

# SPIN DOCTOR

BY MICHAEL TREI

**THIS ISSUE:** An ultraheavy tonearm with a sapphire armtube provides some of the best sound the Spin Doctor has experienced.

## The Spin Doctor checks out the Kuzma Safir 9, a superarm from Slovenia.

**T**he British audio scene from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s was pretty strange. Audio as a hobby was a big deal, with widespread appeal to a much younger crowd than today. Audiophiles were guided by a flurry of what my friends called “hi-fi pornos,” audio magazines that filled the racks at the newsagents.

Far more than you see today, there was a strong nationalist bent, with some writers displaying an open bias against anything that wasn’t British. Magazines’ editorial departments presented readers with a clear, specific doctrine of how a system should be built and what components readers should acquire.

As a schoolboy with no system of my own, I lapped up these suggestions, and when I returned to the US in 1980 to attend university, I was finally able to start building a system that conformed to the system-building rules that had been drilled into me.

After I graduated four years later, I moved back to England for a year before returning to New York for good in 1985. Frustrated in my effort to find the right job in my field—as a studio recording engineer—I took what I figured would be a temporary job at the late Andy Singer’s high-end audio store, Sound By Singer, which at the time was probably the most Anglophile of the New York City high-end audio stores. Nevertheless, it gave me an opportunity to listen to all manner of exotica, and I was quickly dispelled of my belief that only the British knew how to make proper hi-fi kit. Brands like Snell Acoustics, Vandersteen, Krell, and Audio Research crept into my psyche, and within a year I owned an Audio Research SP-11 Mk2 preamp and various other bits of domestic audiophilia. I did, however, continue to sneak back to Hotalings News Service for the latest imported hi-fi mags, to keep my Brit-fi interest alive. Hotalings was a legendary international news stand located in the heart of the sleazy old Times Square long before the internet displaced most magazines and Mayor Rudy Giuliani cleaned out all the smut. Those copies of *Hi-Fi News*, *Hi-Fi Answers*, *Hi-Fi for Pleasure*, and *Hi-Fi World* helped me pass the time during my hourlong subway commute to and from Singer each day.

My “temporary” job at Singer ended up lasting nine years, and even after I moved on, in 1994, I continued to do freelance work for Andy until his sad passing in April 2024.

One article that grabbed my interest during one of those subway commutes was written by our own Martin Colloms. It appeared in the November 1985 issue of *Hi-Fi*

*News*. He was reviewing a new tonearm called the Kuzma Stogi, which was made in Yugoslavia, of all places. Consumer goods that hailed from behind the Iron Curtain were rarely seen in the US, but they were common back in England. Things like Skoda cars from Czechoslovakia and Zenit cameras from Russia were seen as bottom of the barrel, ultracheap options for people with a limited budget who still wanted something new. They were never thought



of as high-quality alternatives to Western products. That's what made Colloms's Stogi review so fascinating. He was obviously impressed. He said that the Stogi could deliver performance that competed with some of the top-class British arms of the time such as the Linn Ittok and Zeta. What's more, it benefited from the bargain pricing attached to Eastern Bloc goods. Kuzma wasn't available in the US, so I decided that on my next trip to the UK, I would buy one so I could check it out. At just £250—about \$340 in our own greenbacks at the time—it was about half the US price of a Linn Ittok.

In London, I arranged to buy the Stogi from a funky new hi-fi store with a funky name, The Cornflake Shop. They demonstrated it for me on another hot new product, a British turntable called the Roksan Xerxes, which was being hailed in the British magazines as the first turntable to seriously challenge the Linn Sondek LP12's supremacy. The performance of this pairing was truly ear opening. Within six months of my encounter with it in London, we were selling Roksan at Sound By Singer. Three years later, I was Roksan's North American sales manager, but that's a story for another day.

With my preconceptions about cheap Eastern Bloc goods in mind, I was curious how someone managed to make a product like the Stogi in Yugoslavia, which was still very much communist. As I discussed in Spin Doctor #9,<sup>1</sup> dedicated audio enthusiasts behind the Iron Curtain found that where there's a will, there's a way: They somehow managed to get things done. Franc Kuzma was able to pull the strings necessary to procure top-quality Van den Hul



wiring and precision Western ball bearings to use in the Stogi. He also knew when he didn't need to be that fussy: The arm was packed in a crumbly white Styrofoam that screamed low-rent, and the blurry single sheet of instructions used an Olde English font to deliver scant information.

Back in New York, I installed the Stogi on a Linn LP12 at Singer to gauge customer reactions. While it sounded good and worked well on the Linn, it wasn't until we got our hands on a Roksan Xerxes turntable a few months later that I was able to recreate the magic I had heard at The

Cornflake Shop. I ended up using the Stogi at home on my own Xerxes for a couple of years before I started working for Roksan, at which point I switched to using the Roksan Artemiz arm.

Amazingly, the original Stogi is still made by Kuzma in a form that's nearly unchanged, although US importer Elite Audio/Video Distribution chooses not to offer that version, focusing instead on the upgraded Stogi Reference and Reference 313 and the cheaper Stogi S unipivot.

Nearly 40 years after my first encounter with Kuzma, the world is a very different place geopolitically. The Iron Curtain fell, and Yugoslavia split apart, making Kuzma a part of an independent, democratic Slovenia. Of all the former Iron Curtain countries, Slovenia has the highest *per capita* GDP, outpacing even some Western countries including Portugal and Greece and making it an ideal place to do business. Kuzma stuck doggedly to their core business, making only turntables, tonearms, cartridges, and a few related accessories.

Over the years, Kuzma has developed new tonearms with different types of bearing designs, including unipivot, linear air bearing, and the traditional gimbal ball bearings of the original Stogi. But it was the introduction of the 4Point arm in 2008 that truly demonstrated Franc Kuzma's out-of-the-box thinking and design chops. As its name suggests, the armtube assembly of the 4Point rests on four jeweled bearing points, two for the vertical pivot, and two

<sup>1</sup> See [stereophile.com/content/spin-doctor-9-soviet-era-hi-fi-2-aidas-phono-cartridges](http://stereophile.com/content/spin-doctor-9-soviet-era-hi-fi-2-aidas-phono-cartridges).



for the horizontal. This hybrid approach gives you the advantages of a zero-clearance design like a unipivot combined with the stability of a traditional gimbal.

The 4Point was an instant success, garnering widespread praise for its sonic performance and ease of use. Soon, the original 11" 4Point<sup>2</sup> was joined by an even longer 14" variation and, eventually, a simplified 9" version called the 4Point 9. The 4Point 9 was designed for use with smaller turntables that couldn't handle the size and weight of the longer versions. All have sold well, and I have installed dozens of them for owners here in the New York City area.

Franc Kuzma's most recent breakthrough came when he began to experiment with the extreme stiffness and favorable resonant properties of sapphire. Back in the '80s at Sound By Singer, with the original Stogi arm, we would joke that *stogi* was the Slovenian spelling of *stogie*, referring to its cigar-shaped armtube. Franc Kuzma, though, says that *stogi* is the Slovenian word for rigid or stiff,<sup>3</sup> a key principle behind Kuzma's designs and the catalyst for his decision to explore sapphire for the armtube. For the Safir 9, Kuzma uses a single tapered piece of lab-grown sapphire. Its translucent quality gives the arm a truly striking appearance. Apparently, lab-grown sapphire doesn't come cheap: As tested, with Kondo silver wiring and an RCA output cable, the Safir 9 sells for a wallet-busting \$23,140. Versions with alternate wiring configurations start at \$22,620. Kuzma has come a long way since the \$340 Stogi.

Looking at the Safir 9's specification sheet, one number jumps out: its 60gm effective mass. Any arm with an effective mass of over 25gm is considered high mass; the Safir more than doubles that. This can affect the low-frequency resonance of the cartridge you pair with the arm. When you use one of those old-school mass-over-compliance charts to calculate the expected resonant frequency, the results with most cartridges don't look good. It's like putting three tons of lumber in the bed of a half-ton pickup. It may run and drive, but the suspension is going to be under stress.

Recently, though, we've learned that the old resonant-frequency tables, though theoretically sound, may be too simple to be accurate in the field; anyway, they're less relevant with today's low-compliance moving coil cartridges. I have started to use the compliance calculator on the Korf Audio website;<sup>4</sup> I used it to get a better picture of how various cartridges would work with 60gm of tonearm hanging over them. Most of my listening was done using a Lyra Atlas λ Lambda cartridge, but I also used my Dy-



navector XV-1S and my Zu Audio modified Denon DL-103, which is known (or widely believed) to work best in a heavyweight arm. (At less than one-20th the price of the arm, the Zu Denon is admittedly an unlikely pairing.) Mounted on the Safir, none of the three cartridges showed any signs of (di)stress or woofer pumping.

As Kuzma's most expensive tonearm, you might expect that it would come equipped with all of the nifty luxury features found on most of their higher end models, eg, viscous damping troughs, swappable headshells, and a VTA tower with on-the-fly adjustment. In fact, the Safir takes most of its cues from the stripped-down 4Point 9, which has none of those features. I expect there are two reasons for this. At nearly 3lb, the Safir is already fiendishly heavy; adding those features would likely compromise compatibility with some turntables. Adding a VTA tower would work against the Safir's goal of maximum rigidity. For the same reason, probably, the Safir only comes in a 9" version, although Kuzma showed a prototype of a 12" Safir at High End Munich in May 2024.

### Setting up the Safir 9

Kuzma has come a long way from those early days of sketchy instruction sheets using weird fonts. Their setup procedures, manuals, and packing materials are now among the best in the industry. Most Kuzma arms, including the Safir 9, mount using what's commonly referred to as the Linn mounting pattern, which has also been used by Jelco, Alphason, and several other brands. The mounting distance is 212mm, which splits the difference between some of the other arms that use the same pattern but at distances ranging from 210mm to 214mm. Kuzma's importer supplied the arm with

an armbase designed for use with the SME 30 turntable; I found that the back of the counterweight didn't clear my SME's right rear suspension tower. This armbase should work fine with other Kuzma arms that have a VTA tower, but not with their direct-fitting arms like the 4Point 9 and Safir 9. Switching to plan B, I tried to get an armboard that would fit my Brinkmann La Grange turntable, but because it's a discontinued model, Brinkmann could only supply a blank, undrilled version. Luckily, my handy friend Joshua Walfish, of Hyendaudio Services in New Jersey, came to the rescue: He was able to drill the thick aluminum Brinkmann armboard to accommodate the Kuzma mounting collar.

While it may be less convenient to adjust than some other Kuzma arms, the Safir 9 allows you to optimize all parameters with precision. The arm height can be fine-tuned using a stop screw to limit movement, much like with the SME Series V and AMG tonearms. Azimuth adjustment is similar to the 4Point but even more elegantly executed, with a gear that rotates the armtube where it enters the bearing housing, which is made from brass and aluminum. Instead of having to juggle counterweight plates and spacers as on the 4Point, the Safir has a single, split counterweight that covers all cartridge weights; tightening the halves together locks the weight in position.

A brief note in the manual says that if you change VTA, you should reset the tracking force. I suggest obeying that instruction. As with the 4Point, the Safir's

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Fremer's review at [stereophile.com/content/kuzma-4point-tonearm](https://stereophile.com/content/kuzma-4point-tonearm) and his follow-up at [stereophile.com/content/kuzma-4point-tonearm-follow](https://stereophile.com/content/kuzma-4point-tonearm-follow).

<sup>3</sup> Franc Kuzma should know. However, when I consulted several online translators and Slovenian-English dictionaries, the results I got were, alternately, "stacks" or "roof."

<sup>4</sup> See [korfaudio.com/calculator](https://korfaudio.com/calculator).



tracking force will change a lot as you move the arm up and down, which also means it's essential to use a tracking force gauge that can be set to measure with the stylus at precisely the same height as the record surface. I recommend the Riverstone Audio Record Level gauge for this.<sup>5</sup> Antiskating is applied using a falling weight on a pivot attached to the arm with a thin filament; just make sure that the thread is seated correctly in the groove on the arm, and that it goes over the rotating disc where the weight is.

When I was a much younger audiophile, discovering a new component that significantly advanced the performance of my system would send me on a quest, playing familiar records to discover what new revelations I could hear. That doesn't happen as often these days, but the Safir 9 did it, sending me into several late-night listening sessions: I wanted to hear what the arm could extract from some old chestnuts in my collection. One of the first things that struck me was how quiet this arm is, with almost none of that familiar vinyl sound as the stylus hits the record and before the music even begins. Playing Yello's *Tied Up* (Mercury 872 367-1) kicked off a flurry of spinning, including a bunch of UK 12" 45rpm singles. On "Tied Up in Life," the realism and dynamics of the conga drums was particularly striking, while the synth bass had a twang and color to the sound that I've never heard before with so much vibrancy.

To further explore the bass performance

of the Safir, I played a favorite reference album for organ recording, *Organ Sounds From Mount Olivet* by Diana Lee Metzker (Ark 1094-S). This is the kind of record you might flip past in the thrift store dollar bin, but it's worth picking up if you happen to see it. The late Bob Fulton of Fulton Musical Industries is remembered as a brilliant loudspeaker designer, but he was also an exceptional recording engineer who made wonderfully natural-sounding records. The catch is that Bob was also an example of what's known as Holt's Law, a term coined by *Stereophile* founder J. Gordon Holt when he proclaimed that the better a record sounded, the worse the performance would be, and vice versa. Many of Bob's releases on his Ark Recordings label were of amateur school and church choirs, which hold little interest for most of us, but this organ record is a real gem. On Bach's "Prelude and Fugue in B Minor," the sound immediately opened up to reveal a massive soundstage, allowing you to really feel the size of the church and the volume of air contained within. The bass stops were especially impressive, with a relaxed naturalness that went really deep yet never sounded forced or overcooked.

The Safir 9 tonearm is a bit like a stripped-down, high-performance race car. It's expensive and uses advanced technology in a package shorn of some luxury features so that it can deliver sonic excellence that leaves more conventional offerings in the dust. The Safir conjures up adjectives like fast, clear, focused, powerful, and dy-

namic, on a level I have rarely heard. While some care is needed when matching it with cartridges and turntables, in the right context, it's hard to beat; potential competitors, such as the SAT, sell for even more.

With that in mind, following all the armbored mishegas, US importer Elite A/V has agreed to follow up with a Stabi M turntable that I can pair with the Safir, so stay tuned.

Calling a \$23k tonearm good value is the sort of thing that gets us audiophiles into trouble, but if you can swing it, it would be hard to say no. ■

<sup>5</sup> At \$28.39 on Amazon (see amzn.to/3B9tdnG), the patented Riverstone Audio Record Level VTF Pressure Gauge, which comes in two colors, is one of hi-fi's great bargains, but beware of even cheaper knockoffs. —Jim Austin

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