings, various ferrite rings, Target rack, Yamaha KX-380 cassette deck, custom made wooden cable lifters by Mr. Clark senior, and all the NOS tubes I can afford!

room at CES in the Alexis Park Hotel. Both Ray and I were admiring the looks, build quality and sound of the little Kuzma Stabi that Ray had set up when in walked none other than Michael Fremer. Fremer quickly proceeded to the back of the room where Ray and I were and joined in on the huddle. I took Mr. Fremer's comments in like a sponge. He said something to the effect that the little Kuzma was underrated soundwise, had great build quality, and was a great bargain. Talk about adding fuel to the fire! The next thing I had to do was to find out where I could get my hands on one.

Enter Scott Markwell and the The Music/Gear Shop. Actually before I met Scott, I was a fan of his writing for the *Absolute Sound Magazine*. Meeting and talking with Scott at a couple of *Los Angeles and Orange County Audiophile Society* meetings at the gear Shop set the stage for me to review and possibly buy a Stabi S turntable. As it turned out, things went in the opposite direction. Before long there was a smallish, but very heavy brown box in my breeze-way full of brass, rubber, metal and Plexiglas—ready for assembly. By the time I got around to doing so, almost three months had passed by. You see I bought this rig before I had a chance to review it.

Now either I am thicker than I admit and need step by step instructions in the proper setup of a turntable, arm and cartridge, or the very few sheets of instruction that came with the Stabi S were not actually enough for an amateur. The actual assembly of either table or arm was not what gave me fits, it was when it came time to actually mounting my cartridge that things became difficult. The Stogi S unipivot arm is a thing of beauty. With its all aluminum arm, two brass weights and silicone-oil damped unipivot design and one piece Cardas internal wiring it is a well thought-out design. Admittedly when I was installing the two brass counterweights I felt intimidated. "How in the heck am I going to get those adjustments right?" I thought. Turns out in practice that it is not as hard as it looks. Both weights can be rotated and slid on the shaft for proper cartridge tracking and azimuth adjustment. The thicker weight has a machined hole that goes through the lower half of the weight with a grub screw installed. Simply turn the grub screw for fine azimuth adjustments. As our brothers in Britain say, "Stroke of genius!" The trick is to start out with a cartridge that is in proper working condition. After many attempts to mount my trusty Blue Point No.2 on the end of the Stogi S arm, a few emails and phone calls to Scott, much time re-reading the instructions and staring at the scant pictures, that darn cart just wouldn't balance out on that arm. Then one day while sitting at my dining room table just staring into space and daydreaming about the frustration of not being able to mount a cart on an arm, a bad memory flashed across my mind. I remembered dropping the BP No.2 off the kitchen counter. I had totally forgotten about that incident. Could that be why it wouldn't mount properly? Like I said, thick!



So a new cart was soon pressed into service. Good friend and audio bud Larry Cox gave me his old but still in good shape Audioquest 404i sometime before I bought this Kuzma Kombo. Our intention was to have it and his Koetsu modified by VanDenHul. We did so and VDH did a great job with that aging AQ cart. This time, not leaving anything to chance, my Kuzma rig was dropped off at Brooks Berdan Ltd for the install. One more glitch before I got my table back was a three-month stay at Brook's place of business. Brooks was backed up with ten tables ahead of mine.

One positive thing though was that there was a two-arm version of the Stabi S sitting on his bench which belonged to Brooks himself. This gave me a warm feeling all over to think that one of the high-end turntable gurus owns the same table as me; which was just that much more of a positive reinforcement for my purchase.

When it came time to actually install my new TT, the last place I wanted to put it was on my gear rack. Although solid, it is exposed to the elements. Elements like air/floor borne vibrations, competition for space on my rack, and the potential of curious fingers from visiting nephews. So I took the simple route. I drilled a hole in my wall behind my gear rack, ran interconnects through and installed it in the next room. It is easy to get to since the door to both rooms is right next to it and my gear rack. And the door locks! Quite a few years ago my brother welded together a table that has the perfect dimensions to house a turntable and phono section. After a little refurbishing it was back in service being saved from a life of servitude as a backyard plant stand. Believe me, this table is solid and heavy, especially after I filled it with sand and topped it with a butcher block. For the piece de resistance, the table is topped off by a Gingko Audio Cloud 10 unit. A little experimenting with the rubber balls in the Cloud 10, and the whole rig was dialed in and ready to play music.



And play I did, for two years. You see after buying the table and promising Scott a review, I never got around to doing it. Scott was interested in me doing one, but seemed to be in no hurry. After all I bought the thing didn't I? Well one thing led to another and one review kept cutting in to my writing time for the little brass Stabi S, but here it is all this time later with a number of other reviewers beating me to the punch. And to think, I could have scooped them all. So here we are in 2008 and I am finally delivering. Bless your heart Scott!

First of all, this is one cool looking table, I mean solid brass bar. Hey who needs a plinth anyway? What are they for? You just have to stamp out vibrations from them. Not so with the Stabi S. I especially like the way the brass housed motor hides under the very heavy, but thin platter, making for that compact look. Secondly, when reviewing a record player it is difficult to isolate its sound and that of the arm, and even that of the cartridge. There are so many pieces connected together to make a *whole* compared to an amplifier, CD player, or preamplifier. And don't forget the phono section. Taken into account that the Monolithic Sound PS-2 phono and

Audioquest 404i VDH modified cartridge are very clean, dimensional, and extended units in their own right, the Stabi S/Stogi S combination has a very solid foundation in which to start off.



Isn't it fun breaking in a new record player and phono cartridge? Not to start off with a cliché but the phrase "black velvet background of silence" does apply to the Kuzma Stabi and arm. Music emerges and evolves from silence and doesn't actually seem as though it is coming off of a flat record's surface. Which in reality, of course, it is. We all have read in turntable reviews writers talking about different grades or levels of background silence. To me that relates to different levels or grades of how quiet the bearing is in a given table. Boy you are really getting down to a gnats rear end when you are grading different levels of black, silent background noise. That must be a way to justify the price of those other expensive tables. Golden ears rejoice! As far as the Kuzma Stabi S is concerned, its designer can stand proud on its bearing design providing a high grade of background silence.

The Stabi S also extracts music from the surface of an LP with a minimum of fuss. The Stogi S arm tracks very well. My collection of LPs is mostly nice, flat, and in excellent shape. I have tamed warped disks in the past by stacking books on them for a few weeks in the summer. This sounds like a crude way to flatten vinyl, but it worked for Muddy Waters' *Folk Singer* on Mobil Fidelity. That album was warped almost as much as Howard Stern's sense of humor. *On Folk Singer*, Willie Dixon's upright bass was solid in pitch and timing and seemed to have a halo of air around the instrument that you don't get with digital; no matter how expensive the rig is. This disk is so full of great blues music that it is a shame to use it as a "test" record. So in a way I didn't. I just relaxed and enjoyed it all the way through; it is a great recording. Muddy's voice sounds so naturally textured and realistically placed in space. The Mo Fi CD version of this recording, while good, falls short. At least it wasn't warped like the LP was. The Kuzma arm and table reflects the soundstage and imaging of a recording like a chameleon. This was evident with the next LP I put on which was Muddy Waters' *King Bee*. While this is a good recording, it falls short of *Folk Singer* in recording quality but not in content. The stage wasn't as wide and spacious. The top end not as smooth and sweet. And the midrange was more brittle. And so it was on record after record. From Ian Dury to Robert Plant to Bob Dylan to Yello. The Kuzma Kombo easily reflected the recording quality of each record and reproduced realistic images. While at the same time reproducing the sweet harmonics and organic wholeness that analog delivers with ease and pulls one into the recording. Realistic and live are definitely two words that apply to the way this table reproduces music.



Tonal balance is never exaggerated in one area or another, being very even and solid from top to bottom. My speakers go down to 33Hz, and via a ribbon tweeter, up to 28,000kHz. This table and arm are ever so slightly warm and a shade to the darker side as opposed to bright, light, and clinical sounding. Yet the slightest details easily gel forth either helping to create that realistic soundstage or bringing forth subtle details in the guitar work of Pat Metheny on his *American Garage* album. It was with some of Metheny's LPs that I noticed the midrange to be smooth but again detailed and natural. Many of Metheny's recordings seem to be more mid range than bass heavy anyway. But the Kuzma Kombo reproduced from mid range to the top end smoothly with an abundance of detail yet controlled and focused. Again on *All the Roadrunning* from Mark Knopfler and Emmylou Harris the subtle interplay of their voices and guitars on songs like "Rollin On" and "Belle Starr" sounded sweet and clear and at the same time detailed, clean and dimensional. It does not seem correct to describe the sound and music making abilities of this table and arm in segments because I feel its strong suit is its cohesiveness. But it does help to illustrate the strengths of this table and arm.

Here you have a relatively affordable turntable and arm that is unique in its design and looks. Most likely I won't be sending it back to Orange Street anytime soon for repairs. It is ruggedly constructed to say the least. It does all the things a well designed table should do such as track the records well, get up to speed quickly, and keep that speed constant. It is after a fashion relatively easy to set up. More importantly to me, with the right combination of ancillaries, it draws you into the music quite easily. Whatever character it has minimally intrudes on a recording. It is very easy for the owner of a given piece of equipment to think it is the best thing since microwave ovens. Having heard a Linn, well I know there are sweeter sounding tables out there. Having heard the bigger Clearaudio and VPIs I also know there are tables that have more bass slam and greater detail. But like a wise man once said, that is why Kuzma has more expensive offerings to choose from! When I was looking for a record player I basically narrowed it down to Clearaudio, VPI, and Kuzma. For me I fell for this table's looks, design, and price first, but the sound it makes is some very sweet icing on my analog cake.

In the future I would like to report on the external power supply with the RPM selector. There is also an SD adapter for a second arm, and a nifty brass record weight. If I am brave enough to try another cartridge. (At CES 2007, Frank Kuzma told me it takes him five minutes to swap out a cartridge!) It is said that the Stogi S arm helps in extracting the best out of pricey cartridges. For now though this analog combo from Slovenia has me making frequent trips to Amoeba Records in beautiful Hollywood. It is a good thing I live close by! **Francisco Duran**

**Stabi S turntable**  
Retail: \$1800

**Stogi S unipivot arm**

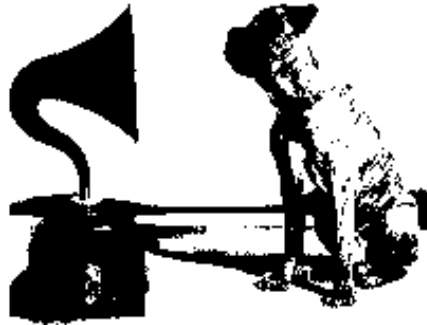
Retail: \$1000

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