

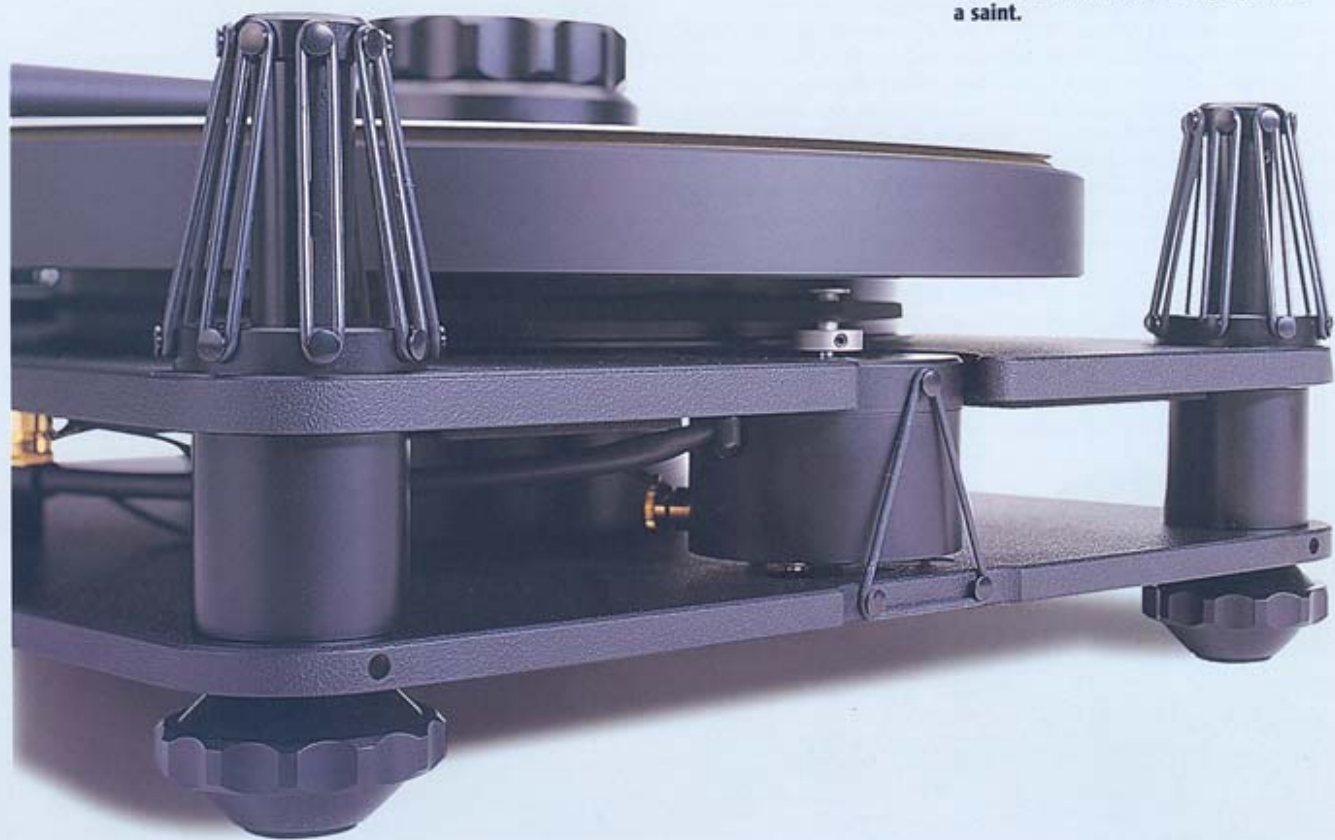
HI-FI CHOICE

THE FINEST HI-FI MAGAZINE IN THE WORLD

**WHY WE
THINK THIS IS
THE BEST TURNTABLE
WE HAVE EVER HEARD!**

HIGH-END TEST

The SME Model 20.2: it's a veritable beast of a turntable, but it plays like a saint.





SME MODEL 20.2A

THIS MONTH'S EDITOR'S CHOICE

There are two products from this month's high-end reviews that warrant the coveted Editor's Choice flag for services to the higher senses. First there's the latest version of the turntable that I managed to borrow off Alan Sircom two years ago and have studiously avoided giving back, namely the SME Model 20.2A. Dave Wiley wrote this review when he was running the Sound Organisation shop in London Bridge, he clearly loves the deck as much as I do, realising that what many thought were shortcomings at its inauguration are in fact omissions of distortion. This turntable and arm are extraordinarily capable when it comes to reproducing solely what's in the grooves rather than the many musical effects created by other designs.



GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The SME Model 20 is a modern classic. Now that a new power supply has taken it to 20.2 status, David Wiley thinks it's unbeatable.

What is so special about a record player that costs over £4,500 without cartridge? Firstly the British hi-fi enthusiast has been accustomed to paying a lot for good record players, ever since the hugely expensive (for its time) Linn LP12/LVII Ittok was released at the beginning of the '80s. In this decade it became commonplace for the record player to take the lion's share of the budget as it became apparent that the skills required to build really top-class players were very expensive. Despite the massive lowering of costs of just about all things electronic, precision engineering remains as expensive as ever. Secondly, there is the small matter of time. The Model 20 is designed to 'last a lifetime' and is engineered to do so, with the minimum of service or set-up hassles. Averaged over a life span of 20-30 years the price seems reasonable. This truly is the only record player any practical person will ever need.

The original turntable released in 1992 was called the Model 20 and cost £2,500 without an arm. With a 'special edition' Series V tone arm fitted, it became the Model 20A player

and cost around £3,800. By mid-1995 the price for a Model 20A was a little over £4,000. Earlier that year it became apparent that the outboard power supply would not meet CE regulations, so rather than modify the existing unit a decision was taken to design an all-new supply. The improved power supply allowed a better motor to be used and these changes improved the performance of the player significantly. This became the Model 20.2, currently priced at £3,402.51 and the Model 20.2A at £4,863. At all times there was a small but worthwhile saving of around £150-£200 to be made by purchasing the turntable and 'Special Edition' Series V arm together as the complete

Isolation is achieved via oil damped pistons with rubber suspension.

player. By word of explanation, the 'Special Edition' arm is a specially selected Series V, detailed in gold to match the Model 20 and 20.2 turntables.

DON'T JUDGE BOOKS...

Most people's first reaction on seeing an SME player for the first time is to comment on how small it is, and then, when invited to lift it, they are amazed by the weight. The footprint is smaller than any other serious player — it will fit inside the plinth of a Roksan Xerxes, yet it weighs well over 40lb, at least twice the mass of an LP12, Xerxes or Pink Triangle. The player is deliberately small and heavy, designed that way to reduce vibrations, which are further controlled by the huge

damping post under the main bearing housing. This control of vibration is fundamental to the design of the player and goes much of the way to explaining the stunning tonal and dynamic neutrality that it exhibits. This neutrality and evenhanded behaviour is the great strength of this player, in fact I would say that it imposes less of its own character onto the music than any other player I have ever used. The SME Model 20.2A is not 'boppy', it does not 'boogie', it isn't 'fast' nor does it exhibit outrageous 'dynamics'; in fact these euphemisms for an identifiable sonic character that are so often used in praise of other players, simply do not apply. In hi-fi terms this player is the absolute embodiment of the term, 'less is more!'

SOUND QUALITY

The Model 20.2A has remarkably little identifiable sonic signature of its own. This lack of



character has caused some commentators to suggest that this player is somehow bland or boring – “rather laid back” is a comment I have heard often. To suggest that I think these people are wrong and that they are completely missing the point of this player is to seriously underestimate my views.

Changing the cartridge alters the sound so completely that it's crystal clear just how neutral a platform the turntable and arm provide, it enables any good cartridge to really give of its best. Different production styles become obvious, good

performances sound great and great performances simply take your breath away. Lesser performances are not 'pulled apart' as happens with a fair few other decks; and in some cases, performances that refuse to

involve the listener on lesser players really come to life on the 20.2A. Beware though, there are musical performances out there that are

genuinely mediocre and the SME absolutely refuses to 'paper over the cracks'. It is also pretty tolerant of the quality of normal pressings, surface noise is not exaggerated and even older, well played records can sound very good indeed. Some 'audiophile' and other premium quality pressings sound absolutely stunning, but then so do some of my vintage Deccas and Blue Notes. All in all, if you're records refuse to involve you, then you can lay the blame firmly at the feet of the musicians and the cartridge.

Comparisons with this player are difficult as there are few, if any, comparably priced players easily available. Most of the recognised good players (Linns, Michells, Roksans, PTs etc) are all about £1,000-£1,500 less expensive, but interestingly it is the comparisons with these less expensive players that most enthusiasts will be interested in making. For the dedicated vinyl lover, who is seriously thinking in terms of that final major upgrade, the 20.2A is an absolute must audition. Once assembled, this player is virtually immune to variations in set-up, it does not go out of adjustment and does not require a visit to a dealer every year or two for a reset or other servicing. Such adjustments as may be required in time can be done by the owner in about 10 minutes and moving the player to another loca-

“Anybody who is lucky enough to live with an SME for a period of time finds that adjusting back to any other player is very difficult.”

tion is very simple.

Furthermore the player does not need an expensive support – a rigid, flat surface is all that is required. SME recommends placing the player on a sheet of metal or glass, about 5-6mm thick, placed on a flat table, a simple and elegant solution that works well. Improvements can be made by using a top class support like the Townshend



Seismic Sink, but the improvements are relatively small compared to what this excellent support does with most other players.

Long term users of other players can sometimes find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that the SME is not 'a better Linn', nor is it 'a better Roksan' or a better anything else – it is totally itself. The lack of sonic signature can be a problem, when coming to the SME from any other, there is an immediate feeling that something is missing, that some aspect of the performance is gone. It takes a while to realise that what is missing is the character of whichever player you are used to, and unconsciously using as a reference. Anybody who is lucky enough to live with an SME for a period of time finds that adjusting back to any other player is really very difficult. After a while, the almost total sonic invisibility of the player becomes normal and the way that the character of other players simply gets between the listener and the music comes as something of a shock. A good recording with a well defined soundstage will produce a well defined soundstage on playback, where as a less good recording will not. It really is as simple as that.

CONCLUSION

If I have appeared to be too uncritical of this player, then I apologise but it is one of the few truly great components to come my way in recent years. As an evaluation and demonstration tool the 20.2A is unsurpassed. On occasions I have tried to set up top class systems only to be frustrated when, despite hours of setting up and fine adjustment, the system simply fails to

The SME may look small but it weighs in at a whopping 18.2kg!

gel. This never happened with an SME player at the front end! I can specifically remember setting up a pair of Martin Logan CLS1 1z's with top quality amplification to evaluate a highly regarded and very expensive CD player. The sound produced was so poor despite hours spent on the system set up, that I actually began to think that there was something wrong with the speakers! After the CD player was removed, the SME was connected and a record placed on the platter. The result was quite superb.

Listening for pleasure gives another insight into its qualities, it is the only player that I have ever used that is totally forgettable. In fact you forget that you are listening to records, you forget that other record players even exist, you forget about everything but the music. I rest my case.

David Wiley formally ran The Sound Organisation dealership.

VERDICT

SOUND	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★★
PRICE	£4,863

A superb and substantial turntable and arm, which shows no character, but just simply plays music without fuss.

■ ONE YEAR GUARANTEE

■ SME, Mill Road, Steyning, W Sussex BN44 3GY
☎ (01903) 814321



The Special Edition Series V tonearm is detailed in gold to match the turntable.