

Kuzma Stabi M turntable

By Alan Sircom

Designing one turntable is comparatively easy. Designing a range is much, much harder. You need to avoid making them too similar, but also making sure they aren't too dissimilar. You cannot get away with 'the same, just bigger' anymore, but reinventing the wheel (or, in this case, the platter) can lead to wild differences between products. Franc Kuzma, designer of the turntable brand that bears his name, clearly understands... and has overcome these issues perfectly in the new Kuzma Stabi M.

First, let's set it in context; the M stands between the Stabi Reference and Stabi XL2 in price, but closer to the XL2 in performance. It's a very traditional looking deck (it has a large outer plinth and even a lid), just one that's larger and heavier than most. It's currently designed to only take Kuzma arms (a range of armboards is imminent) and is an ideal match for 12" arms and the company's 4Point arm (as used in the review sample). And, for the appreciable future, the deck's colour scheme comes in a choice of black, or black.

The combination of bigness and blackness does make this something of a statement piece. In fairness, it's not that much bigger than a SME Model 20/12, but the addition of a heavy bent smoked plastic lid gives it substance. It's considerably more aesthetically pleasing than early samples (which were often described as 'agricultural', as in 'looks like a box of tractor parts', or at

best like a really big record cleaning machine), but it is still big and black and heavy. The size and weight call for a substantial equipment support, too; putting a 60kg turntable on a flimsy wall-shelf isn't an option, and its half-metre depth and 610mm width mean it could overhang some smaller equipment tables, which looks odd.

The mass is a part of the Stabi M's secret weapon. 12kg of its 60kg total weight is taken up by the platter alone (two slabs of 30mm thick aluminium, separated by an acrylic damping plate to be precise), and a lot more goes into the massive chassis, which is all made from solid aluminium (the



reason why the whole plinth is finished in black rather than a polished wood, is that too is made from aluminium, and gives you an indication of just how massive the deck really is). That adds up to a lot of structural rigidity – no matter what that platter does, it isn't going to influence the chassis and you'd need grenades to cause the chassis to influence the platter.

The platter itself features an inverted bearing with a ruby ball. This is housed in the 'subchassis' (more an isolated section of the total mass of the system).

If one part of the M's arsenal is down to mass, the other is torque. Lots and lots of torque. The M uses a hefty DC motor mounted in a brass cup and aluminium plate arrangement, itself all supported in a suspended brass motor housing. While this is not a suspended deck, the main frame and motor system are hung from the top plate via four large elastic dampers. This is

for fine tuning the levelling of the platter and armboard assembly. Everything is bolted together using thick aluminium blocks. The DC motor is so powerful, it can drive that massive platter to full speed in less than two seconds. Only DJ decks spin up faster, and they have platters that weigh as much as a sheet of paper by comparison. That the M's motor can heft a 12kg platter to full speed by itself in two seconds is little short of amazing. As I said... torque.

One of the unique features of the M is its machined blue plastic



belt. This is designed to be near indestructible in daily use, so no changes in speed as the deck compensates for an ever-shifting rubber belt. In other words, less wow or flutter from play in the belt, in fact all the advantages of belt drive with much of the precision of direct drive. In the unlikely event of damaging the belt (say, you used it to drive a supercharger or maybe used it in self-defence against a rampaging polar bear) an SME or Linn standard belt or Kuzma's neoprene belt could be used instead, with appropriate modification.

The turntable itself includes an off-board speed control, but the basic controls are replicated on the front panel of the M itself, and turning the motor on or off can be operated by remote control (not supplied at the time of review). I'm not entirely convinced of the need for a remote, but basic replication of speed and power controls on the deck itself is a great thing if – like most people playing turntables – you've hidden the PSU on a low shelf and your knees make that twig-snapping sound each time you bend.

The whole deck sits on three spiked feet for easy adjustment. Although its sheer weight means nothing about set-up of the Kuzma M is 'easy' (anything 'easy' that involves at least two people puffing and panting usually means you have to at least buy her a few drinks first), but the assembly of the deck is straightforward.

This proved to be one of the easiest reviews I've ever performed. Most of it was done with just two albums. The first – *Sea Change* by Beck showed how adept the deck was with simple music and vocals. The second – *Newport 1958* by Duke Ellington and his Orchestra – highlighted what it could do with a massively dynamic piece of music. Between the two, you could hear the difference in pressings and the 'fist' (in the Morse Code operator sense) of the mastering and recording engineers, even the difference in vinyl formulations. ▶

► Naturally, some of this comes down to the abilities of the Benz cartridge fitted and the performance of the system it was used in. But a good deal of this comes right down to the authority and precision of the turntable.

More than this though, the two words that punch through the whole review are 'master tape'. OK, so on many recent recordings that should be 'Hard Disk', but it just doesn't have the same impact. This presents vinyl with the kind of precision one would normally find when invited to listen to a freshly minted master tape. It was like the pressing plant and all the stages between tape and ear had been swept aside.

That first album (on MoFi) is a dry studio cut, although you can easily listen into the wet parts, such as the reverb tails on the guitar parts and the placement of the synth bass in the mix. It's a fantastic recording, although those seeking 'the absolute sound' ideals of live acoustic instruments in their own space will be slightly disappointed, it always sounds good in an increasingly (and very deliberately) claustrophobic manner. The Kuzma M made light work of this. Vocal rooted centre stage, layers of

instrumentation (it doesn't matter if it's natural spacing or pan pot and delay, the instruments were clearly sitting in their own 3-D spaces) and the precision of the instruments just made the sound more like what you'd expect to hear in a control room than a listening room. And yet, it also had the refinement, sophistication and insight of high-end devices, along with that precision and speed and detail demanded by a recording engineer.

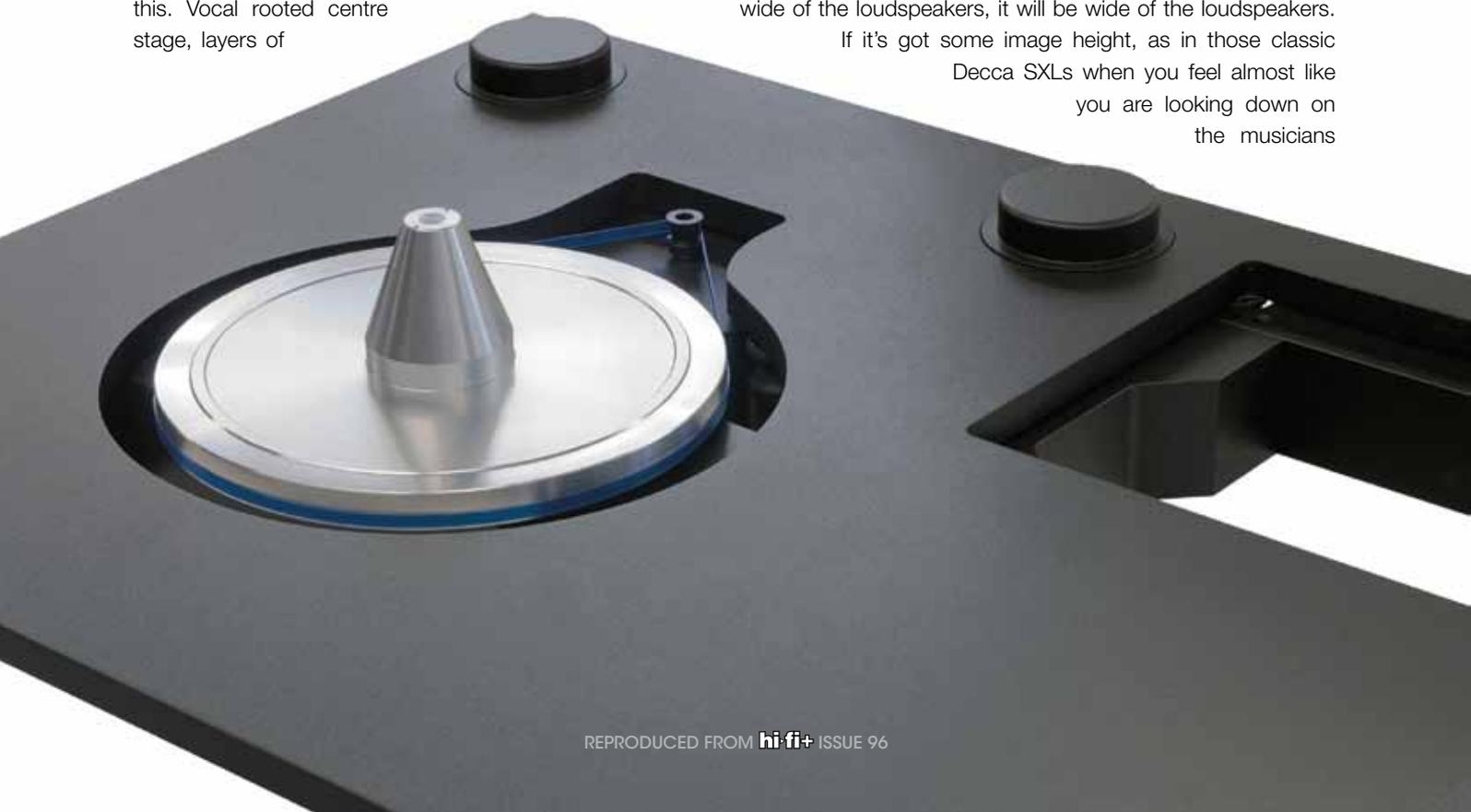
Moving over to the Ellington album, on 'El Gato', the orchestra builds slow and then thanks to a razor sharp fanfare from trumpeter Cat Anderson and the rest of the horn section, you jump out of your seat. Except in most cases you don't; the range of this is curtailed and just sounds smooth. Here, it's as dynamic and exciting as if you were in that Jazz festival 55 years ago. It's powerful, almost shockingly so, loud and exciting.

OK, so listening to two albums is not even the beginning of a review of a component this important, but practically everything that followed only served to extend slightly on those first two cuts. And I don't think that was blind luck; the Kuzma M's abilities are such that you could take almost any two albums you know well, play them one after another and then have such a profound take on the performance of the deck that you'll reach for the credit card seconds later.

Why? Because not only will you hear near enough everything that was put on the vinyl, the recording defines the parameters of sound (which is how it should be). Or rather, all other things being equal, the recording defines the parameters of the sound – if you have a strongly-flavoured cartridge or phono stage or amps or speakers, naturally that will be the sticking point, but the turntable itself is not going to introduce its own flavours into that mix.

This is most easily resolved listening to soundstaging. If what's on the vinyl is deep and narrow, the soundstage will be deep and narrow; if it's wide of the loudspeakers, it will be wide of the loudspeakers.

If it's got some image height, as in those classic Decca SXLs when you feel almost like you are looking down on the musicians





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Speeds: 33, 45, 78

Platter material: aluminium and acrylic

Platter mass: 12 kg

Bearing type: ruby ball - inverted

Shaft diameter: 16 mm

Chassis material: aluminium

Motor: 1 DC (three phase)

Includes: Clamp, Mat, Lid, bearing oil, Allen keys. Optional armboards (design does not allow two arms)

Dimensions (WxDxH): 61x50x29cm

Weight: 60 kg

Price: £12,495

Manufactured by: Kuzma d.o.o.

URL: www.kuzma.si

Distributed by: Audiofreaks

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from the gods, all served up as it comes. It's not simply the soundstage, but that part hits you first. Then comes the detail resolution, the delicate articulation of voice and instrument on k.d. lang's 'Save Me' from here 1992 *Ingénue* LP. And then you begin to listen further into the mix.

An interesting part of this is how it exposes dynamics and microdynamics. It suggests that the whole microdynamics thing is a red herring; when you hear what an unforced dynamic turntable can do, there is no differentiation between macro- and microdynamics, there is just the music. Of course you can hear the squeak of the drum pedal; you can hear it when there's just a bass drum and a bass line being played, and you can hear it when the whole band fires up. Why would anything be otherwise?

The thing about the Kuzma M is it does what only the best products do; you end up describing aspects of its performance not in a 'it does this' or 'it makes this piece of music sound like that', but in terms of what other things fail at doing. The best way of describing this is it's like Franc Kuzma sat down and listened to a cross-section of the best turntables (including a couple of his own designs) and mixed together all of the good bits and ironed out all of the negative parts. And, the rivals aren't exactly stocked full of negatives. Put it this way, a lot of people listen to something like a top spec Linn or an SME and love it. A few will say, "it's not for me, because..." and identify a performance characteristic that they don't like. Usually, when not coloured by something almost ideological, the thing not liked is surprisingly consistent, and is often the same performance aspect liked by those who bought the deck; the Linn's simplicity of delivery and upper bass richness can also be viewed as over-simplifying the music and glossing over deep bass information, the SME's even-handed presentation (in the hands of those who love it) can be viewed as boring (by those who don't). The Kuzma Stabi M is that rare thing, a turntable that doesn't oversimplify or overstate the music, that doesn't emphasise one aspect of performance at

the expense of others and that simply gets on with the job of resolving music beautifully. Arguably, more beautifully even than the Kuzma XL2 that stands atop it in price.

Turntables are all about the engineering. Although there are exceptions, generally the better the engineering, the better the turntable; and the better the sound as a result. And this is engineering with a capital 'E'; you could drive a tank over the Stabi M. But, although the suspicion would be this creates an over-engineered design, in fact it creates a turntable that makes many designs sound under-powered and under engineered.

So you are going to need a world-class system to fully realise the potential of the Stabi M (just finding an arm and cartridge suitably resolving to not hold the Stabi M back is likely to set you back several thousand pounds, and any speaker system less than full-range will miss much of the M's joys), but the end result is like getting the keys to every studio control room in history. Very highly recommended. +