

KUZMA'S NEW 4POINT - THE BEST TONEARM EVER?

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Kuzma 4Point 9 tonearm

by Alan Sircom



OK, so regular readers already know the score here. We've loved the Kuzma 4Point tonearm in all its guises since first we saw it. And the 4Point 9 – the latest, smallest, cheapest, and possibly the best version of the 4Point – already won an award in the last issue even before this review was published.

This isn't a 'tail wagging the dog' review, though. We had already performed the listening tests required by the time of the award, even if those listening notes weren't fully written up. From the outset though, it was clear that this was something special, and deserving of that award up front.

Kuzma presently makes 11 arms using four basic configurations; three unipivots, four gimbaled bearing designs, an air-bearing parallel tracker, and now three models using the company's unique four-point bearing design. The first of these was the 11" 4Point launched a decade ago, and this was followed by an even larger 14" arm. Both arms received some of the highest praise for their performance, but that performance came at a price; both financially, and by

placing heavy requirements on the turntable itself. The unique offset arm design on the first two arms allowed for a spot of geometric magic (meaning that a 14" arm could be mounted in a turntable capable of accepting a 12" arm, for example), but the physical construction of the arms meant they automatically limited the number of compatible turntables.

The 4Point 9 redraws the map. As the name suggests, it retains Kuzma's four-point bearing. This features two points to allow vertical movement, in a manner similar to a double-unipivot design, the second pair allow horizontal movement. All four are designed to have minimal starting and moving friction, and zero play in any playing direction. For those of us more used to conventional tonearms, there's a feeling of slack in the bearings in some movements that feels a little alien, but is perfectly normal for the design. This also gives the arm a sort of bulls-eye look from the top, with the aluminium arm-tube (with its vertical spike and cup bearings) fitting around the (rather than over) the arm tower with its horizontal bearing assembly. The main difference between the 4Point 9 and previous 4Point designs, is this arm tower now sits directly on

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- ▶ the Kuzma arm base, where the larger designs place a VTA adjustment tower at the arm-base point and the arm itself sits on an outrigger.

With no offset VTA tower, the 4Point 9 takes up no more space and adds not much more significant mass than any other 9” tonearm. Of course, with no offset VTA tower, the 4Point 9 can adjust VTA, but not while a record is playing, and I suspect the removal of layers of additional components needed to build that VTA tower help make the 4Point 9 sound so good. In saying this, I realise I may unleash the Wrath of Gregory, as the former Editor of this parish is extremely keen on tonearms that adjust VTA on-the-fly (and in using a VPI, I can see the point of this, too), but the rigidity and solidity the removal of the tower brings to the party is attractive enough to overcome any issues over per-album adjustment.

Not having on-the-fly VTA adjustment also promotes a slightly less anal-retentive way of listening to albums, where microscopic changes to VTA for each album you play can lead to a more OCD approach to the record playing ritual. I am in two minds about this – a lot of the joy of playing records is that ritual process. You engage with the music in a more physical way when you take the album out of the sleeve, place it carefully on the platter, give it a swipe with the record brush (and possibly a zap with a Zerostat), let the record come up to speed, then carefully cue up the stylus. Carl Jung would approve, and would probably also like the additional listen-stop-adjust-repeat machinations required to get VTA ‘just right’. However, the downside to this is you can spend so much time on the adjustment, you run out of time to play the record, or you hear the opening bars so many times in the adjustment stage, you tire of the recording by the time it comes to playing it. Sometimes, the simplest approach is the best.

Let’s not get too carried away by the ‘simple is best’ ethos. This doesn’t extend as far as the pithy maxim of Lotus founder Colin Chapman: “Simplify, then add lightness.” This is not a tonearm stripped back so far as to make it a fragile flower. The 4Point 9 still weighs 920g, has the bombproof build of Kuzma designs, and is still more than capable of taking practically any cartridge ever produced. However, compared to the significantly heavier 4Points, that does fit Chapman’s maxim after all!

Depending on your prior experience with tonearms, installation is either extraordinarily complex, or slightly more complex – but more accurate – than the norm. In other words, if you are used to fitting conventional arms (like Rega or SME designs), the process of setting up the tower then adding the arm might seem ornate and overcomplicated. On the other hand, if you come from a unipivot world, this is a robust dream of an arm. And, if you are used to parallel trackers, especially some of the more ‘homespun’ designs, this arm goes together like a clockwork jigsaw puzzle. Kuzma provides exceptionally good instructions and a good set of tools anyway. It’s not Ikea-easy, but if you can understand the manual that comes with your car enough to check fluid levels and change a headlamp, you can install the arm. This is, however, the kind of tonearm where you don’t want to lose the manual, and you should allocate several hours to both installation and fine-tuning.

Kuzma designed this arm to take any cartridge and sit on any deck, and as a consequence supplied the arm with a suitably high mass cartridge (the company’s own CAR 40 moving coil) to sit in that removable headshell, and a variant of the Stabi S turntable –the T-Shaped brass entry-level into Kuzma’s turntable systems – to provide a base of operations. Prior to this, the 4Point really was only considered suitable for the higher-end Stabi M and XL models, and this automatically trebles the price (or more). While the shape of the high-end turntable industry has changed of late (the days of using brand X’s arm on brand Y’s turntable are fading, as so many turntable makers now produce their own arm, and vice versa), the nature of the 4Point 9 brings it more in line with other arm makers.

Unless you’ve heard the bigger 4Points, the sound of the 4Point 9 is unexpectedly good. You would expect it to perhaps couple the best points of a unipivot (that sense of musical freedom and midband clarity) with the best of a conventional arm (the authority and extension), and it does that... with bells on! You almost immediately begin to hear where your old arm was letting the side down, and realise just what your cartridge was failing to extract from the record. Plucked double bass is an obvious draw, because suddenly you are hearing the finger-squeaks and textures of the plucking process (as you might when hearing the recording through a ▶

“The Kuzma arm gets out of the way so well it makes good cartridges sound better, and really good cartridges sound fantastic!”

► unipivot) but with the substance and intensity you can only get from conventional bearings. But it's not just plucked bass; everything has less arm in the way. Records I've known and used for decades both as reviewing tools and for enjoyment were unveiling details lost to one form of bearing or another. More importantly, you don't hear this in an analytical sense; you hear it as an absence of arm-sound, pushing the onus of the audio system performance onto the cartridge and its characteristics. I've only experienced such disappearing arm performance a handful of times, and they have usually been with arms that were significantly more expensive, significantly more fragile, or significantly more expensive AND fragile.

Naturally, I didn't stay with the CAR 40 and played with a number of cartridges both suitable (Lyra Delos) and demanding (Ortofon MC7500) and in all cases the arm didn't just acquit itself, it highlighted all that was good – and occasionally not so good – about the cartridge. Let's put it this way, I thought I knew how good the Delos can sound, but I was hearing more arm than cartridge in a previous life. And the CAR 40 is no slouch, either. Put simply, the Kuzma arm gets out of the way so well it makes good cartridges sound better, and really good cartridges sound fantastic!

The limitation is although the 4Point 9 dramatically lowers the weight of the arm compared to its bigger brothers, it's still a heavy arm by today's standards. That puts it beyond the load-bearing capacities of the springs of many of today's most popular suspended turntables, such as the Linn LP12. I'm not sure if this is even a limitation today as so many high-end decks are high-mass designs that eschew suspension systems, and the Linn fraternity tend to stay within a very limited set of tonearm options anyway (basically, Linn arms, second-hand Naim Aros, and the occasional Roksan Nima). In fact, the 4Point 9 is so good, you have to think those owners of suspended decks with springs incapable of coping with a 900g+ tonearm are missing a trick – a Stabi S or something like a Pear Audio/Fletcher Audio/Nottingham Analogue turntable coupled with this arm and a good cartridge will happily see off many of the high-spec bouncy-castle decks.

The Kuzma 4Point 9 is the four-point bearing concept stripped to its bare bones, without the longer tonearm and on-the-fly VTA adjustment. The performance of the Kuzma 4Point

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: four-point nine-inch tonearm with detachable headshell

Bearing type: four pivot

Maximum cartridge mass: 35g

Effective mass: 13g

Effective length: 229mm

Arm-mount distance: 212mm

Spindle-pivot distance: 212mm

Offset angle: 23°

Armtube: conical aluminium

Bias adjustment: Yes

VTA adjustment: Yes

Arm mount: Kuzma

Wiring: Silver as standard, options available

Connections: XLR, 5pin

Total mass: 920g

Price: £3,495

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9 is therefore a direct result of that bearing technology. And – stripped to its core – the four-point bearing is a real star. We already sort of knew that from its older brothers, but bringing this technology down to more real-world levels, it suddenly becomes throws the sonic limitations of conventional unipivot and gimbaled-bearing tonearms into sharp focus. It also brings the absolute top-end of tonearm design down to a far wider audience. Finally, if you have a Kuzma Stabi of any vintage, and can't quite make the financial or size commitment to the bigger 4Points, this is by far the best arm you can buy. Highly recommended, and a new reference point irrespective of cost – this might just be the best arm you can buy today. +