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& Record Review

SUPER SME

Compact 20/3 deck - the best yet?



New Series!
Ken Kessler's
listening room
Hi-Fi @ Home with
the reviewers, p88

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SME 20/3 (£8560)

Now that SME can offer 9in and 12in versions of both the Model 20 and Model 30 turntables, the 20/2 benefits from trickle-down refinements and reaches '3' status
 Review: **Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller**

Time certainly flies: SME's Model 30 turntable is now entering its third decade, just as the company itself enters its sixth decade of tonearm manufacture. In keeping with practices established back in the days of the 3009 pick-up arms, SME has slowly and deliberately improved each model in carefully calculated stages. The Model 20/3's revamp is as extensive as any, and the results will prove to be blessed relief for those amongst you with aspirations toward one of the Steyning masterpieces.

Leaving aside the baby Model 10 (to me an almost inexplicably delightful compact record deck, but atypical of the range due to the absence of a true suspension), the other four models in the line-up embody the philosophy of SME founder Alastair Robertson-Aikman. After launching the turntable range 20 years ago with the Model 30/2, he followed it with a lighter version called the Model 20. What distinguished a 20 from a 30 were thinner upper chassis and subchassis plates, a smaller, thinner platter and other reductions in mass.

In 2006, to test the waters, SME released the 20 in a widened version that would accept a 12in arm. It was a huge success, so the Model 30/12 appeared to equal acclaim [*HFN* Mar '09]. In the interim, the external power supply had been upgraded, and was made common to all models, while 2010 saw the introduction of a new black platter mat material.

Although the 'regular' Model 20/2 has been a best-seller, enough had been learned from the development of the 20/12 and 30/12 to inspire a makeover. The 20/3 differs from the Model 20/2 most visibly through its all-black platter, which also enjoys an increase in thickness and size, closing in on that of a Model 30/2's. For the record (groan...), a 30's platter measures 330mm in diameter, the 20/2's

was 300mm, while the 20/3's is 312mm across. Weight-wise, the older 20's platter tipped the scales at 4.6kg; the new model's is a heftier 6.5kg.

Add to that thicker chassis plates of 16mm versus the 20/2's 9.5mm, larger overall dimensions of 440x350x172mm (wdh) against the 20/2's 420x320x172mm (wdh), and you can understand how the weight went up from 18.2kg to 28.6kg. The 20/3 also features the latest version of the external power supply; the bearing's central damper has been uprated more in line with the Model 30's, and there's an improved oil bath.

DOING SOME SUMS

Remarkably, SME did all this without upping the price punitively. The last retail price for the Model 20/2 was £4200 plus VAT (without arm), while the Model 20/2a with Series V cost £6190 plus VAT. The Model 20/3, benefiting from all of the above gains, sells for £4995 without arm, or £7135 with (plus the newly increased VAT) – so barely addressing inflation. In addition to using the 20/3 with the Series

V arm, I also tried it with the painfully under-rated M2-9 tonearm, just to hear what the combination would sound like, with savings of around £1200 on the package price. Although the audible gains are substantial with the Series V, such an economy might cover a decent moving-coil cartridge and phono stage. SME's CEO, Cameron Roberston-Aikman, however, feels that a more sensible compromise would be to fit a Model 20/3 with the Series 300 Model 309. Sorry to bang on about these austerity measures, but times are tough, and anything that keeps you from being deprived of such a stellar device is something to be investigated.

CONFIDENT APPROACH

Set-up is as with all SME turntables, thorough and comprehensive. SME's instruction manuals are models of clarity, and the supply of all of the necessary tools and adjustment gauges ensures that all will operate as it should. Although time-consuming, there's no mystery, no mumbo-jumbo, so confidence levels will be high when you play your first LP. The arms, too,

RIGHT: Larger platter fitted with new, stealthy 'black mat' instead of yellow pea soup of yore. Clean design and small footprint render the Model 20/3 a discreet object, easy to house





are straightforward to fit and adjust, SME's overhang gauge being one of the best.

But back to the review. In addition to a session in the SME Music Room, which revealed (as with the Model 20/12 before it) that the 20s can certainly hold their own through one of the planet's most revealing systems, I used it variously with Koetsu, Lyra, Transfiguration and Clearaudio cartridges, through the Audio Research PH5 phono stage, Reference 5 and Reference Anniversary Edition preamps, Quad II-eighty mono and McIntosh 2102 power amps, and Wilson Sophia 3 speakers.

Coming to a new SME turntable, the fifth I've reviewed in two decades, is – I would imagine – like moving on to the next Porsche 911: a brilliant design good enough to survive the decades because it responds to refinements. What's difficult, especially for owners of any one of SME's 'four-poster' models, is the actual task of distinguishing one from another. Probably the most difficult was identifying, let alone defining any gap between the Model 30/2 with 9in arm, and the Model 20/12 with 12in arm. The former still had the edge

for mass, for those cavernously deep bass notes and pitchblack silences, while the latter benefited from the reduction in tracing error due to the longer arm.

SME has a different problem with the Model 20/3, because concerns about choosing between the 'short-wheelbase' 30 versus the 'long-wheelbase' 20 were rendered moot, thanks to a substantial price difference: a 20/12 costs much less than a Model 30/2. Here the dilemma is fresh and smile-inducing: the Model 20/3 (wee Model 10 aside) looks like the biggest bargain in the entire company catalogue.

No, don't fire up your mice: it's still a serious investment. But in a world where people do not leave the room in a huff when price tags of \$150,000 are mentioned in the same sentence as 'turntable', a Model 20/3A all-in, with the VAT of (coincidentally) 20 percent, seems a gift at less than 10 percent of the cost of a Continuum. Certainly, its performance is breathtaking in all parameters.

ABOVE: Thicker upper and lower chassis plates, heavier platter and larger-diameter corner pillars than those of Model 20/2 contribute to a weight increase from 18.2kg to 28.6kg

WAKE UP CALL

Armed with a stack of recent 180g audiophile pressings, as well as cherished favourites, I was able to put the SME through its paces with assorted cartridges in an attempt at isolating specific areas. Of course, the only valid remarks concern the sound as a whole, but certain LPs can highlight the various parameters which define greatness.

'Recorded 50 years ago, this LP is used as a show-stopper'

As in the Music Room, I used Billy Cotton's *Wakey Wakey!!!* to see what the 20/3 would do for soundstaging.

You have to understand that, recorded 50 years ago, this LP is used as a show-stopper when guests in the Music Room are ready to feel religion. Yes, it's that revelatory an experience, bordering on the spiritual. The air and the openness, which I had previously attributed to the 30/2's background silences and retrieval of low-level detail, were present in cinematic levels with the 20/3. A nagging voice still tells me that either of the 30s will deliver perceptibly more lower octave mass, but the difference is only evident in a system with ultra-wide dynamics and uncompromised resolution.

With 20/3, 20/12 and 30/12 side by side (my 30/2 is enjoying its first-ever service after 20-plus years), I could identify indisputable gains as you go up the SME ladder. What's changed is that the price gaps have widened, while the sonic gains have narrowed. SME has, in effect, ⇨

A QUESTION OF BALANCE

Like the turntables, SME's arms are so close from model to model that you need a commensurately higher-resolution system, or a more critical cartridge, to hear differences between one and the next with any totalitarian certainty. The Series IV is effectively a simplified Series V – silver finish vs black; optional damping instead of standard; LC-OFC wiring vs Litz – its most important feature being static rather than dynamic balance control – the latter applies tracking force through a resonance-controlled spring. Some users prefer the IV, a faction which believes that static force applied by positioning a weight is superior to the dynamic force of the 'V. As the bearings no longer differ between the two, any other audible dissimilarity is due to the wiring. I've used both, and prefer the slightly superior subtlety of the Series V ... if you can muster the extra £620.

TURNTABLE



ABOVE: Rear view shows primary power/on off at back of outboard power supply/speed selector. Cable (exiting left) connects to central block at back of the Model 20/3

produced a range that starts out so blissfully competent at its entry level that the benefits proffered by the dearer models are more rarefied. If SME were blessed with a master list of all the high-end amplifiers and speakers on the market, I'm sure that the company would be able to match like with like, eg, a Model 30/12 with Wilson Alexandrias, or a 20/3 with Sophia 3s.

But back to Billy Cotton's crew. Alma Cogan's voice possessed both a liquidity and a force that suggested she would have been the ultimate Broadway chanteuse: one who could have stepped into Ethel Merman's shoes had she lived long enough. With her powerful, expressive voice backed by a band that redefined 'brassy', a lesser system would attack the listener with treble punch so sharp that it would metaphorically pierce your skin: 'shpilkes' my mother might say. With the 20/3 it was silk and shimmer, a huge orchestral pillow filling the space between and around the Sophias.

A NATURAL CHARMER

And 'shimmer' is the word that best describes the way the SME handles the upper midband through to the furthest treble notes. I've heard the strings on Buddy Holly's 'Raining In My Heart' both screech or seduce. Retrieved by the 20/3, 'charm' can be added to that, with a naturalness that made me glad I use valve amps.

Again and again, that which might offend was rendered docile. But equally, music with seemingly unlimited power burst forth in full-on Robert E Howard berserker mode. You gotta love Mountain, their abbreviated epic 'Mississippi Queen' so singularly crucial in defining what is regarded as both 'heavy metal' and 'riff rock' that some might deem

it too unrefined to allow near such a stellar device. But never have I heard Leslie West's notes soar as with this front-end (tipped with a Koetsu Urushi), with speed and extension and palpable form.

This, of course, would horrify the sort of person one imagines to be an archetypal SME client. SME has, for a half-century, represented finesse and grace with such aplomb that one wonders if AR-A was actually David Niven in disguise. So, to demonstrate one's respect for an LP spinner of such elevated status, it was only natural that I end with Analogue Production's Nat 'King' Cole remasters.

Massed strings, perfect microphone set-up, arrangements surely penned in heaven, a voice with textures as unique as fingerprints, material that defines 'the standard'. Each and every song sounded fresh, full, rich, as if it were a live performance circa 2011. With no cuteness, no hyperbole, I must admit: 'When I Fall In Love' aptly describes the first moment I heard the SME Model 20/3. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

So well-conceived are SMEs that each model is embarrassingly close to the 'next one up'. The middle-of-the-range 20/3 is so like a dearer 30, bar the 30's extreme bass and quietness, that you need a mind-blowingly revealing system to appreciate its costlier siblings. The 30/2 remains my all-time favourite but, as of now, the Model 20/3 is the best-value deck in the range. Indeed, a masterpiece.

Sound Quality: 89%

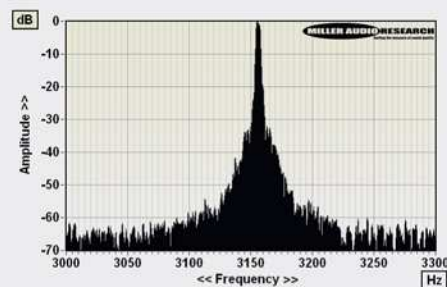


SME 20/3 WITH SME V (£8560)

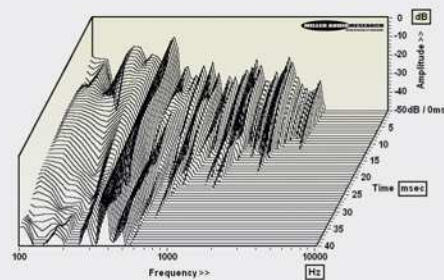
Any keen manufacturing start-up looking to design a world-class turntable could do worse than cast their gaze towards Steynning and the work of SME. The new model 20 (Series 3) bearing is not quite as over-engineered as that fitted to the larger 30/12 [HFN Mar '09] and so the through-bearing rumble is just a little higher at -75.8dB (12th-octave, DIN B weighted). This is still better than every other deck we've measured, however. So too is the through-groove noise of -73.8dB, a figure that improves still further to -74.0dB with the benefit of SME's clamp. While the uncorrected 33.3rpm speed of our sample was running imperceptibly fast (+0.17%), its stability was never in question. Wow and flutter [see Graph 1, below] mirrors that of the 30/12 and represents the state-of-the-art at 0.03% (peak weighted).

Readers may also care to compare the cumulative resonant decay plot for this SME Series V tonearm [see Graph 2, below] with that for the simpler Series IV [HFN Jun '10]. While both arms clearly share the same ~360Hz main tube resonance, the yoke bending mode that's distinct in the Series IV is less so here, presumably muddled by the compound resonances of its additional appendages. Fortunately any higher frequency modes are rapidly extinguished although there is a deal of lower frequency energy (up to 300Hz) that takes slightly longer to dissipate than in the SME Series IV.

Otherwise, in terms of its vanishingly low friction and superb geometric adjustment, the Series V remains a class act. Readers are invited to view a full QC Suite report for the SME 20/3 turntable and Series V arm package by navigating to www.hifinews.com and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz, 5Hz per minor division). Wow is minimal but this deck was running imperceptibly fast



ABOVE: Cumulative tonearm resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing, pillar and arm tube vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.39rpm (+0.17%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.01% / 0.02%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-74.0dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-75.4dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-65.1dB
Power Consumption	4W
Dimensions (WHD)	420x155x320mm