

ABSOLUTE Analog

A New Twist



On an Old Idea

SME 20/12 TURNTABLE SYSTEM

Jim Hannon

Twelve-inch tonearms have always held a fascination for many analog enthusiasts, including the late Alastair Robertson-Aikman (AR-A), who reportedly designed one for his personal use nearly fifty years ago. Prodded by other audiophiles to make it a commercial product, AR-A introduced the SME Model 3012 Precision Pick-Up arm and its smaller nine-inch sibling, the Model 3009, in 1959, to immediate critical and commercial success. Indeed, SME is reported to have sold close to half-a-million units of the 3000 Series arms, and they are still considered “classics” among audio cognoscenti.

The longer SME 3012, with its decreased lateral-tracing-angle distortion, is highly sought after on the used market, but is incompatible with modern, high-mass, low-compliance moving coils. Although AR-A designed another twelve-inch tonearm more recently, the SME 312, it did not incorporate enough of what he had learned in the evolution of his flagship tonearms, the SME V and IV, to satisfy him. Hence, we now have the new SME 312S tonearm, which is only available on a completely new turntable designed to accommodate it. As this new combo, the SME 20/12, was regrettably AR-A's final design, one might easily

conclude that it would be his “statement” turntable system, but that pride of place is reserved for the more costly SME 30/2 and its companion SME V (or SME IV.Vi) tonearm, according to Sumiko, the U.S. importer. Yet, the new SME 20/12 turntable system is mighty special, and, I dare say, some may even prefer it to its more costly bigger brother.

But before we go too far into a discussion of this new mechanical-engineering masterpiece, why would anyone in his right mind spend ten-times more for the SME 20/12 when he could buy a very good turntable system like the fine Pro-Ject RM-10 that I reviewed a

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SME 20/12 Turntable System

few months ago (Issue 172)? A turntable is not something that you can drive or wear to impress the neighbors and, for many, critical listening is frequently a solitary experience. Well, it's because the SME 20/12 has an uncanny ability to bring the performers into the room, and it reproduces music with a sense of effortlessness that, once heard, may make it difficult to accept anything less.

Fortunately, I was able to compare the SME 20/12, outfitted with the somewhat under-appreciated Sumiko Celebration cartridge, with a Pro-Ject RM-10 that I tricked out with a VPI SDS speed controller and a Gingko air-suspension platform. Make no mistake, the Pro-Ject RM-10 is a really fine performer and shares many compelling sonic attributes with the SME 20/12. When it is coupled with the SDS, its rock-solid pitch stability rivals that of the SME. The Pro-Ject RM-10 rig displayed very good focus, detail, and transparency, as well as well-controlled and articulate bass on Joni Mitchell's *Wild Things Run Fast* [Geffen]. However, when I switched to the SME 20/12, subtle details came through more clearly and

images were sharper and more three-dimensional. Bass had more weight and control, making bass lines more articulate and dynamic peaks more thrilling. Joni's voice was reproduced without the slightest hint of grain or excess sibilance—and was even more seductive on the wonderful reissue of *Blue* [Reprise/Rhino Vinyl]. Whereas the RM-10's low noise floor was commendable, the SME 20/12's was eerily silent. Music emerged from an even blacker background, perhaps the quietest I've ever heard, rivaling that of the SME 30/2. Admittedly, I haven't had the pleasure of experiencing either the Walker or the Rockport, but the silence from this 'table, including its lack of groove noise, is remarkable.

The 20/12 has the uncanny ability to bring the performers into the room

Only in direct comparison to the SME 20/12 did I notice that the RM-10 lost some of its composure on the complex passages and dynamic peaks of the Paganini Violin Concertos Nos. 1 and 2 [EMI/Alto] and the Shostakovich Fifth Symphony [Mercury/Speakers Corner]. The SME 20/12 was unfazed by either of these LPs, but what was more shocking was that, now, the orchestra seemed to hit the attacks as one, as if a better conductor had taken the baton and demanded more precise playing from the musicians. Lastly, the illusion of the performers in the room was more palpable and holographic, with a better sense of the hall.

Most importantly, the SME 20/12 had a unique sense of effortlessness. Let me try to describe what I mean by this. Suppose you have two athletes who run the 5000 meters in the same time, but one does it by sheer force of will, whereas the other glides around the track and doesn't even seem to be out of breath at the conclusion of the race. Well, the first runner is more like the RM-10 and most other turntables, whereas the second is like the SME 20/12. It glides without seeming effort and music floats as if on

a cushion of air. The listening experience is not only more relaxing but also more engaging.

One design element that undoubtedly contributes to this sense of effortlessness is the longer tonearm, which produces significantly less tracking error and distortion. However, a twelve-inch tonearm can also produce more resonance through its longer arm tube, and its additional mass can be more difficult to control and puts more strain on the cartridge cantilever. To minimize these deleterious effects, AR-A used an extremely lightweight, yet rigid, magnesium arm tube, similar to that used in the SME V and IV.Vi, but with a detachable magnesium headshell. The 312S is not only 27 grams lighter than the standard 312 (already among the best twelve-inchers), but is also stiffer and less resonant. It is also compatible with a wide range of cartridges, performing beautifully with a Lyra Titan at CES. With the 312S, which includes a fluid damping trough, you get the seductive midrange openness and soundstage depth you hear from the best linear-trackers, but without a loss of bass weight and extension—a drawback of many, but not all, linear-tracking designs.

The SME 20/12 has that special ability to draw you deeply into the music and the performance with any decently recorded record, not just a favored few. In terms of perception, the performance becomes "figure" and the audiophile checklist becomes "ground." Listening to Vladimir Ashkenazy's Rachmaninoff Preludes [London], I thought I was at a live concert. I found myself transfixed by the performance, listening to Ashkenazy's phrasing, the singing tone he was able to elicit from the piano, his phenomenal virtuosic technique and musicianship, and even his pedaling. I listened for these same attributes when I heard him perform several times in transcendent solo recitals at Carnegie Hall. With the 20/12, the piano and the performance seemed to breathe as they did in the live performances.

One specious criticism that has been leveled at the bigger SME tables is that they don't "boogie" enough. That's just plain hogwash! The leading edges

Specs & Pricing

Type: Belt drive, manual turntable with 12" tonearm

Speeds: 33.3, 45, and 78 rpm

Dimensions: 20.47" x 14.76" x 6.83"

Weight: 78.1 lbs. (net); 100 lbs. (shipping weight)

Price: \$28,000

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

VPI Aries turntable (TNT V platter & bearing), Graham 1.5 arm (w/2.2 bearing), and Koetsu Black cartridge; Pro-Ject RM-10 turntable; Sumiko Celebration cartridge; MFA Venusian preamp (Frankland modified) and Art Audio Vinyl Reference phono stage; PrimaLuna ProLogue Six amplifiers and DiaLogue Two integrated amplifier; Hyperion HPS-938, Quad ESL-2805 and ESL-57 (PK modified) loudspeakers; Virtual Dynamics and Goertz cables

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Hometheatermag.com, June 2006

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UltimateAVmag.com, June 2006



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Howard Ferstler, Sensible Sound, Issue 111, Jan/Feb 2007

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of transients are neither blunted nor exaggerated, and speed accuracy is spot on. It's true that the SME 'tables don't sing along with the music, but that's a very good thing. Since the SME 20/12 and its brethren control unwanted resonances so extraordinarily well, what you do hear on all types of music is a much cleaner, more transparent, and more detailed sound, without spurious artifacts. With the 20/12, I often felt as if I were listening to a direct feed from the recording studio—or that the drummer and rhythm section had been replaced with musicians who kept better time. Whether you listen to *Portrait in Jazz* [Riverside/OJC] from the Bill Evans Trio, or JJ Cale's and Eric Clapton's first-time collaboration, *The Road to Escondido* [Reprise], I bet your toes will be tapping. Hey, you just might get up and start dancing to JJ Cale's great track, "When This War Is Over." Here again, you'll undoubtedly focus on the wonderful performances.

Although you might get lucky, what I've learned the hard way over the years is that you just can't slap a great tonearm on a great 'table and be guaranteed great sound. Fortunately, the SME 20/12 is a thoroughly designed 'table and arm system, with straightforward setup and minimal "care and feeding" to keep it sounding its best. If you live outside the range of a competent dealer, this is a very important factor when considering the purchase of a high-performance analog rig. While based on the design of the SME 20/2, the 20/12 'table is almost twice as heavy, with a wider and thicker plinth and a larger-diameter platter. To support this extra mass, it uses eight more elastomer suspension bands than its smaller counterpart, and employs a heavier-duty bearing that is based on the same design. Of course, it easily accommodates that low-distortion, twelve-inch arm. While the 312S has a connector between its magnesium arm tube and headshell, in contrast to the SME IV and V's one-piece construction, it provides the most secure connection of any detachable headshell I've encountered. If you like to swap stereo and mono cartridges, for example, this approach makes it really convenient.

Just in case you want to experiment with other arms, you can easily flip the arm-

board over to accept a standard, nine-inch arm. This might make sense for occasional comparisons, but if you really plan on using a superb nine-inch arm, such as the SME V, SME IV.Vi, Graham Phantom, or Tri-Planar, instead of the supplied SME 312S, you might want to seriously consider digging a little deeper and getting the SME 30/2. Be assured that the SME 20/12 table is just as meticulously engineered and executed as the SME 30/2, it's just that the 30/2 offers even more fanatical isolation and additional mass. Alternatively, you could save yourself a bundle and go with the SME 20/2, which like its costlier siblings, offer superb isolation, ultra-low bearing noise, and benefits from the rock-solid speed stability and fine-tuning flexibility of the new SME power supply, first introduced on the SME 30/2 early last year. But if you're one of those who falls hard for the unique sonic qualities of this larger footprint SME table with its long arm, and I count myself among this number, the 20/12 will reward you handsomely.

Let me conclude by saying that Alastair Robertson-Aikman saved some of his best audio design work for last. As one might expect from his previous achievements, this is one turntable system that excels in what a turntable is supposed to do—control unwanted airborne and mechanical resonances, minimize bearing noise, maintain precise speed accuracy and stability, and let the cartridge extract all the information it can from the grooves. Its brilliant 312S tonearm provides a significant reduction in tracking error without incurring the typical resonance and control liabilities associated with longer arms. Admittedly, the law of diminishing returns is at play here, but like a Stradivarius or Guarnerius violin, there's something very special about what the SME 20/12 does (or doesn't do) that arguably justifies its price. Music is reproduced effortlessly with superb transparency, soundstaging, focus, realism, and dynamic range. Like few other components in my experience, it simply turns your hi-fi into a musical event, enabling you to get lost in both the music and the performance. **TAS**