

# SME 20/12A

SME 'gives it large' with a new 12-inch tonearm and turntable to match

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**T**welve-inch tonearms are pretty exotic beasts. You might find them in Japanese high-end magazines and see them on the occasional Platine Verdier but for the most part they are the stuff of audiophilia nervosa in extremis. However, there are some sound reasons for an arm that is longer than the traditional nine inches: primarily, the longer the arm is, the less tracing error you get. Or to put it another way, the longer the cantilever will remain parallel to the groove as the stylus

19mm spindle and an all-up weight of 33.5kg, it comes pretty close to SME's range-topper in many respects. In truth, it is a completely new turntable that shares very few parts with either range-mate, but the name stuck.

The 312S tonearm looks similar to the standard 312 but is made of magnesium like the Series V and has the fluid damping trough found on that model. It also has silver (internal) and silver-plated copper (external) wiring from van den Hul. The external power

bit less exciting than a regular nine-inch arm turntable but that's down to a reduction in distortion. Some of vinyl's thrill power is a direct result of the euphonic foibles (distortion, in other words) that a turntable, arm and cartridge bring to the party. There is very little evidence of that here but that doesn't mean the sound is dull: it's as gripping as the music makes it.

With a decent cartridge such as the van den Hul Condor, this can be thrilling and revealing in equal measure. In fact, it left us wondering if the makers of certain classic albums from back in the day could hear the same results when they were monitoring in the studio. This question arose because of the extreme bass we found on Stevie Wonder's *Superstition*, which came across in overpowering fashion through our big ATC active speakers. In contrast to this, much more up to date recordings with heavy bass sounded tight, deep and controlled, so it's not the turntable losing control. As well as power, this SME also delivers that vital vinyl quality of openness through the midband, delving into the mix and pulling out the reverb to glorious effect.

The 20/12A is both a superb piece of engineering and an extraordinary transcriber of vinyl recordings. It delivers sonic precision and flow, whilst delving into the deepest details with ease. As a tool to illustrate just why wee vinyl heads still love analogue sound, it's among the very best. And it still fits on a standard support, just. 🍛

Jason Kennedy

See the May 2007 edition of *Hi-Fi Choice* for the original review of this product

## "The 20/12A is both a superb piece of engineering and an extraordinary transcriber of vinyl recordings"

transcribes the vinyl. The cost, of course, is that the longer the arm is, the more difficult it will be to control resonances within it. Oh, and the bigger the turntable that supports it has to be. With its massive, die-cast magnesium beam, the SME 312S, which comes fitted to the 20/12A, is designed to give you the benefits of the breed without its shortcomings.

When SME conceived of this turntable it was due to be a bigger version of the Model 20, but things seemed to have got a little out of hand in the evolutionary process and the 20/12A has ended up being a far more substantial turntable all together. In fact, it's closer to a Model 30. The aluminium chassis plates are considerably thicker and the suspension towers in each corner are a lot chunkier. With a 6.5kg platter sitting on a

supply is a highly refined, three-phase device that offers 33, 45 and 78rpm.

Feeding our test system, this proved to be an extraordinarily refined and revealing turntable that reproduces all manner of music and digs out the smallest nuances whilst swinging major-league dynamics. As ever with SMEs, the 20/12A is as self effacing as a record player can be. It simply gets out of the way and lets the music through, so that all the sonic character comes from the recording rather than the transcription process – pick-up cartridge allowing.

Nonetheless, it is possible to assess what this turntable does more effectively than its competitors. It is both cleaner and faster while also pushing the noise floor down thanks to vanishing levels of distortion. It might seem a

