

EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Kuzma Stabi S-12 turntable and Stogi S-12 tonearm

By Alan Sircom

No matter what kind of turntable you use, like or prefer, there's something about the Kuzma Stabi S that will always attract. It's that well-engineered minimalism – just a brass T-bar (inherently rigid and not vibration prone) with a motor at one end and a bearing at fitted into one of the spars. Who needs feet when rubber O-rings do the job? Even the platter – a pressed and machined aluminium plate that is anodized and plated, then fitted with a rubberized textile compound mat – is engineered for rough-housing.

The Stogi S damped unipivot is similarly minimalist in construction, in its none-more-black and brass finish. Like the deck, it's built to last; maybe not to the road-digger solidity of the turntable, but you could still win a bar brawl with the arm and not find a scratch on the thing. And fortunately, both products have a sonic performance that gives as good as it gets, and the Tonka Toy build does not undermine the excellent sound quality.

All of which caused a spot of panic when Kuzma announced it was to make a 12" version of both deck and arm. Would the magic be broken? Would it still be the sort of turntable you might imagine Brunel would

make? Fortunately, both rely on healthy doses of a 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' ethos, and the extension in no way compromises the performance of the original designs. Which says a lot about those original designs that they can be extended out relatively easily. And also, given the elegant simplicity of the design, it's a near-zero maintenance product.

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If you are the kind of person who thinks manuals are for wimps, you'll love the pairing. While it's not as simple as unpacking it and pressing the 'go' button, taking the deck out of the box will still probably take longer than putting it together. The arm assembly is more involved and you'll need the manual – especially as there's a silicone-damped dashpot to contend with – but it will still take you longer to accurately align a cartridge than it will to install the arm. The only truly difficult parts involve adjusting VTA (an exercise in getting an Allen key under the arm base, which can be tricky), azimuth adjustment (the counterweights double up as tracking force and azimuth compensation) and anti-skate. This last involves connecting a weight and wheel on the base to a little brass hook on the arm itself and can be fiddly. In fairness, anti-skate bias adjustment doesn't seem to be that vitally important here, perhaps a function of unipivots in general.

Kuzma supplies comprehensive manuals for both deck and arm, along with a suitable protractor designed for a 12" arm, but this last was being printed at the time of writing, so instead I used the excellent revised version ►

▶ of the Dr Feickert protractor to great effect. As most vinyl-lovers know, the two alignment points on the deck are not the secret to the 12" arm's potentially great sound, it's the lower distortion between these two points that makes the difference.

The review of the Stabi S-12 is essentially going over old ground. What applies to the standard Stabi S applies here in almost identical measure. It's a very quiet, measured sounding deck, more concerned with providing a neutral platform for the arm

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to extract the maximum amount of information than it is making a song and dance about the process of spinning a platter. It retains the sense of music rising out of a neutral silent background and the overall presentation is pitched only slightly on the warm side of things (this really only manifests itself when compared to colder sounding decks like the Clearaudios of this world, and is reminiscent of Notts Analogue and SME decks... so it's clearly a tonality popular with UK ears). As mentioned before, the big issue here is that there is no issue; if you like the Stabi S, you'll like the Stabi S-12.

The Kuzma Stogi S-12 is the true star of the show, not least because this is one of two S-12 variants; the other – expected soon – places the arm on an outrigger of the Kuzma VTA base, allowing both on-the-fly VTA adjustment and fitting to a deck designed for 9" arms. Ignore that for the moment, however. The move from 9" to 12" necessitated a longer chassis element to compensate for the longer arm tube and there were a few adjustments and improvements to the basic design along the way. The arm retains the same medium mass and damping schema as the standard Stogi S, which makes it a fine choice with good moving coil designs. The Benz SLR tested last issue was – I felt – a cartridge made for the SME. Then I heard it on the Stogi S-12 and realised what wonders it was still giving up (so much so, I think the cartridge is worth a thorough re-visit). The arm doesn't sit as comfortably with high compliance, low mass moving magnets or moving irons though; the damping at the base tends to make the cantilever of such designs a touch too active when riding warps in records.

If your unipivot kung fu began and ended with the Naim Aro, the concept of damping may seem alien, but it works. It means the arm doesn't feel twitchy when cueing up a record. It also seems to give the arm a more clearly defined and authoritative bass and a more extended top end. If the deck is designed to get out of the way so the arm can extract the maximum information off the groove, this arm steps up to the task perfectly. What this offers is a sense of even-handedness that is made all the more real and valid by the reduction of tracing distortion a 12" design brings. What this means in musical terms is simply more gets through and does so with greater clarity and neutrality. I find the Pixies Surfer Rosa on MoFi to be a real torture album for most decks, because adding distortion to an already distorted sound can make for a very grating sound. Here, it manages to retain all the energy and excitement of this seminal post-punk band, but also does so with greater precision.

The criticism that can most readily be leveled at the current deck as it stands concerns the baseboard and cover. The motor's best position is next to the middle of the T of the T-bar, and that simply can't be done with the current base. A bigger base (whether Kuzma-produced





▶ or custom-made) would be a lot better, as would a new larger cover. I suspect both are in the pipeline. There is also the price-creep that comes when adding those extra arm inches. The standard Kuzma Stabi S/Stogi S combination is roughly the price of a Michell Gyrodec, while the S-12 combo costs as much as an Orbe. It is still competitive (in fact, the deck+arm costs slightly less than a 12" SME V arm on its own), but it does put the Kuzma combination up against stiff competition. Fortunately for the Kuzma combo, it still wins.

Finally, there are a couple of potential upgrades that will raise the sonics still further. The first is a Heavy Platter kit, a £450 extension that sits between existing inner and main platter to add mass. There's also the SD (or SD-12 add-on, which is a relatively straightforward standalone outrigger that can be used to add a second arm to the Stabi without tears. Fortunately, all of these upgrades can be made post-purchase, and the only mechanical actions that need to be performed to the deck are basically lifting up parts of it.

There is also an upgrade that's popular outside of the UK, which adds an electronic speed control box and brings superior speed stability and the chance to switch to 45rpm without using the supplied pulley adaptor. As this brings the cost of the complete package up to almost £4,000, the distributor thinks this is an upgrade too far.

There is a temptation to think of the Stogi S-12/Stabi S-12 combo as the stretch limo of the Kuzma world. But it's more than that; the typical stretch takes a perfectly reasonable car and messes up its suspension geometry, fills it with an uncomfortable and garish interior that always faintly smells of spilled Remy Martin, cheap perfume and Lambrini sick. In short, it's tacky. This just adds to the Stabi S/Stogi S, and takes nothing away, apart from tracing distortion. It's no longer cheap, but still represents one of the cheapest ways to get into the joys of 12" arms today. If you really love your vinyl, this is the next step forward. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Kuzma Stabi S-12/Stogi S-12 turntable/ arm combination

Motor type: Synchronous AC motor

Main assembly: Brass T-Bar chassis, oversize aluminium platter

Suspension system: Unuspended turntable

Arm type: 12" Damped unipivot tonearm

Complete price: £2,750 (excl. Cartridge)

Manufactured by: Kuzma

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