

HI-FI CHOICE

HIGH-END TEST SME MODEL 10

YOUR STARTER for Ten



Jason Kennedy marvels at SME's latest example of engineering excellence.

SME isn't a hi-fi manufacturer, it is a precision engineering company that happens to make hi-fi. It made its name as a hi-fi company in the industry's halcyon days by producing the finest tonearms in the business. And it was the process of creating and perfecting tonearms that led SME into the precision engineering business that is its mainstay today.

To have such a company

expending time and money producing beautiful turntables and arms is a luxury indeed. The level of precision required for the contract work that sustains SME makes the manufacture of turntables and arms look like child's play, but having a Rolls-Royce-plus capability means the standard of engineering is considerably

finer than you're likely to find with other brands. A walk around the factory reveals that other hi-fi manufacturers realise as much – components are made there for some of the biggest names in the business.

If it were solely a matter of profit, SME wouldn't be in the hi-fi business any more, but luckily its proprietor, Alastair Robertson-Aikman, is a bit of an enthusiast. So much so

that he had a substantial listening room built onto his house that has twice appeared in these pages and which currently houses two pairs of heavily braced Quad ESL63 speakers, Krell, Audio Research and LFD amplifiers and the new Model 10 turntable.

This is only the third model that SME has made in its forty plus year history. Admittedly it didn't start with turntables until the 80s, and the previous models have been refined in recent times, but it's still a momentous occasion. The Model 10 is SME's 'entry-level' model and has a matching Model 10 tonearm, the combination retailing for more than £3,000. Not the sort of price usually associated with entry level kit, but when you consider that the next model up, the 20, costs nearly £5,000 with arm, and you take into account the

quality of the engineering that has gone into its manufacture, you realise that it represents good value.

The design of the Model 10 is quite unlike its Model 30 and 20 forebears, which were essentially variations on the same theme. The 10 has some aesthetic similarities to Wilson benesch's Circle deck with its circular base and protruding arm board, but its construction is quite different. It uses a T-shaped subchassis supported on low compliance isolators, the latter use a sorbothane-like material of the same variety you find in Deflex damping products and which has impressive isolation and damping properties. The same material is used for the three adjustable feet that support the chassis, so there's no chance of this deck sliding around, even if you want it to. The feet are all there is to adjust when setting up the deck, there are no springs to balance and all you need for the job is a spirit level.



○ SME produces arguably the finest tonearms in the business – which is why they'll cost yer.



Like other SME designs, this turntable features a threaded centre spindle and matching record clamp, an element which its designer feels confers considerable sonic advantages. Where this model differs is in having a one-piece clamp that simply uses an O ring to avoid damaging the record label.

The platter is driven by belt from a motor unit that will be familiar to users of the Model 20, this being controlled by an eight-bit micro controller in an outboard power supply. The latter is a significant upgrade on previous designs by virtue of having upward-facing switches, thus requiring less familiarity to operate. Speed is crystal referenced and facilitates the usual 45 and 33.3rpm's - you have to spend a bit more if you want to play shellac.

Neat features on the Model 10 include a stylus guard rail to keep flailing limbs away from expensive needles, and an arm base that's pre-cut to accept Rega/Kuzma, standard SME and new Model 10-type mountings.

The new arm is a variant on the popular Model 309 theme with the same detachable headshell and counterbalance. In this case augmented by a threaded tube which combines with a supplied screw to allow precise VTA (vertical tracking angle) setting through arm-height adjustment.

Where it differs from the 309 is in the magnesium arm tube as found in the range topping Series V, but costs have been controlled by the use of a base which is simplified but nonetheless allows traditional SME alignment by fore/aft sled-style movement. Anyone familiar with the dying art of cartridge alignment will testify that the SME system is a superb design. The Model 10 variant isn't quite as glorious, but it's nicer than most alternatives.

This is the first tonearm I've used with a removable and



● The 10's PSU is more ergonomic than most.

twistable headshell, and thus the first time I've checked the uprightness of the needle on the record with the aid of a mirror an alarming process that suggested in two instances a headshell which is parallel to the platter is not necessarily correct. Or, to put it another way, both cartridges used required a bit of headshell rotation to get the tip to stand upright in the groove - an adjustment few arms allow.

SOUND QUALITY

The cartridges employed for this assessment were a Wilson benesch Carbon and a recently rejuvenated van den Hul Grasshopper III GLA (complete with tip

once more!) Elsewhere in the replay chain were DNM Start and PA35 amplification, a Michell Iso/Lithos phono stage and Living Voice Avatar speakers. Cables were vdH on the Model 10 with DNM and Electrofluidics thereafter - the supports I'll go into shortly.

I've been using an SME Model 20A for some time now and have become so familiar with it that I no longer hear it - not that there's much to hear. So the Model 10 was up against tough competition when it first took over the record playing mantle, but its limitations are very skilfully disguised and all I really missed of the 20 was its bottom-end power - a factor, no doubt, of the lighter platter and less compliant suspension on the Model 10.

Initially I made a couple of comparisons with CD - an odious pursuit indeed, but one which revealed the deck's light, open and relatively forward character. Using polycarbonate and vinyl from Classic Records' DAD series revealed the 10's

impressive detail-scouring skills, which brought out the age of the recordings as well as the leading edges of notes.

It's clearly a nimble deck and isn't phased by complex material. What's more, bass power is not in short supply. Massive Attack's bass-heavy *Angel*, for instance, had me transfixed with its darkness and presence.

It has a bit of a penchant for reverb and other elements of acoustic space, revelling in the natural echo from Zakir Hussain's tabla on *Making Music* and picking up the lack of stereo focus on a less impressive print of *Kind Of Blue*



The results of this test

were gleaned for the most part with the 10 on a Townshend Seismic Stand, a support that isolates components using pneumatic suspension, and clearly makes life easier for anything that's placed upon it. So to give the deck's suspension a sterner test, I placed it on the carbon fibre top shelf of a Wilson benesch Asside support.

Here the close proximity of medium-sized loudspeakers standing on wooden floorboards rather undermined the 10's performance, particularly in the bass, which lost its precision, and in the midrange which hardened up.

This is a fairly common result when making such a transition, but served to reveal the limited scope of the Model 10's suspension. Clearly with more solid floors or greater distance between deck and speakers this limitation would not be an issue, but it's something to bear in mind if circumstances are restricted.

Switching cartridges over to the heavy, open-bodied

"It's a nimble deck and isn't phased by complex material. What's more, bass power is not in short supply."

Grasshopper was an extremely rewarding exercise, the resulting coherence and clarity easily supporting the unhealthy price of this rare needle. One startling result was the clarification of rap lyrics on one track (*Obvious* by DJ Vadim, ironically enough) which also turned out to have a strange gong in the background - previously the words were too difficult to discern and the gong just a strange noise. Proving that the 10 is more than a match for cartridges costing as much as the deck itself.

CONCLUSION

The SME Model 10 is a welcome addition to a very fine range, handling all sorts of material with an open and persuasive balance that encourages you to keep on listening and hunting for more vinyl (it is out there by the way). As well as being stylish it's ridiculously well made - so forget your BMWs and your Lexii. This is Rolls-Royce Aerospace grade hi-fi and it's a bargain at the price.

This Month's Editor's Choice

I was well chuffed to get hold of the **SME Model 10** (p66) before everyone else, its a real beauty and the sort of deck that would appeal to both rhythm and timing brigade and those more concerned with stereo, bandwidth and so on. Listening to Ali Farka Touré last night i was transported to a spiritually uplifting place...I'd say three grand is a bargain for that sort of experience.

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★

BUILD ★★★★★

VALUE ★★★★★

PRICE DECK £2,643.75

TONEARM £689.33

● A beautifully made deck that warrants the asking price in engineering terms alone, needs good quality support and fully warrants the finest ancillaries to give of its best.

■ ONE YEAR GUARANTEE

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