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SME Model 12A

The company has introduced a second turntable package, priced to appeal to a new generation of customers and upgraders alike. Could it be the answer to all your needs?
 Review: **David Price** Lab: **Paul Miller**

It was the Synergy [*HFN* Mar '19] that saw SME strike out in a new direction, following its acquisition in late 2016 by the Cadence group. The company's first ever turntable package, the Synergy came with an arm derived from the SME IV, Ortofon Windfeld Ti cartridge and boasted an integrated phono stage made by Nagra. It also came with a £14,950 price tag. Now SME has reinvigorated its turntable portfolio still further with the introduction of a far more affordable package.

Costing £7949, the Model 12A comes equipped with a 309 tonearm, though no cartridge or phono stage. But if you're thinking the deck's other component pieces look a little familiar, that's because they're shared with their costlier brother.

SME's Chief Executive Officer Stuart McNeilis says the main reason the company decided to introduce the Model 12A was to fill the gap created by the exit of the Model 10, previously SME's entry level deck. 'The Model 12A provides a much higher specification and performance than the outgoing Model 10,' he says, 'with the modern look and style of the Synergy.'

The result is a package that's as likely to appeal to the well-heeled music lover who isn't necessarily into the rarified world of hi-fi as it is to a generation of audiophiles now looking to upgrade older high-end turntables from other brands.

HEAVY METAL

Weighing 25.9kg in total, the Model 12A is extremely heavy compared to your average British audiophile deck. Finish is immaculate while the deck exudes the same quality feel one has come to expect from a company whose products have been at the forefront of precision audio engineering for decades. As with the Synergy, it's a multi-storey 'trilateral' design, as SME describes it, having a

RIGHT: With core components derived from the Synergy deck, the Model 12A employs the same speed controller and features a 4.6kg damped alloy platter with SME's familiar diamond-turned top surface

sturdy cast aluminium base. The upper part of the chassis hosts the tonearm, the bearing assembly and inner platter along with a belt-drive motor that's isolated by rubber bands. The main bearing is 19mm in diameter and machined from high-chrome tool steel while the 4.6kg main platter is machined from aluminium and shared with both the company's Synergy and Model 15 [*HFN* Oct '15].

The platter starts up swiftly when you select the desired speed by pressing the button on the electronic control unit. This PSU/speed controller has a case made from high-quality aluminium and uses a closed-loop servo system run by a microprocessor. Three speeds are offered – 33.3, 45 and 78rpm – with ±0.01% fine pitch speed adjustment, plus a 'lock' LED to confirm when the deck is running at exactly the desired speed.

As for the supplied 309 tonearm, this uses mono-crystal silver internal wiring sourced from co-brand Crystal Cable, as opposed to the 'off-the-shelf' 309 which has vdH cable. The 309 has been on sale

now for some 30 years, and is essentially a 'cost cut' V with detachable headshell.

UPGRADE OPTIONS

Some purists may still throw their arms up in despair at this headshell arrangement, but the coupling system that SME employs for the 309 is extremely solid and has

proven not to compromise sound quality. The armtube itself is a one-piece design made from magnesium and employs constrained layer damping. Its bearing housing is a beautifully made affair with top quality bearings that give the arm

a silky feel when hand-cueing. Should you wish, there's also the option to specify a Series IV or V tonearm when ordering the deck, though at extra cost. For my listening, the 309 arm was fitted with a £2699 EMT JSD 6 MC cartridge [*HFN* Jun '19] and the deck's heavy, threaded record clamp was used throughout the session.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the Model 12A is the range of finishes offered – and from a

'It pounded along with thrilling slam and power'





company that until now has adopted the Henry Ford 'any colour you like as long as it's black' approach. Alongside the regular SME finish you can now specify your new deck in either Dark Grey or, as pictured here, Dark Blue [see boxout, below].

HOUSE MUSIC

The Model 12A will be familiar to those who have previously heard – or owned – an SME turntable in that it retains the Steyning company's 'house sound'. This can perhaps best be described as being 'clean', neutral and even-handed. It's a presentation that's extremely difficult to dislike.

The way the deck can take you to the heart of the music is invigorating. Play The Cocteau Twins' 'Lazy Calm' [Victorialand; 4AD CAD 602] and suddenly you find yourself re-evaluating your thoughts on this serene '80s mix as the Model 12A scythes through the haze of the dreamy, reverb-drenched production. Now you begin to appreciate the way in which the vocals and heavily-processed electronic keyboards

are layered in a fashion that dissolves the barriers between you, the listener, and the recording studio. As everything snaps into focus, you become aware of the accuracy of the stereo imaging and the manner in which the tape effects are locked to a particular part of the soundstage, rather than floating around nebulously.

True, the deck's unmediated sound means that at times this track loses some of its mystery – its 'romance' if you like. While the recording can seem like the audio equivalent of an impressionist painting when heard on other decks, the contrast here couldn't be more stark. However, if you're seeking a turntable package to transcribe almost exactly what's present in the groove, then this is it.

Stereo imaging is one of the Model 12A's real strengths. Indeed, it is one of the few high-end decks that is truly successful at conveying the precise location of all the various musical strands in a mix. The result is that the listener is able to focus on any particular instrument or vocal and follow

ABOVE: Seen here in (very) Dark Blue livery, the Model 12A is supported on four large, polymer-damped adjustable feet. The partnering 309 tonearm is re-wired with silver Crystal Cable

it throughout the song with ease. Sandii & The Sunsets' 'Living On The Front Line' [Immigrants; Yen Records YLR-28004] is a quirky electropop track from the early '80s, and one of those recordings that keeps getting better the more you listen to it. The Model 12A dug deep to reveal vast amounts of information, the lead guitar clear to hear through the entire track.

On lesser decks the instrument can easily become crowded out, subsumed into the overall 'fray' of what is a busy, condensed and compressed pop song. Here it was pinned in space with true precision, rather than fading in and out, popping up every now and again from behind the lead vocals and percussion.

Again, the Model 12A revealed the 'tiered' nature of the production, with different layers set behind one another, all carefully marshalled, ensuring this was no longer a morass of sound. Indeed, anyone with a Model 12A may find themselves deliberately choosing densely produced programme material, just to experience how skilfully the deck 'unpacks' it all!

FOUR ON THE FLOOR

This is not to say that the turntable succeeds only in 'hi-fi' terms, because it's clearly a highly engaging and involving performer with a variety of material – whether it be a highly polished production or not. Flowered Up's 'Weekender' [Heavenly HVN 16X] is a punchy indiepop single from the early '90s that showed how deftly the deck handles complex rhythms.

The Model 12A is not a turntable that aims to tempt with euphony. Rather, it's ↻

NOW IN COLOUR...

SME's CEO, Stuart McNeilis, says that black will always be his company's trademark colour. 'This is in line with our founder's design requirements and specification finish,' he told *HFN*. 'However, in recent years we've experimented, and released some different colours for select products – namely the Model 10 and Model 12A – as a result of customer feedback and market research.' It was this very customer input that caused SME to offer the Dark Blue and Grey colour variants on the new turntable. 'The objective was to introduce an elegant and current colour theme to complement the traditional and popular black finish. Indeed, there are plans to extend the colour range of the Model 12A in the near future by way of a colour selector/configurator at the point of sale, and on the SME website, which will include aspects of customisation. The price point will remain the same for all colour variants.' As well as being a replacement for the Model 10, McNeilis says the idea behind the Model 12A was 'to attract a new generation of SME customers, with its modern appeal, high specification, superior performance and attractive price point'.

TURNTABLE



a matter-of-fact performer, preferring to hammer out low-end leading edges like a virtuoso 'four on the floor' drummer. The result was that 'Weekender' pounded along with thrilling slam and power, the deck sounding surefooted and wonderfully secure. The focus was on solidity and grip, and in particular I loved the way it revealed the relationship between the hi-hat, snare and bass drum patterns.

NAILED DOWN

Having reviewed the Synergy with its SME IV-derived tonearm and made comparisons in the past between the stock IV and 309 arms on several decks, it was illuminating to hear the 'tickled up' 309 on what is a very similar platform to the Synergy.

Grace Jones' 'My Jamaican Guy' [Warm Leatherette; Island Records ILPS 9722] is a great reggae-tinged song with some serious percussion work from the rhythm section hosted by Sly and Robbie. If the 309 arm here differed from the Synergy's modified IV it was only that the percussion's subtle dynamic accents were not quite as fully resolved and that the periodic bass drum 'thunk' was perhaps a shade diminished.

Otherwise the Model 12A made more than a fine job of the track, giving an admirably focused, detailed and controlled take on it. And there were plenty of other aspects to enjoy, such as the deft handling of the cymbals which had a tightly defined and tonally pure sound that glistened out of the mix.

As you would expect from an SME turntable, the Model 12A sounds 'meaty', and that's not just down to

ABOVE: The combined outrigger / tonearm base is part of SME's 'trilateral' subchassis, supported on three damped columns, and also holding the bearing

the general confidence and poise of its presentation. There's also a subtle tonal warmth that invests bass with real weight. This strong and gutsy sound is underpinned by the deck's fine speed stability, which ensures every bass guitar or double-bass note is a meaningful occasion.

Dance music dominated by heavily-modulated bass synthesisers such as Uncle Bob's 'Burly House' [Stress Records 12STR 7] gains some welcome extra heft thanks to this low-end warmth. A vintage techno track, sub-bass runs right through it, and the Model 12A certainly isn't shy about showing this. It delivered the sort of visceral thump only a true high-end turntable is capable of, the stylus feeling as if it was nailed down into the groove. 🎧

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

This is a no-nonsense, compact, user-friendly package that will cut to the heart of the musical mix to reward with a sound that's taut, precise and highly detailed. Add the superlative build quality and you have a package that punches far above its weight when it comes to value for money. And while its new finish options may still lack the 'razzmatazz' of some rivals, many will want the deck for precisely this reason.

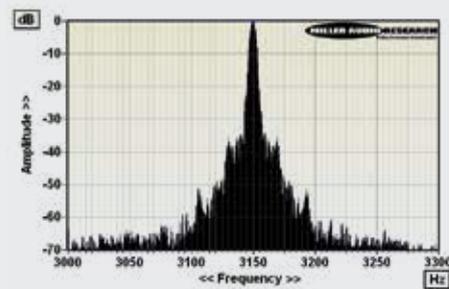
Sound Quality: 90%



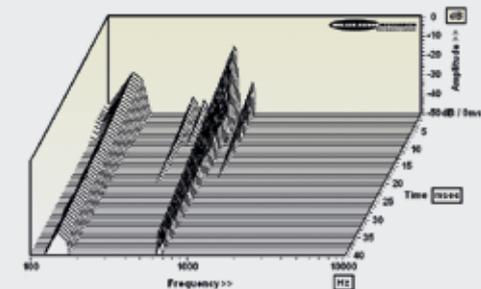
SME MODEL 12A

The Model 12A's platter, bearing and motor are clearly derived from the Synergy deck [HFN Mar 19], as is the MOSFET-based PSU/speed controller. Once again, the 4.6kg alloy platter spins up within four seconds while the wow and flutter, and rumble, specifications are as close to that of the Synergy as production tolerances might predict. So, our sample was also a mere -0.05% adrift in absolute speed while the peak wow remained at a respectably low 0.015% [see Graph 1, below]. Peak flutter was actually slightly lower at 0.030% (versus 0.035%) and visible here in a reduction in amplitude of the shoulders at ±20Hz. The same, or similar, 19mm chrome-steel spindle and bearing registered a mere -71.5dB through-groove rumble, improving to -72.7dB with the record clamp in place. Once again, the through-bearing rumble is quieter still at just -74.7dB (DIN B-weighted).

The partnering 309 tonearm, despite not being a 'one-piece' tube/headshell, is arguably a simpler design than either the Synergy or Series IV [HFN Jun '10] – the adjustment and locking for the underslung counterweight, for example, lacking those convenient 'finger controls'. However, the tapered tube, bearing yoke and counterweight rail are all still fashioned from a single magnesium alloy die-casting, and even with the robust locking collar for the headshell, the effective mass is still just 10g. Comparing the resonant spectra [waterfall, Graph 2] is intriguing – like the SME IV and Synergy, the first bending mode occurs at around 150Hz but the principal higher-Q harmonic/twisting mode occurs at a higher (midrange) 680Hz here. So the 309 will have a different 'tone'... Finally, as expected, the pre-loaded bearings offer almost zero friction and no detectable play. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz, 5Hz per minor division)



ABOVE: Cumulative tonearm resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing, pillar and 'tube' vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.32rpm (-0.05%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.015% / 0.030%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-71.5dB / -72.7dB (with clamp)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-74.7dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-60.1dB
Power Consumption	5W (<1W idle)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	370x178x350mm / 25.9kg