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Turntable of the century?

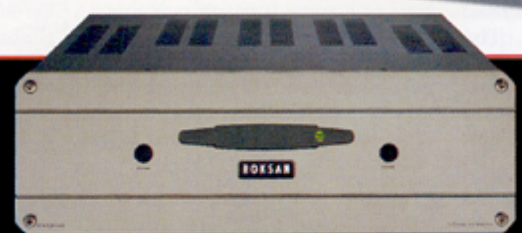
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A PERFECT 10



Less costly than the existing models, this new turntable and arm still set the highest possible standards

by **KEN KESSLER**

Everyone loves surprises. And, hey, who wouldn't be tickled pink at the thought of a new treat from SME? While the antithesis of fertile, SME never fails to issue a new wonder every time Alastair Robertson-Aikman feels the need to stretch his abilities. We are, after all, talking about a company with a design team, a philosophy and machining capabilities second to none in the world of precision engineering for audio purposes; maybe there's a watchmaker or two in Switzerland who could 'worry' SME. The finish, inventiveness and sheer intelligence of every SME product ever made give this company a track record without fault. Yes,

even that blip in the lineage, the lightweight SME Series III arm, oozes cleverness, excellence and desirability.

'So what's left?' you might be wondering as the analogue playback market continues to shrink down toward relative insignificance*. Do we really need anything more 'right' than an SME 20 or 30 turntable? Isn't the Series V tonearm as good as it gets?

As the millennium ends, as the curtain closes on the century which gave us the LP, SME has decided to issue a new turntable which comes in *below* the SME 20, at £2643.75, a new entry-level player which departs from the '20 and '30 in so many ways that it may confound those who find deviations in a 'true path' to be something unholy.

But if AR-A wants to make a plinthless turntable with no suspension *per se*, one which does away with so much of the 20/30 approach, then it's something you have to assume is worth pursuing. For Alastair is a man who does not make decisions lightly, nor issue new models with rapidity. Maybe he and Peter Walker come from the same 'anti-prolific' school. At first



**As I will forever argue with a current purveyor of LPs, who thinks that selling 5000 of a particular title is a big deal: 5000 is what EMI or Columbia or Decca would have considered to be a respectable weekly figure for faulty pressings in vinyl's heyday.*

glance, the SME 10 calls to mind the plinthless turntables which precede it, working back from the Wilson-Benesch Circle through countless (usually British designs) designs forgotten in the mists of time. Ariston, Transcriptors and others have released decks which would fit snugly under a dome, and all have appealed for compactness and aesthetic aptness. An LP is a 12in diameter disc, so why not create a turntable which is no larger, save for the arm mount, which exploits the perfectly round shape? Thus, the SME 10 will find instant favour with those who fancy a bit of

space-saving and who find a rectangular plinth something of a stylistic fault. Even the earliest round decks still look 'modern'; the SME 10 looks positively futuristic, in a sinister, Stealth fighter way. And yet, by virtue of its build integrity, it is utterly devoid of any of the frivolity which usually accompanies the deliberately

new power supply and housing which I wouldn't be surprised to see supplied with the older turntables in future production. Most notable is the sloped front panel, making it much easier to use than the vertical panel of the earlier unit. It contains a row of three buttons which operate

10's solid aluminium base. This is a circular plate resting on three screw-in feet filled with a polymer reminiscent of Sorbothane. The broad feet are finely threaded, so adjustment for levelling is quick, easy and very precise. Fitted to the base plate are the motor housing – so silent that it's positively creepy – and three pillars also filled with the squishy material found in the feet.

The polymer inserts in the feet and pillars are, effectively, the sole forms of isolation. Positioned



on top of the pillars is the T-shaped sub-chassis, with arm-mount cut-out and the bearing assembly into which is positioned the machined sub-platter and taper-top bearing. (Note that a minor adjustment for the bearing tightness can be performed by the user, via an adjuster at the base of the bearing housing, but I would always opt for factory or dealer tweaking.) The belt is fitted over the pulley and placed around the sub-platter. The massive main platter is covered in the same finely grooved, mustard-coloured material found on the SME 20 and 30, which mates beautifully with your LPs for ideal contact. Slightly changed from the complex clamping arrangement found in the 20/30 is a new single-piece screw-down clamp – a marvel of machining – and a special washer placed over the spindle to raise the LP at the centre. SME recommends that the user taps the LPs at three equidistant points to make sure the disc mates securely with the platter.

Whatever the verbiage in this report suggests, the set-up is so simple and straightforward that anyone with even a modicum of experience can have the SME 10-plus-arm up and running in under an hour. SME has a tradition of producing the sort of owner manuals which are beyond criticism; the SME 10's is no exception and you'd have to be a certifiable moron to mess up this installation. I fitted a much-loved Lyra Lydian into Musical Fidelity

ultramodern. This is no exercise in gimmickry, even though it bristles with novelty. The first thing I noticed was its simplest, least expensive, yet most desirable feature: a cartridge guard in the form of a bent wire defence surrounding a pick-up which would otherwise be unprotected from accidents. However minor a feature this may seem, it is in its own way the most telling of the thought processes which created the '10. Nothing, and I mean nothing, was left out; neither was anything superfluous left in or on the SME 10. As one who lives in an old house, in which dust is endemic, I asked about a dust cover – the curse of plinth-less decks. AR-A immediately replied that dustcovers affect the performance, confirming what others have always argued. But the fastidious AR-A is not the type to allow dust to settle on his wares, so he whipped out a perfectly-shaped soft cover, its precedents being those supplied with every '20 and '30.

Because the '10 follows years after the '20/'30, it benefits from a

stop/start and choose 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm or 45rpm. Five LEDs indicate main power on (the on/off rocker is at the back), 'on' mode when the start button is pressed, the chosen speed and speed lock to indicate that the deck is up to 33 or 45, as measured 120 times per revolution by a crystal reference.

Because the power supply is an 8-bit micro-processor-controlled device with regenerative braking, the table possesses an eerie sort of behaviour, as if unseen hands are whipping the deck up to speed when called into play, then applying ultra-smooth braking when the stop button is pressed. It's most impressive, almost a party trick: the kind of behaviour rarely seen in audio since the days of top-end, costly and highly-sophisticated open-reel tape decks with superior tape handling.

Its connection to the deck itself is via a small connector of the S-video/PS mouse type, the socket positioned at the rear of the SME

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THE SME MODEL 10 TONEARM

X-LP and EAR 834P phono sections, Lexicon MC-1 and Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista pre-amps, Nu-Vista 300 and Acurus 3X200 power amps, and Sonus Faber Guarneri, Wilson WATT/Puppy 6 and Martin-Logan Scenario loudspeakers.

What I heard merely confirmed the results of the 'preparatory sessions' when I first experienced the SME 10 in AR-A's own legendary Audio Research/Krell/Quad system; how little did I realise after leaving Steyning that I was ready to write the review, unaware that the SME 10's absolute consistency was so utterly trustworthy. Nothing I heard later in my own systems contradicted the findings, despite different ancillaries. I stayed with the same recordings I tried at Alastair's: the Mobile Fidelity 180g pressing of Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee's *Sonny & Brownie* and a vintage Peggy Lee LP, augmented by the new soundtrack to *Yellow Submarine*, some mono Mickey Katz on 'purple label' Capitol and the new Vivante pressing of the Police's *Outlandos d'Amour*.

When pressed, AR-A might admit that the '20 and '30 offer more weight or solidity, or whatever virtues we lump in with sonic mass, scale and lower-octave supremacy. But to focus on this would be to imply that the '10 is a lightweight. It isn't. In fact, I find its bass to be among the most harmonious, listener-friendly, smooth, tight and coherent that I've ever heard. In all other respects, it's pure SME, the sound exhibiting grip, precision, fine detail, consistency — we're talking about a tool, a turntable equivalent of the Wilson WATT Puppy approach to monitor-grade speakers. The SME 'experience' is all about low coloration, the minimising of residual noise, the banishment of any intrusion which might upset one's equilibrium. If

SELLING FOR a cost-effective £689.33, the new arm is the latest in a series of variants which make the SME V's primary virtues available to the many at a reduced cost. Unlike models sold on an OEM basis to other manufacturers, which vary in colour or merely do without the damping or some other feature, the SME 10 is a re-design which aspires to greater simplicity and 'universality'.

Most noticeable is the separate headshell, allowing for cartridge azimuth alignment; the SME V pre-supposes absolutely perfect set-up from the outset. The counterweight assembly is simpler, if slightly cruder, the SME 10's weight locking the Vernier-style wheel which allows you to move it back and forth in small, controlled increments. On the SME 10, you slide it back and forth by hand, your own delicate (or not) touch determining how coarsely to make the changes. It does, however, lock with the same

you are ever lucky enough to meet AR-A, you'll know what I mean: this is a man who must be a closet Buddhist, because he takes the concept of being 'unruffled' to extremes beyond that of a mere English gentleman. And the turntable reflects this: it is polite, well-bred, refined.

But, ah!, you're thinking — it therefore must lack soul. This is not the case, unless you travel under the misguided assumption that turntables have rhythm, *ad nauseum*. What the SME 10 reveals to me is that the soul, the rhythm and the funk are in the *music*, not the hardware. And the SME 10 let you hear the music and nothing else. Indeed, it is so eerily quiet and uncoloured that, while one of the best ambassadors yet for the greatness of analogue replay via vinyl,

secure method and 'old hands' used to the kid-glove techniques required when installing cartridges will barely miss the SME V's more refined approach.

But the most important change to the SME 10 is a simplified arm base, featuring locating pins and only two screws to affect the proper mounting; it still retains grip when the set screws are loosened to keep the arm in the position you've set it prior to final tightening. The cut-out on the SME 10 arm board accommodates both the new arm base and the traditional SME four-screw type. In all other respects — anti-skate, height adjustment, etc, the SME 10 arm mirrors the SME V.

So is the SME 10 clever? Complete? Ergonomically perfect and above criticism?

You'd better believe it. In fact, the only product I know of which comes close to the SME 10 arm (and the SME Series V, of course) for such thorough 'rightness' are the Leica M-Series cameras. And, boy, how I'd love to let AR-A loose on their few remaining faults...

The massive main platter is covered in the same finely grooved, mustard-coloured material found on the SME 20 and 30, which mates beautifully with your LPs for ideal contact

it also serves to confuse the digitalians just because it is so damned quiet. Like, uh, near-to-CD-quiet. In this respect, it comes close to depriving CD of its only true virtue (beyond remote-control convenience): between-track silences.

Whatever it takes, I will one day make an SME 10 the deck in my reference system. And why not a '20 or a '30, you might wonder, should price not be an issue? Simple: the SME 10 is the only turntable I've ever seen which makes me think it was produced by a watchmaker. Slap a Breguet badge on this baby, and you wouldn't raise an eyelid.

But then you'd have to add an extra nought to the price. ✦



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