

Super Model

David Price finds SME's latest Model 10/Series V turntable/tonerarm combination an arrestingly attractive proposition...

SME's £2,775 Model 10 turntable is something of a breath of fresh air in today's turntable world, offering genuinely high performance from a compact package and the easy option of buying it with a very fine tonearm thrown in, for £3,621 as the Model 10A. It is the Steyning company's attempt to make high quality vinyl replay accessible, to provide world class sound without the concomitant clutter of wires, suspension, separate motor units and other associated ephemera. Basically, it's intended to be plug and play vinyl at its best.

The Model 10 can best be summed up by the aphorism 'small but perfectly formed'. Measuring just 370x250x161mm and finished in sober satin black, it is not going to impress someone who craves vast expanses of shiny metal (Acoustic Solid One, anyone? See p88). Whilst some will think that anyone spending £2,775 on a turntable should get something at least as large as a Michell GyroDec SE (i.e. sans acrylic base), others will see the Model 10's small footprint as a positive boon. It certainly looks unassuming on an equipment rack, but as soon as you use it you find its performance to be anything but...

Despite the diminutive dimensions, its build and finish are sublime. This isn't hyperbole – I use the word deliberately – because I can confidently say I have never come across anything better finished, at any price. Even classics like Trio's L-07D are as good as, but no better than, the SME. That same 'camera finish' given to the SME Series V tonearm is in evidence here, with the satin black aluminium base almost silky to the touch. The way all the bits fit so accurately, and so slickly, into everything else will be familiar to anyone who's stripped down a Honda motorcycle engine or disassembled a classic Yashica camera. By way of

comparison, the £2,165 Michell Orbe feels considerably less finely finished – and that is already one of the best built in the business!

What makes the SME Model 10 so accessible is the fact that, unlike its bigger 20 and 30 brothers, it has no suspension. Instead, the whole assembly sits on three large polymer isolators, with adjustable feet allowing quick and easy levelling. The subchassis is carried on three polymer loaded towers (similar to Sorbothane but apparently more pliable), and there's an inner platter around which a tight, square section rubber belt is attached and driven from a crowned aluminium motor pulley. The platter is a fully machined 4.1kg aluminium disc with a sticky top surface. On top of this sits a largish, fairly massy record clamp which screws into the 19mm high chrome tool steel spindle. A spiral channel in the bearing surface lifts oil to the top for effective lubrication, and a tooled-steel ball at the bottom

sits in a bronze thrust plate, softer to give effective seating.

The AC synchronous motor is isolated from the deck's subchassis by three long polymer sleeved pins, and driven by the external power supply which has an internal quartz crystal reference that monitors the speed 120 times per revolution in a phase locked loop configuration via an 8bit microprocessor. It provides 33, 45 and 78rpm operation, complete with a 'lock' LED when the deck reaches the right speed. Thankfully, SME have spared us tedious blue LEDs – they come in a classic green! Interestingly – and very welcome for a dyed-in-the-grain hand cuer like me – there's a polished stainless steel stylus guard which runs up from the base and provides a handy platform on which to rest the back of your hand whilst





wielding the arm's finger lift. Finally, a soft dust cover is provided.

The SME arrives in a largish box, and requires self-assembly (unless your friendly dealer will come around and do it for you). Without recourse to the instruction manual, I managed to do it in one hour including fitting and aligning the tonearm and cartridge, although I am already well versed in SME Series V setup [see ARMED FORCE]. The Model 10's compactness and relatively light 16kg weight mean that it's easy to work on, and assembly is basically the matter of removing the transit bolt, fitting the arm and cartridge, then putting the main platter on and plugging in the power supply. The turntable itself has very few adjustments, which is just what SME intended.

The Model 10 was supplied, as requested, with a Series V tonearm simply because of my familiarity with this particular model. As such, it takes the price from £3,621 (as the Model 10A, fitted with Model 10 arm - a derivative of the 309) to £4,556 (fitted with Series V). For the purposes of the review, you can add another £2,399 for a Koetsu Red K Signature moving coil cartridge - which proved a particularly famous combination. The deck was auditioned with my Michell GyroDec present (also fitted with the same SMEV and Koetsu) to act as a 'grounding' for my thoughts. Obviously, the Gyro is not a price rival, but I've heard it against everything from a Trio L-07D to the new Linn LP12SE, so it's truly a known quantity for me.

SOUND QUALITY

Lovely, in a word. And it was all the more so when I looked away

from my loudspeakers to see not a vast sprawling behemoth of a turntable but a compact record player with a smaller footprint than a Dual CS505. The SME Model 10 needs no excuses made for its dimensions - here is a turntable that's utterly competitive in performance at the price with anything, large or small.

Its basic characteristic is one of clarity - it makes, for example, a GyroDec sound warm and rather opaque. Considering the Gyro does this very trick to most other turntables (sometimes at four times the price, too), that gives you an idea of just how transparent the Model 10A is. Pound for pound, I'd say it is one of the cleanest, most clear sounding devices I've heard. Running the Series V tonearm, the midband was staggering in some respects. Kraftwerk's 'Computerwelt' showed its uncanny ability to get right to the back of the mix, and open it up and throw the nuances right out at you just like they were lead instruments. Importantly however, when it did dig out all that detail, it was presented with order and grace rather than just dumped in front of the nose on your face.

This is the next key point of the SME Model 10 - its wonderful sense of scale. Instead of shoving everything out around the plane of the speakers, the SME is able to hang the recorded acoustic way, way behind

if need be – yet you can still hear all the way into it. Conversely, lead instruments in the mix, or lead vocals, project comfortably ahead of the loudspeakers while other elements hang seemingly miles back. Compared to the Gyro, the SME was substan-

(doubtless down to the amps of that time), yet Roger Daltrey's voice was eerily natural and unsullied. The Fender fretless Jazz bass on Japan's 'Ghosts' conversely sounded a tad dry, but the synthesiser breaks were deliciously warm and fruity (just as

of total solidity. Highly modulated sections of the groove didn't throw the deck into a rhythmic wobble, and it gave the abiding impression of being in total control. The big meaty drum sounds on the 'Avalon' album were a joy through my system, sounding tremendously powerful and self-assured, and when called upon so to do, the SME Model 10 really caught dynamic swings.

Rhythmically it is very accomplished – it's certainly a lively and engaging performer, so much so that you wonder why some people think the Series V tonearm is emotionally uncommitted, but I still wouldn't say that the Model 10 is the most gushingly emotive sounding turntable. Once again, the obvious comparison is the (rather more expensive) Linn LPI2SE which really got to grips with the 'feel' of UB40's 'King' better than the SME. What the SME did was give an 'X-ray-like' exposition of everything that was going on in the mix, whereas the LPI2 simply unbuttoned its top button and started to boogie. Interestingly, the Michell GyroDec was barely any less rhythmically infectious than the Linn, leaving the SME Model 10 alone as the most matter-of-fact sounding, and – truth be told – the most incisive.

Overall then, the SME is a dizzyingly high resolution device (especially at the price) that has no obvious weak points whatsoever, and a surplus of strong ones. It is massively clear, dimensional and almost 'architectural' in the way it digs out the basic structure of the recorded acoustic and hands it to you in such a conscientious way. It is tonally neutral, but can do very warm or sub-arctic too as the occasion (i.e. recording) demands. It is a little looser in the bass than it might be, but this in no way detracts from the

ARMED FORCE

SME's Series V tonearm needs no introduction to any analogue addict. Introduced in 1986, it was a massive leap up from the (then) current 3009S2 Improved, which had been around since the 1960s. To give you an idea of the performance improvement over the 3009, switching to a Series V would be akin to going from the original 1964 Ford Cortina to a 2007 Jaguar XJ8. All the same, some commentators said that, in gaining the world, the Series V lost its soul. It's certainly not an emotionally engaging performer, but the amount of detail it throws up is gobsmacking, as is its ability to render a recorded acoustic flawlessly in three dimensions. Finally, its bass is probably the best that any pivoted arm will ever achieve, so accurate and powerful is it. The SME V is a glorious product, but one that not everyone can live with. People who've bought one will sometimes sell it, whilst secretly knowing that they're going to change to an inferior arm that's simply more to their taste. This is the key to SME V – it is so matter-of-fact sounding that many vinyl addicts, who love the format for its 'romantic' sound, simply find it too clinical. Personally, I adore it and always will. Every time I hear one, even having heard some stunning designs at twice the price (or more), it always stops me in my tracks.

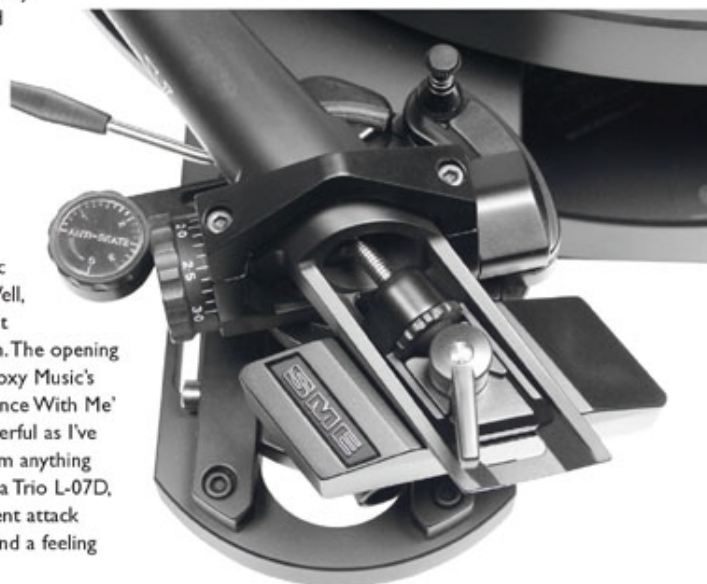
Funnily enough, I think my affection for it is as much on an intellectual level as a practical one. Rather like Concorde, every aspect of its design (and build) just seems to be right – both at the time it was designed, and now. The tapered, varying thickness armtube is made from diecast Magnesium alloy and internally damped to avoid vibrations, the wiring is all silver litz and the bearings are of superlative quality. The arm is so beautifully designed that, uniquely, set up is a joy. Everything from height and overhang adjustment is performed effortlessly and to extreme precision with the supplied tools. Hand cueing an SME V still feels like no other, so exquisitely smooth is its gait. Finally, the arm looks utterly beautiful; despite being twenty one years old (amazingly!), it seems bang-up-to-date in every way, as does anything whose form is a direct, uncorrupted result of its function.

tially more dimensional in terms of front to back, but interestingly not from side to side. In my experience, the Orbe and Gyro have one of the most expansive (left to right) soundstages in the business. Although it bunched the recorded acoustic of Supertramp's 'School' close to the plane of the speakers, the Michell simply managed to stretch the stereo image much further, almost as if you'd hit a 'stereo wide' switch on your ghetto blaster. The SME threw out a confident left-to-right image, but it didn't quite have the width of the Michell. The result then was a much deeper sound, if not quite so expansive.

Tonally, the Model 10 is not a warm, euphonic deck by any stretch of the imagination, but to say it is clinical is utterly wrong. Rather, we're back to the glassy clarity than just cuts through the mush and tells you what's on the vinyl. Both the Linn LPI2SE and Michell GyroDec are considerably warmer than the SME, but the SME is by no means cold or lightweight. Rather, it lets you size up each individual instrument in the mix, without fear nor favour. To wit, The Who's 'Wont Get Fooled Again' sounded just a tad warm in the bass

those early analogue designs should be). The point is that the SME doesn't editorialise at all about the tonality of an instrument, and as a result it has a wonderfully varied palette of colours – it's not the aural equivalent of looking at your holiday snaps in Photoshop with all the colour tones taken up.

So, we have a tremendously clear device with wonderfully capacious soundstaging, inside which is an extremely detailed and tightly framed stereo image. What then of the SME's rhythmic and dynamic prowess? Well, once again it was spot on. The opening drums of Roxy Music's 'Take a Chance With Me' was as powerful as I've heard it from anything this side of a Trio L-07D, with excellent attack transients and a feeling





REFERENCE SYSTEM

Michell GyroDec/SME Series V/Koetsu Rod K Signature turntable
 Linn Sondek LP12SE/Ekos SE/Arkiva/Lingo turntable
 Note Products PhoNote phonostage
 Linn Linto phonostage
 MF Audio Silver Passive Preamplifier
 World Audio K5881 power amplifier (modified)
 Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers
 Quad ESL-989 loudspeakers

SECOND THOUGHTS

As far as I'm concerned, there is nothing quite like an SME product. From their construction, fit, finish, detailing, packaging and even instruction manuals, you know you are looking at something truly special, designed by a company with serious engineering ability. The Model 10 turntable is a perfect example. It is magnificent; stunningly finished and intelligently designed in such a way that you do not require a degree in engineering to put it together with the aid of precision tools; you simply unpack it, remove the transit bolt, fit the platter, plug in and go.

The sound of the Model 10 is exactly as you might expect from handling it - solid and weighty with a vast soundstage that just makes everything around you disappear, leaving you completely immersed in the music as it should be. I set the Model 10 up in the office for measurement and photography before David arrived to collect it for the review, but also took the opportunity to have a listen for myself. I actually ended up using it for most of my evaluation of the Anatek phono stage on page 92 and this proved to be a formidable combination. So formidable in fact, that I was rather surprised to hear just how much better it was than the eminently capable Pioneer PLC-590/SME M2-10 setup that we have been using in the *Hi-Fi World* listening room for a while now. Switching back to the Pioneer and cheaper SME removed the ultimate dynamics of the performance and also softened everything generally, but particularly the bass - proof that direct drive will not always 'out-grunt' a good belt drive. I found the Model 10 an utterly addictive component - one of those that you really don't want to stop listening to, but that inspires you to keep digging through the vinyl in order to check out what it is going to pull out of the grooves that you haven't heard before. I may have even sulked for a while when David finally came to take it away [and I'm not bringing it back in a hurry! - Ed].

And the Series V arm? Well, I have lusted after once of these since it first came out in 1986, when I was but a twelve year old lad with a hi-fi obsession. When I finally heard one, it only intensified my determination to own one eventually, something I still stand by to this day. Whilst I am aware that there are a number of high-end tonearms I have yet to hear, as things stand at the moment I look at SME's "The best pick-up arm in the world" slogan and, even twenty one years on, find myself with absolutely no inclination to disagree with them... AS

overall listening experience, and it doesn't have the supernaturally wide imaging of the Michell, but it still comes out as nothing less than deeply pleasurable thing both to listen to and to behold.

CONCLUSION

Personally, I just couldn't get enough of the Model 10's clarity and detailing - and the lively way it hung it all together. Not only is it such a convincing and largely flawless way of playing music, but I loved it for its diminutive dimensions, sheer accessibility and ease of use - plus of course that gorgeous finish. Then there were those delightful details that make life with it such a pleasure, from the precision of the power supply's speed change buttons to that inspired stylus guard that makes hand cueing such a joy. I've always rated SME tonearms as up there with the very best and, as such, I was suspicious that their turntables weren't going to be as good (because very few manufacturers can maintain exemplary standards across their entire product portfolio, or indeed do). I was wrong - the Model 10 is a gem, and lovers of SME arms would be mad to overlook it, as would anyone who prizes clarity, accuracy, neutrality and control in a turntable, all served up with real zeal.

VERDICT

Beautifully transparent, accurate and controlled sounding turntable with peerless finish plus refreshingly diminutive dimensions.

SME MODEL 10	£2,775
SME SERIES V	£1,781
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FOR

- transparency, detail
- depth, scale
- packaging
- finish

AGAINST

- nothing at the price

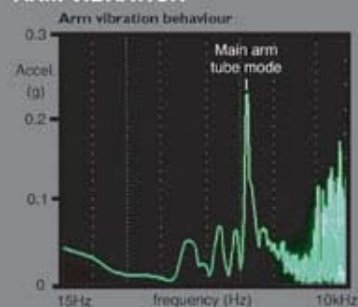
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The 10A returns a good IEC-weighted wow and flutter figure of 0.081% and gives an even result across the frequency spectrum. This speaks volumes for its drive system and motor, which offers good torque and stability. Speed accuracy was good and very stable during measurement.

The SME V arm has a large main resonant mode at just over 1kHz but this is a very narrow peak, meaning that the arm tube itself is well damped. Below this, the arm is very well behaved, suggesting its bass should be good - solid and detailed. At the higher end of the spectrum, the V proved to be quite lively, which should imbue it with a similarly lively sound, although it may not be as smooth as some competitors.

Overall, the SME combo should offer bags of dynamics and detail, with good weight and energy to the sound. It is unlikely to sound dull. AS

ARM VIBRATION



WOW AND FLUTTER

