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WORLD EXCLUSIVE LINN'S NEW SELEKT DSM IS DIGITAL STREAMING REBORN!

Kuzma Stabi R modular turntable system

by Alan Sircom

Kuzma's nomenclature is slightly off. The baby of the Stabi turntable range is the S and the top of the line is the XL, so you might expect that the two in-between would be (in price ascending order) the Stabi M and Stabi L. The Stabi M exists, but it is one step down from the XL and this new model is called the Stabi R. Worse, because it's a modular design, it should have been called the Stabi M and the bigger one the Stabi L. The audio industry is full of joined up thinking, said no-one, ever.

Forget the names, the Stabi R was first seen at Munich 2018. It's a square plinth akin to the transcription turntables used in radio stations up until only a few years ago. And unlike many of the other designs in the Kuzma line-up, features a fully integrated power supply system: the larger Kuzma M features a similar speed control layout – on its front panel – but demands an external power supply to drive it, where the new Stabi R connects to the juice directly by means of an IEC cable.

The platform is inherently modular, with a series of armboards (called 'arm wings' by Kuzma) designed to slot into grooves in the side plates of the Kuzma R. It can use just the one arm on an arm wing, or two with a second arm wing, or – with a combination of arm balconies, and outrigger armboards attached to Allen bolts on the corners of the deck, up to six different arms of anything between 9" and 12". Naturally there are also a wealth of alternative plates, wings, balconies, and the like with Linn, Rega, and SME arm bases alongside the Kuzma, as well as a series of plinths for turning the Kuzma R into a scaled-down Kuzma M, and even the option to paint-match your turntable to the canary yellow of your Lambo, should the desire take you.

We went for the more basic option; just a basic silver plinth, with a single matching silver arm wing made for a 9" Kuzma. We brought the recent 4Point 9 tonearm (reviewed in issue 155 and handed the award for Tonearm of the Year in 2017) taken off a dual arm Kuzma SD and fitted it with a Kuzma CAR 40, as I suspect this will be the starting place for many prospective Kuzma R owners.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. The Kuzma Stabi R is a very compact turntable made from a solid block of aluminium with an internal electronic power supply fed direct from the wall. Drive is provided through a DC motor and a proprietary, non flexible drive belt.

The main platter is a constrained sandwich design consisting of three layers (aluminium – acrylic - aluminium) in order to minimise vibration and maximise the damping effect of the platter itself and that of the LP. The inverted ruby ball bearing minimises friction and noise within the thrust bearing and is supported on a special low noise compound material.

The design may be modular, but it owes a lot to designs like the Kuzma M and Reference models. And like all Kuzma models, it's simplicity itself to build. Simply lift the deck out of its box, lay it on a flat and level surface (one that is capable of holding its 36kg mass). The four feet are adjustable to fine tune level (place a spirit level on the platter to check when installed). Give the bearing housing a glug of oil, and then lift the large, volcano-shaped inner platter into place, apply the belt, place the outer platter on the inner platter, then mount the arm wing to the right hand side, using the appropriate holes on the side to lock it in place. If this sounds like a complex process, you haven't tried to install a truly high-end turntable!

One trick to note in installing the Kuzma R is that the turntable platter itself is heavy and when installed runs very low relative to the top plate of the plinth. This means when installing the main platter, hold the relatively heavy design with palms to the sides as you seat it, rather than holding the platter in a regular grip. When it comes to installing your own Kuzma R platter, gripping it will result in skinned knuckles.

Kuzma is increasingly switching from AC to DC motors in its higher-end devices. The R is the cheapest model to date to include a DC motor. This requires one of the tautest belts around, in part in order to preserve speed stability (a squidgy belt will mean the DC motor may hunt for the right frequency). The blue belt is almost indestructible in daily use, so placing it beneath the platter isn't likely to cause a problem any time soon. The overall build is solid, as the turntable is built from a solid billet of aluminium.



There's so much Kuzma DNA in here, it's difficult to sort out precisely what comes from where, but I think a lot of the Kuzma R springs from the success of the Kuzma M. This huge integrated design has its disadvantages – it's larger than many equipment supports, it's so heavy that it's only sold in black because light cannot escape from its clutches, and it is too expensive for many audiophiles. With its more pared back aesthetic and ethos, the Kuzma R offers much of what the M also offers, but in a more manageable and attainable package.

So, perhaps it might come as no great shock to find the Kuzma M and R share many common tonal balances. They are not completely tonally identical, however. What is especially good about the R is it's not simply a stripped-back sounding M, and in many ways might just be a more rounded turntable than its bigger brother, in a manner similar to the way the 4Point 9 is a more rounded, more forgiving design than its bigger brothers. It doesn't mean the cheaper deck is 'better' than the more expensive one, just more forgiving.

Of course, the big thing missing from the Kuzma Stabi M is the elastomer suspension system. That clever system that helps control stray resonance, and yet isn't a full suspension system like you might find in a Linn or old Pink Triangle. In addition, the Stabi R does feature plastic damping sleeves between the main chassis and each of the feet, and this acts to decouple the turntable from its environment. Nevertheless, the lack of full damped suspension system does make for a less differentiated bass and upper midrange; where the Stabi R can portray a deep bass note, the Stabi M better defines the shape of that bass note. There's almost no difference in terms of bass depth, but a wealth of difference between the way that bass is delivered to the listener.

Staying in an all Kuzma context, the tonal balance and the extended treble of both decks are very similar, but I think some of the slight forwardness in the upper mids and low treble has gone away to no small extent. OK so in terms of absolute detail resolution, the Stabi R is inferior to the Stabi M. ►

“What the Stabi R shares with its bigger brother is that sense of absolute confidence in its own performance.”

- ▶ Not by much, and that inferior performance might make the Stabi R the better option, because it makes the sound a little more inviting than the more ‘reference’ sound of the M.

How this plays out is especially noticeable in choral pieces. Fauré’s Requiem [EMI] or Haydn’s Nelson Mass [Vox Turnabout] for example sound as if you can hear every individual voice within the choir on the Stabi M (this is not the case, but it feels like the voices are distinct), and there is almost a tension as you wait for the one bum note that you know some baritone sang. The Stabi R is not quite so unflinching in its midrange performance and that sense of tension is reduced.

That aside, the Stabi R is not too dissimilar from the Stabi M in performance. OK, so it doesn’t have the absolute pitch stability and the kind of motor that can go from zero to 45rpm in a single turn of the platter, but it’s not far off. The pitch stability is not an audible aspect of the performance, but more about just how much torque goes into the Stabi M, and how the Stabi R is not in the same league, even though it gets very close.

Most importantly, what it shares with its bigger brother is that sense of absolute confidence in its own performance. There’s a sense of order to the sound that only seems to come with a high-mass platter being driven by a DC motor with a lot of reserve in the tank. It toes the right balance between expressive and exuberant, and authoritative and dour. The control of the sound isn’t so overpowering as to make the turntable seem oppressive, and yet isn’t so free as to make it wayward. It’s a clever balance shared to a lesser or greater extent with all Kuzma decks, and in the Stabi R, it’s most definitely ‘greater’.

This is best expressed in its handling of dynamic range, which is little short of superb. Not only in the big expressive swings of a Mahler symphony, but in those quiet microdynamic interplays between musicians and the band that audiophiles love so much. I went badly audiophile retro here for a brief interlude, playing those two Propirus recordings every single hi-fi buff from the late 1970s onwards used to buy: *Cantate Domino* and *Porn at the Jazz Shop*. Sorry, *Jazz at the Pawn Shop*. They were popular for a reason, but – in the latter case especially – the reason wasn’t a musical one. It’s not enough that you realise you are listening more for the drinks clattering

in the background than you are to the ‘music’, it’s that you actually come to enjoy that musically bankrupt piece. I don’t think I could ever bring myself to actually ‘like’ *Jazz at the Pawn Shop*, but the Stabi R gave me new-found respect for the recording process. Given this was one of the remnants from my hi-fi store days, seemingly know it backwards because I must have played it 1,000 times a year for several years, that the Stabi R is delving deeper into the musical information on the disc, and whatever you might think of that recording, the Stabi R’s influence there is significant. That it meant me dusting off a record I haven’t played in almost 30 years shows just how competent the Stabi R really is.

Beyond the Kuzma comparison, the Stabi R does make an excellent turntable package in and of itself. It’s combination of tonal evenness, with the added bonus of a hugely foot-tapping sound and excellent imaging properties make this a deck for the ages. OK, if you want the etched, forward sound that is taking all the credit today, know that the Stabi R comes from a very different place, one that goes for naturalness of sound, and follows the ethos laid down by the late Harry Pearson decades before Kuzma made its first turntable. You feel drawn to well-recorded, unamplified sounds in a natural acoustic, hence the reaching for those ancient Propirus recordings. The Stabi R has the power to shock, as long as your records are up to the task.

The turntable part of the Kuzma Stabi R is a complete package in and of itself, with no need for upgrades. Kuzma does make a record clamp, but even this is not stressed as a ‘must have’ upgrade. Many will prefer that to the seemingly endless array of upgradable subchassis, top-plates, power supplies, feet, and all the add-on options to help ‘sell up’ the basic turntable package produced by some rival brands. The modularity is in the arm wings, outriggers, balconies, and plinth options. Essentially, once you have your requisite number of arms (and let’s be honest, for most people that’s probably some number that is ever so slightly more than 0.9 and ever so slightly less than 2.1 arms), you are basically done.

The point of the Kuzma Stabi R is to make an extremely flexible transcription turntable package, capable of supporting as many tonearms as any enthusiast might ever want, even though I suspect few will venture much past one arm, fewer still will go much beyond two arms, and few (if any) will go ▶



▶ with three arms or more. I also think few will take up the plinth option – although wrapping a transcription deck in a tree was a popular choice back in the early 1970s, it was in part because a Garrard or Thorens of the time didn't have much more than a handful of standoffs to hold it in place, and a nice box made of teak would fit the bill well. Those times are gone however, and the Stabi R in a dedicated plinth does cut an imposing figure on the equipment stand.

For me, I'm not too bothered by the myriad tonearm options, or the additional plinths and so on. Despite the job, I am more a 'fit and forget' guy when it comes to turntables, and the Kuzma Stabi R does that perfectly if you want. As a reviewing platform, the ability to swap a tonearm plate at will to replace an arm or fit a cartridge without tampering with the turntable should be a vital part of any reviewer's arsenal, and – if the geometry of both arms is set in advance, you could swap arms in less than a minute. From an enlightened self-interest position, that makes for better tonearm and cartridge reviews. Aside from box-swappers who have a penchant for tonearms, that's a very narrow outlook.

That's the real joy of the Stabi R; it's a surprisingly 'Everyman' turntable. It appeals as much to someone just wanting the best turntable as it does to the music collector who must have entirely different cartridges for different recordings, and all points in between. While I don't think this is the rebirth of the transcription turntable, not least because few radio stations are playing records that much today, the Kuzma Stabi R honours the spirit of those transcription turntables, by building a turntable that will just keep running and running, and sounding damn good in the process. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Modular turntable system

Suspension system: none

Drive: DC motor

Speeds: 33, 45, (fine speed adjustment)

Power supply: internal, electronic

Platter material: aluminium and acrylic

Platter mass: 8kg

Bearing type: inverted (ruby ball)

Shaft diameter: 16mm

Chassis material: aluminium

Armboards: up to three

Options: various pre-cut arm boards, RAL finishes, second tonearm wing, small tonearm holder, arm board VTA tower, wooden frame

Finishes: black or silver

Dimensions (WxDxH, with armboard): 48 × 38 × 15cm

Weight: 36 kg

Price: From £7,500 (drive chassis with one arm wing)

Manufactured by: Kuzma

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