

Kuzma SAFIR 9 tonearm

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There are some audio brands that are the epitome of an 'overnight success'; they hit the audio world seemingly from out of nowhere with a product that takes everyone by surprise. And usually, that's it; they vanish almost as fast as they appeared. Kuzma is not that kind of company. Instead, Kuzma's success is the result of years honing and perfecting extremely good products. The SAFIR 9 is the ultimate result of this on-going quest for perfection, building as it does on the strengths of existing Kuzma designs and taking them to the ultimate in performance.

Let's back-track a little: 40 or so years ago, Franc Kuzma quit his regular job and, as the hardest of hardcore audio and music enthusiasts, delivered his very first design

dedicated to playback of the best sounding analogue sound carrier we call 'LP'. It was a belt-driven turntable called 'Stabi'; its plinth and dust cover frame were made out of solid oak, suspended subchassis out of multilayered MDF, had a heavy aluminium platter/subplatter assembly, traditional bearing and the (then) infamous Philips/Impex AC motor as a main driver. Main trademarks of the design were stability (hence Stabi), freedom of resonance, overall structural and mechanical rigidity and good isolation and decoupling from airborne and other feedback and interference.

Back to today!

Guess what? In 2022, Kuzma has long been one of the very leading global producers of turntables, tonearms and >>





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» anything and everything else related to the LP analogue playback, his turntables still carry the name Stabi and – very same design goals and principles can be attributed to every single one of his creations, albeit cooked to a considerably higher degree of perfection with so much experience, knowledge and pragmatic wisdom accrued ever since!

Kuzma neither designs nor releases new products for the sake of historical alignment or regularity. Ever. But, when he does release a product, the imposed (and achieved) goal shifts the limitations of the hitherto possible into another dimension. Time and again this was verified and confirmed with vast majority of Kuzma products. But, what we have here and now is all that and... a hell of a lot more.

Even before considering and dwelling on the particulars of the design, construction and execution, before a single word about sonic performance – before anything – the new Kuzma SAFIR 9 tonearm, the main and only topic of this story, has, without a shade of doubt, shifted the known boundaries and thinking about tonearms in general. Why? One single word answer to the question in its entirety –

Sapphire. A precious stone with unsurpassed general resilience and overall degree of rigidity; one that can be grown artificially into virtually any shape.

Five years

It took more than five years of laborious research and development to bring analogue LP playback to reach this level. Numerous pre-production prototypes were frequenting Kuzma's own reference audio system for over three years with constant refinements and improvements in every imaginable aspect of a tonearm design. A very special, custom made, tapered arm tube out of sapphire has been designed and put into reality. Why sapphire? We all know it is not the lightest material in the world, so what could be so beneficial to outweigh some theoretical hindrances? Sapphire's natural properties (read: without having to make it behave as required) are an almost ideal inertia and insensitivity to a very high percentage of unwanted resonance mode and vibrations which, when observed through the broad frequency response and





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» natural harmonic structure of the music, end up with a lot of distortion and other artifacts. In short: ingredients which noticeably reduce the ability of a tonearm to assist a given phono cartridge to extract the nth degree of musical information stored in grooves of a record; extracted correctly and without loss of information.

Once the sapphire arm tube has been completed at both ends it is fitted into a substantial ensemble of solid aluminium and brass blocks, adding even more to the rigidity of the overall structure and mechanically very quiet support to the arm and the implemented bearings.

Ah, yes, – bearings! As with all other Kuzma tonearms, the SAFIR 9 comes with the latest and even further improved proprietary multi-point bearing solution. A complete in-house design, they consist of four unbelievably sharp spikes machined to absolute perfection and resting in, equally so accurately made cups which are – surprise, surprise! – made out of sapphire! Friction-free lateral and vertical movement guaranteed.

Rounding off the conceptual part of the SAFIR 9 design, let us mention a twin section brass counterweight with lock mechanism which accurately and efficiently balances the tonearm and any of the very best phono cartridges to a desired vertical tracking force.

Needless to say, VTA (vertical tracking angle) is fully adjustable with the help of a special tool provided with the arm. Azimuth is also very easy to adjust for the optimal channel balance and stereo separation with clear markings on the arm tube and main assembly for repetitive settings.

In it's standard specification, SAFIR 9 is supplied with a high-quality, 1.5m long, single piece (from headshell cartridge pins to the interface with the phono input) cable solution. The heart of this arrangement is a high-quality silver internal wire. As with all other Kuzma tonearms, alternative internal wiring and interfaces are available as options.

In spite of its relatively high mass of 1250gms, Kuzma's SAFIR 9 is conveniently compatible with a number of today's very best decks; including quite a few from the company's own range of turntables. Its somewhat higher than average effective mass is of no (negative) consequence for a total synergy with any of the most capable moving-coil cartridges of today and even yesteryear. If anything, a correctly implemented effective mass of a tonearm further improves working conditions and environment for a good cartridge.

Only the best

For this review, the Kuzma SAFIR 9 tonearm has been installed to the Kuzma Stabi XL AIR turntable and the CAR60, flagship of the Kuzma MC cartridge range has been used. Fitting, installation and setup has been simple and straightforward. Not only does the SAFIR 9 retain the standard Kuzma arm base fitment, but arm tower for the XL AIR allows vertical adjustment itself which, in this instance, further assisted a good range for VTA adjustments.

I don't want to make it seem like the Kuzma SAFIR 9 only works in the context of Kuzma turntables and cartridges, however. Nevertheless, we have seen something of a trend in turntable design of late. In the time when it was just 'vinyl' and not a 'vinyl revival', people regularly used to select a turntable from one brand, and arm from another and a cartridge from a third. While the choice of cartridge is still very open, it seems many people today opt for using the same brand for deck and arm.

Resetting the levels

The strange part of the SAFIR 9's performance is that it doesn't sound like you'd expect it to in any way. It doesn't pull together all the good points of past masters, it doesn't sound like an improved version of the best tonearm in its class, and it doesn't do an impression of another style of arm (like a unipivot that 'thinks' it's a parallel tracker). Instead, what it does is establish a new benchmark; limiting the impact and ingress of the tonearm like never before.

Part of the reason for the SAFIR 9's success might be because the effective mass of the arm is 60g. Most modern moving coil cartridges have a compliance in line with an arm weight about one-fifth of that figure. The result is outstanding bass performance, although it suggests a degree of rigidity elsewhere; putting this arm on a turntable sitting on a wobbly floor is probably not a good idea!

However, in the right setting it delivers bass like no other tonearm; not 'big' or 'bassy' but exceptionally well-controlled yet tuneful right down to the lowest notes. And from there, the SAFIR 9 reaches up the frequency band with the same precision and musical integrity. This is no small change, and arguably bass is one of the few places where digital audio exceeds the performance of analogue. The SAFIR 9 evens the score; delving into the synth bass of 'The Word Girl' from *Cupid & Psyche 85* by Scritti Politti [Virgin] gives a depth and clarity to those deep, electronic beats »



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» that is usually the stuff of CDs and downloads. Similarly 'Wake Up and Make Love With Me' by Ian Dury and the Blockheads from *New Boots and Panties* [Stiff] perfectly got into the groove laid down by these outstanding pre-punk pub-rock stars. Often with this album, when played on vinyl, you seem to have a choice of 'depth' or 'funkiness'; the SAFIR 9 is rare in that it offers both.

Good bass alone would not make the SAFIR 9 so successful. But the foundation stone of good performance at the low end sets the arm up for outstanding performance the further up the frequency range. Even compared to the best, the SAFIR 9 is unexpectedly good. It has a state of the art sense of musical freedom and midband clarity, all the while delivering a sound with authority and extension. This is important because in every other arm out there, these elements act in some kind of dynamic balance; you trade one off against the others. But not with the SAFIR 9, because you successfully reach all points of the compass at once!

Curiously, this sonic revelation is not something from which you drink deep, at least at first. You find yourself listening to two or three records you know really well, then retiring to whatever Fortress of Solitude you prefer to think about what just went on musically. Then, you return for another session. It's as if you can only educate yourself one or two albums at a time. Naturally, this fades and what's left after the scrutiny sessions is the most wonderful sense of musical order; suddenly they are playing all the right notes and this time in the right order, Mr Preview! And then the orgy of music begins; you want to hear every LP that ever moved you, that ever made you think or tap your feet, because you want to hear what it really sounded like, and in most cases, you'll be impressed. Whether it's a well-worn classic like *Moondance* [Van Morrison, WB], an old audio favourite like *Making Music* [Zakir Hussain, *et al*, ECM] or a long-forgotten back of the pile track like 'Constant Craving' by k.d. lang [*Ingénue*, Sire], it's like listening for the first time, and re-evaluating everything at once.

Taking it slow

That last might explain the need to go slow at first. Listening to tracks you have heard time and again (even ones you heard and stored in the collection) is often easy if the

changes are small, but when they are as profound as the changes brought about by the SAFIR 9, the learning curve is as steep as it is well-worth climbing. In truth, I'm at a bit of a loss to describe these changes, as they are profound and wholesale; it's a bit like record playing just got a whole lot closer to the studio, but without the clichés that implies. Everything is just more 'right' than it has been before. I played mostly jazz and rock because most of my LPs are in those genres, but listening deeper to any kind of music, the same powerful new truth applied. This is resetting what is possible in high-performance vinyl and that's a heady wine!

I'm not sure where to go after hearing the Kuzma SAFIR 9. It sort of destroys all you think you know about turntables and turntable hierarchy. Granted, the high-mass turntable and an immovable object of an equipment stand are mandatory requirements for this tonearm, and those conditions alone will prove a turn-off for many high-enders. But if those conditions are in your vinyl purview, there is nothing that comes close. And given the current view of the turntable world (14" arm beats 9" arm, air bearing beats gimbaled tonearm), the SAFIR 9 is disruptive technology of the highest order. But all of that pales into insignificance when you sit down and just listen. That's when you realise this really is the best arm ever. +

Technical specifications

Type gimbaled tonearm with synthetic sapphire armtube
Effective Length 229mm (9 inch)
Mounting Distance (spindle to centre of rotation) 212mm
Offset Angle 23 degrees
Effective Mass 60 grams
VTA Adjustment Yes
Azimuth Adjustment Yes
Bias Compensation/Adjustment Yes
Internal Wiring Silver Alloy
Overall Mass (Weight) 1250 grams
Price £20,000

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