Meet Your Maker – Kuzma

By Alan Sircom

Last year, we spoke to Franc Kuzma, at his factory in Slovenia, about the way he designs and builds turntables. Unlike most hi-tech brands with computer aided design and product development, he uses those tried and trusted methods of pencil, paper and a good set of ears.

Alan Sircom: Why do you still use a drawing board?

Franc Kuzma: I'd like to say analogue is better, but the truth is I never learned how to use a CAD/CAM program! I spoke to the guy who sells these programs and he told me it takes about three to five years to learn, and there's no way I can take the time out to master this. It would be nice to have someone trained who could use this… one day!

It does have its advantages though. The basic principle is we do the drawing and then do the prototype, because often the idea is one thing, but the end result has no point. Some rely too much on the computer to do the work.

AS: How long does the design process take?

FK: I have a feeling each time it takes longer and longer! For example, the AirLine took about two and half years to develop, the 4Point took a little longer and now the Stabi M is looking like it will take three years from start to finish.

Because we are a very small company and don't have separate R&D, any time you make a prototype, you need to steal time from production and that slows the process down.

This too has an advantage. It allows the ideas to mature, to rest a bit in the design process, and allows us to be one solution ahead. At least, that's my excuse!

AS: How long do the products take to build?

FK: It depends, but let's take the 4Point tonearm, which is one of our most complex products and has about 130 pieces in total that we need to make, plus all the screws and stuff we buy in. Assembly time, when all those parts are finished and painted is very quick – we can make 30 tonearms in about two weeks – but the complete process of manufacture takes about 12-15 months!

AS: How much of your material is locally sourced?

FK: Most of it. We buy in some specialist components, such as wires and lift-lower arms, from the Far East, but we don't generally buy off the shelf. We also buy bearings from the best manufacturer, who happens to be in the UK, but we still need to check every one. It's very expensive. And naturally, we don't make our own motors or air compressors. Everything else we make or machine in house.

AS: A turntable is arguably only as good as its bearing. How are yours made?

FK: Normally the bearing shaft is cut and hardened and ground to the precise size. After that we do what is called lapping, and then take the extra step of polishing.
We choose materials that are not metal-to-metal (to minimise vibration), so we use a special textile. This is hard to shape but will run forever, even without oil – but we still use oil anyway. We've been using this material for 30 years and the bearings still run on and on… perhaps forever!

AS: What turntable are you most proud of?

FK: Well, the first turntable we are not making any more, so there's some nostalgia there. But, I'm hoping the Stabi M will be the one I'm most proud of, because it's the culmination of all the knowledge of my time in turntables, including some things I knew but never put into turntables before.

AS: What would you have done differently?

FK: I would have liked to introduce the Stabi S ten years earlier. It's such a simple design and gives good performance. So why didn't I think about making a 'non-turntable turntable' before?

However, whenever looking back, you always forget about things like family commitments, so you never play it safe in hindsight, and we must have done something right, because we've been in business for more than 30 years!

AS: What do you think about the 'vinyl revival'?

FK: In some ways, it's wrong because it's becoming a fashion statement. However, if people are buying vinyl because they are passionate about their music, it's very good because it means people are thinking about better sound. +