

# Kuzma CAR-50 moving-coil cartridge, 4POINT tonearm and Stabi M turntable

by Roy Gregory

**T**here was a time when radio stations actually played records. Yep – the flat(ish) black things with musical squiggles pressed into their surfaces. To do that, they needed record players: not just any record players, but record players that could play discs of any type, day in, day out, with all the robust practicality that a studio environment demands. And by “any type” I really do mean ANY type. When 78s were the order of the day, running times were so long that radio stations used special 16” discs, running at 33 (or sometimes 16) RPM to get whole musical pieces onto a single disc. These “transcription discs” were essential to the process and so the Transcription Turntable was born. Companies like Garrard, Thorens, and Technics all built their reputations on building such decks, motor units that would be built into a console and often used with a pair of separate arms of different types or lengths as the programme material required. Indeed, they were so successful that pretty soon, the term Transcription Turntable was being applied to any deck with pretensions to high-fidelity performance. Even the LP12, a deck that flew firmly in the face of all things traditional, adopted the moniker. Such was the power of studio association...

The days of the standalone motor unit are long gone (although the appearance of potted direct-drive systems means that they



may be about to re-emerge) and nobody is suggesting that you build Kuzma's latest turntable into your sideboard, but even so, there's an unmistakable air of the studio about the Stabi M. It comes from the unbelievable solidity of its construction, its size, its sheer practicality and its absolute operational and physical stability. It also comes from its lack of visual embellishment and no- ▶

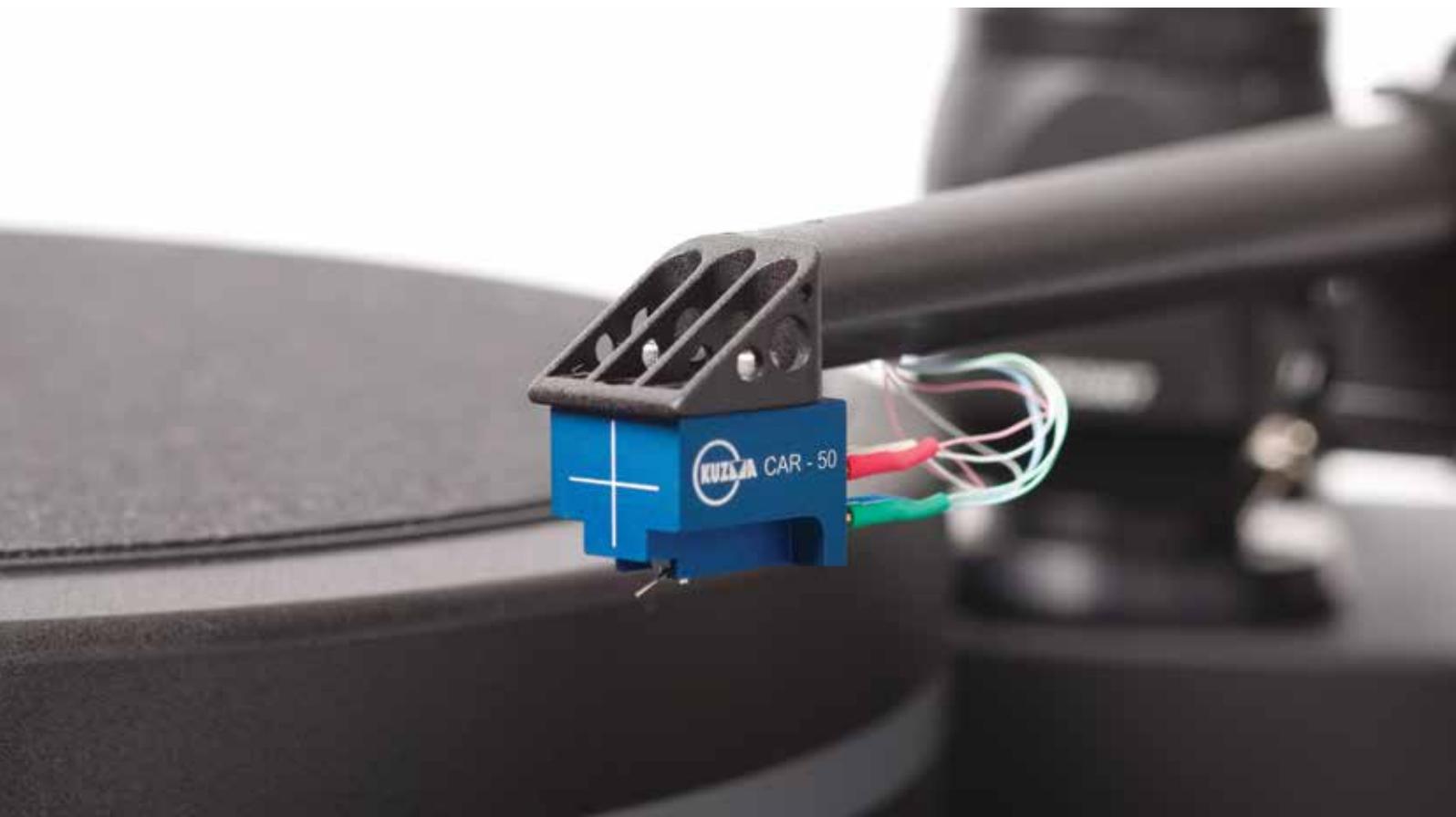
► nonsense appearance. At a time when the number of individual elements, materials, and glitzy surface finishes involved seem to be directly proportional to a turntable's price, the Stabi M's look is all business. Externally it's a case of, "move along, nothing to see here", with what little there is hidden below the smoked lid. The lid? What self-respecting high-end 'table has a lid? This one – a fact which underlines just how different this 'table really is.

But the Stabi M story – indeed, the Kuzma story as a whole – is inseparable from the development of the company's tonearms. While the original Kuzma Stogi was a 9" arm, very much in the mold of its contemporaries, it was also quite a bit heavier. That led to compatibility issues with some decks, but not with the Kuzma Stabi, a suspended turntable whose sheer stability meant it had no problems accommodating heavy arms. Nearly 30 years later, the emergence of the remarkable Kuzma 4POINT tonearm has played its own part in the final shape of the Stabi M. What makes the 4POINT so special? It's that unusual combination of evolution and revolution that generates a step-change in performance. Its proven tapered armtube (with what is surely the best azimuth adjustment EVER) originated with the Stogi Reference. Its headshell and beautifully engineered VTA tower have evolved from the Air Line. Its 280mm effective length has been arrived at after experience with traditional 9", 12", and linear tracking designs. But what binds all those different elements into a single whole that's considerably greater than the sum of the parts is the unique 4POINT bearing design, a hybrid configuration that combines a horizontally stabilized single-point bearing for lateral motion with a pair of point-contact "rockers" allowing vertical movement. It might be hard to visualize, but the end result is an almost unprecedented combination of stability and freedom of movement, a performance that is utterly consistent, unaffected

by environmental conditions and impervious to all but the most brutal handling. Combine that with the 4POINT's massive physical rigidity and the ability to adjust and optimize every parameter of cartridge alignment and set up (including independent horizontal and vertical damping) and you have an arm that is capable of not just extracting every last ounce of performance from a cartridge, but exploiting that performance to the full.

Even reviewers (who generally can't face the same way when asked to) agreed that the 4POINT was one of, if not the finest pivoted arm ever made. The problem is that 'finest' isn't the same as 'easiest'. It may have been a model of logical simplicity when it came to set up and use, but if the original 870g Stogi arm was considered heavy, the 2050g 4POINT elevates that issue to a whole new level. The latest Kuzma arm delivers a sense of musical purpose, presence, and dynamic authority that sets new standards – but it has a lot to do with the four pounds plus of aluminium alloy used in its construction. Throw in the massive off-set mounting that goes with the VTA tower and 11" effective ►





► length and you've got an arm that's bigger, heavier, and more demanding of space than a lot of decks are comfortable with. Of course, if your turntable is open-plan, skeletal and rigid (like Kuzma's own flagship Stabi XL) that's not a problem. But Kuzma already had a more affordable and conventional design on the drawing board. Intended to fill the gap in the range between the spring-suspended Ref 2 and the solid, high-mass Stabi XL2, the new Stabi M aimed to combine the best of both worlds, applying the benefits of an ultra quiet, high-torque DC motor drive to a genuinely high-mass, suspended design.

Using small, AC synchronous motors, even in pairs or quartets, with really high-mass platters, the low torque generated leads to slow start up and the risk of increased noise due to any asynchronicity in the drive system. The more motors, the greater the risk. Instead, Kuzma developed an ultra-quiet DC drive with enough torque to spin up and control even a really heavy platter. The end result forms the heart of the Stabi M, built into one of the heaviest

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integrated plinth systems I've ever encountered. Of course, mass alone isn't necessarily the answer, or even a good thing. You have to use it intelligently and for all its imposing bulk, the Stabi M is nothing if not clever.

Hang up a bar of metal and hit it; it rings – long and loud. Now bolt another piece of metal to the first one and hit it again. You'll hear little more than a dull 'thunk'. Look at the structure of the Stabi M and you find not just high mass, but multiple elements, generally bars or plates of solid aluminium, securely bolted together. Together they create a massive chassis structure that contributes over 45kg to the turntable's substantial weight, but by using multiple pieces, each of differing dimensions, that structure is also dispersive and inherently self-damping. The external frame is constructed from solid plate, and sits on three large diameter, incredibly easy to use leveling feet. It also supports the top-plate, which sits on four compliantly mounted brass ►



▶ adjusters accessible from above for fine-tuning the level of the platter and tonearm. The sub-chassis is constructed from massive blocks of aluminium, bolted together to create a rigid frame that carries the main bearing, and is further stiffened and damped by attaching the solid, 50mm thick aluminium armboard. The whole assembly hangs from the top-plate on a series of elastomeric isolators, providing immunity from external vibration and yet considerable lateral stability. You really wouldn't realize this deck is suspended unless you compare the subtle vertical give in the top-plate to the rock-like solidity of the surround.

That physical stability is key to the drive system, a belt drive that compares favorably with the latest slew of direct drives when it comes to speed stability. The DC motor is encapsulated in a double wall, brass housing, securely mounted to a heavy aluminium plate that is in turn suspended and isolated from the turntable top-plate by four more elastomer pucks. The massive main-bearing is the proven, inverted 16mm shaft, tipped with a ruby ball used in the Ref 2. The aluminum sub-platter is belt driven and supports a 70mm thick, oversized main platter, machined from a laminated aluminium and acrylic sandwich. The platter itself weighs a substantial 12kg and is topped with Kuzma's proprietary bonded interface material, while the spindle is threaded to take a screw-down clamp. But what makes this drive system exceptional is not just its overall speed stability – it's the ability to spin that immensely heavy platter from stationary up to 33 RPM in two seconds – or around one revolution! Both things are a function of the close-coupled drive, a product of the stiff, flat, plastic drive belt and the lack of lateral compliance in the suspension. Of course, if you mate the drive and platter that intimately, you'd better have a decent power supply. The Stabi M's is suitably large, sophisticated

and versatile. It offers simple and incredibly precise, push-button, fine-tuning of 33 and 45 as well as 78 too. It also offers remote control start and stop. Yes, I was non-plussed too – until it was pointed out that the rapid start up allows users to drop the stylus in a stationary lead-in groove, resume their listening seat at a suitably leisurely pace and then hit the start button – with the same relaxed option at the end of the side.

The large footprint of the Stabi M (10cm greater in both directions than the Ref 2) allows it to accommodate pretty much any arm known to man – and to do it within the confines of the plinth and beneath the protection of the cleverly designed, non-resonant lid. The massive suspended weight and stable suspension means that even an arm as heavy as the 4POINT is accommodated with ease, while the massive, heavily damped chassis offers a perfect mechanical termination for the incredibly rigid structure of that arm. The integrated, easily leveled plinth system is an absolute boon, while the effective and fuss-free suspension makes this a serious plug ▶

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► and play proposition, almost impervious to its supporting surface. Add a Kuzma cartridge, in this case the flagship, sapphire cantilevered CAR-50 (bigger brother of the CAR-20 reviewed in Issue 110) and you’ve got a one-stop solution for state-of-the art record replay. Kuzma will even mount and pre-align that cartridge for you, if you are buying a complete player. Given construction that is in all likelihood, quite literally bomb-proof, along with the confidence inspiring consistency and reliability that goes with it, it’s not hard to understand why this is a deck that would be perfectly at home in a professional/studio environment. It’s an impression that isn’t just underlined but actively reinforced by its sonic and musical performance.

If there’s one word that sums up the sound of this complete Kuzma record replay system, then it’s ‘confident’. The kind of confidence that you see exuded by champion athletes: the confidence that comes with that special combination of balance and power that allows them to meet and beat any challenge, to control any situation. The Stabi M, 4POINT and CAR-50 are all, individually amongst the heaviest products in their class, yet their combined sound is anything but heavy or leaden. Full of pace and energy, it’s

light on its feet and explosively dynamic, capable of breathtaking power and weight, but also astonishing finesse and subtlety. Piano will always represent the sternest test for any record player, with its long decay stressing speed stability, its range of weight and attack a stern test of dynamic range and resolution while its harmonic complexity demands genuine neutrality: that and the fact that most of us have sat at a piano and even if we can’t play, we know what happens (and what it sounds like) when you hit the keys.

Mind you, few if any of us hit the keys quite like Martha Argerich. Her DGG recording of the Ravel G Major Concerto (with Abbado and the Berliner PO) offers a perfect window on the Kuzmas’ capabilities, from the utter stability with which it presents the instrument, to the superb dynamic discrimination. Throughout the staccato, almost Gershwin-esque opening movement, the table’s speed of response and dynamic discrimination make the most of Argerich’s astonishing rhythmic dexterity and its stark contrasts with the florid orchestration. But the long, meandering lines of the solo entry to the second movement is even more impressive. The measured pace and gently evolving weight in the playing gives space to the notes and poise to the playing, with not a waver in the lengthy decay, utter clarity when it comes to the accent and level of each note and phrase, a perfect balance between left hand and the fleeter fingers of the right. That sense of balance is crucial to any piano recording but here it really is make or break, with Argerich’s legendary lyrical and emotional quality utterly dependent on the fluidity and grace in her playing. Any lumps or discontinuities will destroy the spell, but the Kuzmas’ utterly even yet uninhibited presentation draws you in and keeps you there.

That top to bottom evenness and poise is key to the Kuzmas’ team performance. Whether it’s the perfect balance of Martzy and Antonietti in the Coup d’Archet radio recording of the Kreutzer Sonata, a quality that makes clear the depth of understanding (and respect) between this star and her accompanist, or the sheer virtuosity of Pollini’s Chopin Etudes, this record ►

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► player presents a picture of complete clarity and stability, but a picture that lives and breathes with layered harmonics, space, and vitality. Despite the weight that it brings to the left-hand there’s nothing clumsy or congested in its bottom end. Listen to the attack and power that Pollini generates and that the Kuzmas lift from the groove and you realize just how earthbound and turgid less accomplished players (pianists or turntables) sound.

That confidence extends to all musical genres. The solidity, impact and propulsive nature of the drumbeats on Shawn Colvin’s ‘Shotgun Down The Avalanche’ from *Steady On* [Columbia] is seriously impressive – but so is the subtle intimacy of the vocal and delicate resolution of the sleigh bells. If the mark of a great transducer is to step aside and let the music speak then the CAR-50 certainly qualifies, with the Stabi M and 4POINT helping it on its way. And that’s really the key. As impressive as these three products are individually, the utterly seamless and symbiotic way in which they combine creates a whole that, just like the various elements that make up the tonearm, is far, far greater than the sum of its parts – not in terms of its obvious attributes, but in the way they step behind the performers and the performance, freeing them of constraint or imposed character. There are certainly more detailed cartridges and set-ups that offer greater absolute separation, but there are very few that sound as naturally coherent, holistic, and musically complete as team Kuzma. This level of genuine neutrality and the musical versatility and insight it offers is both rare and reminiscent of the stable clarity that comes from master tape – just without the sterile quality that tape delivers too. That’s what makes this Kuzma combination so impressive and so rewarding, immediately and in the long-term; it will play anything – and it will play it really, really well. At a time when many a vinyl collection is being ripped to hard-drive, maybe it’s time to update and revive the transcription moniker, a traditional title for which this is a genuine contender; what it does with records might just cause a few second thoughts... +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Stabi M

Type: Belt drive, suspended chassis turntable  
 Drive System: DC motor with external power supply  
 Platter Mass: 12kg  
 Speeds Available: 33, 45 and 78 (user adjustable)  
 Tonearm Mounts: One  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 600 x 500 x 280mm  
 Weight: 60kg  
 Lid: Yes  
 Finish: Black (optional coloured plinth)  
 Price: £13,995

### 4POINT

Type: Pivoted with 4POINT bearing  
 Effective Length: 280mm  
 Pivot/Spindle Distance: 264mm  
 Mount/Spindle Distance: 212mm  
 Effective Mass: 14g  
 Interchangeable Arm-Top: Yes  
 Adjustable VTA: During play.  
 Adjustable Azimuth: Precision worm drive  
 Overall Weight: 2050g  
 Price: £4,995

### CAR-50

Type: Low-output moving-coil cartridge  
 Cantilever: Sapphire  
 Stylus Type: Microridge  
 Output: 0.3mV at 3.54cm/s  
 Compliance: 10cu  
 Cartridge Mass: 17g  
 Recommended VTF: 2.0g  
 Recommended Load: >100 Ohms  
 Price: £4,495

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