

Equipment Reviews

SME Model 35 Turntable and Series Vi Tonearm

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From the moment the Union Jack covering was slipped off the new SME Model 35 turntable and Series Vi tonearm at the press launch last April in London, England, I knew that this was going to be a very special product to review!

SME has been building what I regard as the world's finest tonearms since 1959, when the original Series I pickup arm was launched. The firm's entry into turntables came much later, with the debut of the SME Model 30 in 1991. It was an astonishing move, coming as it did right at the tail end of the vinyl era, when CD was taking over. It was also a serious statement of intent by one of the world's most-respected audio engineering brands. It's difficult to surmise what drove SME's founder, Alastair Robertson-Aikman, to release a statement turntable when



most people believed that the market for this kind of product was fast disappearing. I imagine he wanted to demonstrate, while there was still time, that there was far more information on a vinyl record than most people realized.

The SME Model 30 was universally feted, and ushered in the era of the super-deck that continues to this day. The Model 30 remained at the very pinnacle of SME's range until the arrival of the Model 60 in March 2022.

The Model 60 featured a raft of improvements in terms of isolation, rigidity, damping, motor control, finish, and sonics. Through the use of advanced composites for the tonearm, the Model 60 drew on new advances in materials science. In addition, the Model 60 unveiled a new, more cohesive design language, which was much easier on the eyes. SME was well aware that the slightly ungainly-looking suspension turrets and rubber bands of the Model 30 pushed the boundaries of domestic harmony, so when developing the more elegant Model 60, the firm worked hard to shed those slightly agricultural looks.



Model 60

With the Model 60 taking such a significant performance leap, it wasn't long before SME's engineering department undertook a ground-up redevelopment of the Model 30, seeking to close the performance gap to the Model 60. The Model 35 replaces the Model 30 as the

second-best turntable SME can make. It may be standing on the shoulders of the Model 35 expertly set up in the living room

of giants, but I think the new Model 35 is the most beautiful turntable SME has ever made. It manages to integrate the gravitas, heft, and imperturbability of the Model 60 into a more elegantly proportioned whole. I had no problem at all fitting the SME Model 35 on the top shelf of my equipment rack, and even managed to squeeze the speed-control module up there, too.

I had been warned that of all the turntables in the SME line, the Model 35 is the most complex to set up, so I elected to leave it to an expert. A few days later, Kells—who is probably the best SME turntable setup engineer in the world—arrived and installed the deck for this review. Unfortunately, I was flying to Milan that day and missed seeing him at work, but I came home to a very nice surprise in the living room!



The Model 35 expertly set up in the living room

Technology and engineering

The Model 35 is a suspended-subchassis design, powered by a sophisticated and highly regulated AC motor control system. It weighs just over 70 pounds, but is quite compact for such a heavyweight, measuring 18.9" W x 8.7" H x 16.9" D. Four finishes are available. In the standard

black or silver anodized finishes, the Model 35 sells for US\$38,999 or £35,999; for the special midnight blue or gunmetal anodized versions, the price is US\$41,165 or £37,999. SME has recently been rationalizing its range, which now comprises the entry-level Model 8 at £9999; the Model 12 MK2, which starts at £18,840; the Synergy MK2, which starts at £33,960; the Model 35, from £35,999; and the Model 60, which starts at £66,960 (all prices include 20% VAT).

The Model 35 is a sophisticated three-column design, derived from the four-column layout of the Model 60. As on the Model 60, an elastomeric belt suspension system provides isolation and damping vertically and laterally, rather than just vertically as is the case with most suspended turntables. The chassis is significantly thicker and more rigid than the Model 30's, so it doesn't require the strengthening beam fitted to its predecessor's subchassis. The whole assembly sits on three decoupled multipoint feet, which permit easy height adjustment for leveling. Above the feet is a massive aluminum base, to which the motor and its separate power connection terminal are mounted. This base is over an inch thick, and it mirrors the contours of the huge suspension columns, as does the subchassis. The motor is a powerful synchronous AC



Note the rear RCA phono connections and socket for the PSU feed

type that is compliantly mounted to the base. The massive, high-carbon-steel main bearing shaft sits on a precision ball bearing and uses sintered-bronze bushings. The bearing is hydraulically damped in a bath of silicone fluid to further isolate vibrations and resonances

resulting from rotation of the platter or motor noise. The silicone bath is similar to that employed on the Model 60, and is mounted to the turntable base.

The huge and heavy subchassis is hung from each of the three suspension columns via 15 elastomeric suspension belts per tower. Unlike the Model 60's towers, however, there are no lateral support bands built into the towers. There is just a single lateral support band mounted underneath the subchassis to steady the whole assembly and damp lateral movement.

The 24-pole AC synchronous motor is controlled from a two-box system identical to that of the Model 60. The first box is a mains transformer, which sends an unregulated supply to the speed-control unit. The speed-control unit uses a dedicated DSP engine to generate a pair of pure sine waves—tuned to the turntable's motor to optimize performance—which provide precise control of frequency, phase relationship, and amplitude. The circuit design utilizes high-quality components surface-mounted on a gold-plated PCB.



The Model 35's speed-control unit is built like the rest of the turntable—beautifully

In common with the rest of the turntable, the casework for these control boxes is beautifully machined and hard-anodized. A single power button starts and stops rotation, and a large rotary knob enables fine-tuning of speed. Speed selection is controlled by pressing the rotary knob when the turntable isn't spinning, and 33½-rpm or 45-rpm operation is indicated by blue LEDs. It's gloriously intuitive and a joy to use.

The tonearm fitted to the Model 35 is a new-generation SME Series V, branded “i” for improved. It’s identical in all respects to the outgoing Series V, except that the armtube is now CNC-machined from an advanced high-density polymer material that, according to SME, offers significantly lower resonance than the original magnesium tube. This is the same material employed in the Series VA tonearm fitted to the Model 60, but where the armtube of the VA has a trilobed cross-section for even greater rigidity, the Vi keeps the original Series V round profile. The Series Vi is wired with Crystal Cable, which is terminated and directly wired into high-quality gold-plated RCA phono sockets at the rear of the table. I much prefer this method of turntable wiring over trailing leads, because it enables one to select a specific interconnect between the turntable and phono stage, just as one would between, say, a streamer and preamplifier.



The new Series Vi tonearm with an armtube machined from a proprietary composite resin

SME stresses that it is critical that the support table, motor unit, and base are absolutely level, otherwise there is a risk that the belt will be thrown from the motor pulley. Leveling is, of course, critical on all turntables in order to optimize performance, and I knew Kells would be meticulous about this aspect of the setup.

Like all SME turntables, the Model 35 has a heavy, oversized platter, machined from aluminum alloy. A proprietary damping material is applied to the platter surface. This surface is diamond-turned and scrolled to provide intimate contact with the record. This material can easily be

damaged, and SME's advice is to treat it as you would a record. The turntable is supplied with a superbly machined aluminum record clamp to iron out warps and promote better platter contact. I'd like to have seen some sort of provision for a dustcover, but I guess if I owned an SME Model 35 I would invest in a Michell Engineering clear-acrylic secure cover. That way, I could minimize the amount of dust reaching the 'table and any records left on it.

The review sample was supplied with a carbon-bodied Shelter Harmony moving-coil cartridge (US\$4900, £4000, €4400), which SME considers to be an excellent match for the Model 35. The carbon body is claimed to have a very high degree of internal damping, which reduces the impact of any extraneous vibration and noise, while its resonant frequency is well outside the audioband. The short cantilever is aluminum, while the diamond is a line-contact design. The only disadvantage of this cartridge relates to installation, because the carbon body requires the use of plastic screws rather than metal, and great care must be taken not to overtighten them.



Shelter Harmny carbon-bodied cartridge supplied with the review turntable

Listening

For my evaluation, I primarily used a Michell Apollo phono stage I had on hand for review, which is superior to my own Trichord Dino. They share a common heritage, as both were designed by Graham Fowler. The rest of the system comprised my Naim NAC 82 preamplifier



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and Naim NAP 250 power amplifier with HiCap power supply, driving my ATC SCM40 loudspeakers. SME provided a pair of Crystal Cable interconnects derived from the Reference Diamond range to connect the turntable to the phono stage. However, when I first used the turntable, I was struck by the very high level of mains hum I could hear through the system. This was a surprise, considering that my system has a dedicated mains spur, I have paid meticulous attention to cable routing, and use high-quality, star-earthed mains blocks from Grahams Hi-Fi. I elected to swap in a length of Chord Company's EpicX ARAY cable in place of the supplied Crystal Cable, and the mains hum vanished instantly. It's difficult to know if there was a fault with the original cable, or if the Chord cable is just better shielded.

Whenever I receive a turntable in for review, I always select the first record with great care. I am currently waiting on delivery of the Rhino High Fidelity pressing of *Buckingham Nicks*, mastered by Kevin Gray, so have been streaming the album on Tidal repeatedly. As a result, I've been enjoying something of a Fleetwood Mac obsession recently. On to the SME's oversized platter went the band's self-titled 1975 album—the first album that featured Lindsey Buckingham and Stevie Nicks as part of the classic lineup. Mine is the 2022 Chris Bellman 33½-rpm edition, pressed at Optimal in Germany, and it's a fantastic-sounding record blessed with a lovely, vintage Reprise label (Warner/Reprise GEMA/BIEM 603497839650).

Right from the off, I could tell that the Model 35 is a turntable of exceptional pedigree. The keyboard intro of "Sugar Daddy" appeared to come from absolutely nowhere; it actually made me jump. This was classic SME stuff—with a nice pressing and fine cartridge, the firm's turntables add so little to the signal that you simply don't hear them at all. It's similar to the experience I had a year or so back, in a fully light-controlled home-cinema room equipped with one of those expensive JVC D-ILA projectors. As I sat in total blackness, I couldn't even see my own hand in front of my face. And then, a night scene from *Game of Thrones* started and I realized the projector had been on the whole time. I was looking at the blackest blacks I had ever seen, which only served to make the flaming torches and everything else around them stand out all the more. That is what the SME Model 35 did, on every record I played. Everything seemed to jump out more into the room, simply because the deck itself was so quiet when there was no signal.

Mick Fleetwood's entering drum fill arced across the room with a sense of tremendous pace and solidity, while those classic John McVie bass lines were superbly melodic and rich. In a system such as this, with a source at this level, there's a real sense of being in the room with the band. At a suitable listening level, it's delivering all the speed, dynamics, and bandwidth of live instruments. The Model 35 is an uncannily transparent turntable, and I could tell that within a second or two. I listened to the whole album, but not for the purpose of forming a judgment on the Model 35. It was purely an exercise in further delight.



The limited-edition purple-smoke pressing of Mazzy Star's *So Tonight That I Might See* on the Model 35

At the time of this review, I had just received my copy of Chasing the Dragon's exceptional release of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, recorded live at Cadogan Hall in London, England (Chasing the Dragon Records VALLP019). This record is as lavish as they come: a double-album box set accompanied by a glossy, LP-sized 30-page booklet outlining the importance of the work, the recording techniques used (right down to the microphones and cabling), and profiles of the conductor and soloists. This is an utterly jaw-dropping recording. I was in such disbelief at what I was hearing from the SME Model 35 in the opening movement that I switched to my 1977 Deutsche Grammophon set, with Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic, only to discover that the Chasing the Dragon recording blows it into the weeds. It isn't even close! In fact, it blows every single recording I have heard of the Ninth into oblivion, including Otto Klemperer's majestic 1958 reading with the Philharmonia Orchestra and Chorus, which was my favorite until now.

From the opening movement, the strings were rendered with sublime sweetness and detail, while the horns and brass stirred the soul with their majestic scale, dynamics, depth, and gravitas. This is a tour-de-force rendition of the Ninth, and one I was fortunate to witness live on the 200th anniversary of its debut performance. Via the SME Model 35, I could easily sense the dimensions of Cadogan Hall. There was no sense of compression of the huge orchestral forces being unleashed. Instruments were detailed but never spotlit, as they are on so many lesser recordings.



From any angle and playing any record, the SME Model 35 is breathtaking

From the Model 35, all I heard was a presentation of the music that was effortless, unforced, and natural—a wide-open window on the magnificent orchestra and choir. The reproduction of soundstage, scale, and ambient cues was absolutely first-rate. Elements of the orchestra, such as the timpani and massed choir, remained superbly delineated on the Model 35 in a way that was almost uncanny. Indeed, throughout the record, I found myself asking just how much better could this get. Sure, it would have been even better hearing the performance live in Cadogan Hall (I know, because I was there), but this was probably as close as anyone can get to feeling the overwhelming emotional impact of Beethoven’s masterwork in the home.

By the time I had listened all the way through the fourth side, I was welling up with emotion. There are some who argue that SME turntables lack emotional impact, and maybe they do, insofar as they don’t add or subtract from the music itself. But if there’s emotion harnessed within the performance you are playing, you’ll feel every bit of it on the SME Model 35—as on the Model 60. My eyes were filling with tears as the orchestra soared its way towards the “Ode to Joy” final movement. I swear I have never heard massed cellos sound like this anywhere other than at a live performance. And the soloists and choir were simply off the scale. Massed choir is fiendishly difficult to record, let alone reproduce on any domestic audio system, but this was life-affirming and soul-enriching on the Model 35, to the point that I found myself high on music by the end of it.



With my eyes full of tears, the epic Ninth drew to a close on the SME Model 35

It's tricky to follow listening to the mighty Ninth from beginning to end with any other piece of music, so I decided that a complete change was the only way to proceed. On went the Dandy Warhols' *Thirteen Tales from Urban Bohemia* ([PIAS] Recordings PIASC1105DLP). This is not an audiophile recording, but it's a very energetic and enjoyable album. "Bohemian Like You" opens with tom drum and organ before launching into a thoroughly dirty guitar riff that sounds like it was played on a well-seasoned Les Paul. The SME took everything in its stride, and the drums and energy of this cut were conveyed with such explosive power that it was all I could do to avoid gyrating and hula-hooping around the room. The Model 35 scavenged as much detail as any turntable could from this compressed, wall-of-sound production, and provided more separation of individual musical strands than I am used to hearing. I was rapidly concluding that like the SME Model 60 before it, the Model 35 can boogie with the best of them.

Feed the Model 35 some purist-recorded jazz, though—such as Cannonball Adderley's *Somethin' Else* (Blue Note 1595)—and you'll find yourself transported back nearly 70 years to a 1958 session that seems so real you'll feel like slipping into your best lounge-lizard suit and taking up smoking again. What this recording revealed is that the SME is beautifully balanced across the entire frequency range—nothing was favored or emphasized. Adderley's alto sax brimmed with reedy, brassy detail, while the steady, melodic bass rhythm of Sam Jones filled the room with its warm timbre and tone. With Art Blakey locking into the groove, every nuance



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of his technique was laid bare on the SME—every cymbal shimmered, and every snare strike cut through the mix with precision.

Surely this is why we audiophiles get so enmeshed with this expensive hobby of ours. It's for the ability to come home after a tiring day at work, pour a glass of wine, sink into a favorite armchair, and revel in the sublime beauty of a record such as this. The SME made music appreciation so easy because it put me right there with the musicians. Apart from the Model 60, I can't think of any other turntable I have heard that got me quite this close to the source. Its bandwidth, transparency, precision, and lack of artifice are world class.

Conclusion and ruminations

In my opinion, the Model 35 is the most beautiful turntable SME has ever designed. With relatively compact dimensions and more cohesive looks than earlier SME decks, it is an extremely attractive centerpiece of any audio system, and will blend seamlessly into any room. When I attended the press launch, I was astonished to find that it is £4500 cheaper than its predecessor, the Model 30, but sonically and visually superior. Those old suspension pillars on the Model 30 now strike me as somewhat agricultural—they always did seem to be slightly in the way of handling the tonearm and cueing a record. There are no such obstructions here, just beautifully clean design and seamless operation.

Sonically, the new suspension system, motor control unit, and improved tonearm serve to elevate the performance of the Model 35 above the level of its predecessor, and dangerously close to the flagship Model 60, which costs significantly more. In my view, this makes the Model 35 the sweet spot in SME's range, and a truly aspirational turntable. I've had both the Model 35 and Model 60 here on extended loan, and I can confidently say that the SME Model 35 is so desirable that it's the turntable I would most like to own in the world, without question. Sure, it doesn't offer quite the same vanishingly silent backgrounds as the Model 60, and its dynamics are the tiniest bit less dramatic than the flagship, but for me, the Model 60 was always destined to be out of reach financially. The Model 35 feels like it could one day be a possibility, if I ever finish my novel and manage to sell the film rights.

The SME Model 35 with its new Series Vi arm is an astonishing turntable. It offers world-class detail retrieval, rock-solid pitch stability, a gorgeously stable and believable soundstage, and the ability to track and retrieve deeper bass than you ever imagined could be pressed into a vinyl groove. This weight and solidity low down is highly addictive, and is something that is a particular characteristic of top-tier SME 'tables, as well as the AVID HiFi Acutus Dark Iron. Most other turntables I have heard seem to lack that total command of the lowest registers of the music, and sound a shade lighter and fractionally less extended. Listening on the Model 35 provided a level of gravitas, solidity, scale, and palpable impact that I sensed as much as heard.



The SME Series Vi tonearm is part of the reason why the Model 35 sounds so good

Combined with shimmering highs, breathtaking transient speed, and a midrange so beautifully balanced and nuanced it shamed digital sources, it was abundantly clear that I was hearing a magnificent vinyl spinner

SME has been a specialist in vinyl replay for over 75 years. Built in England to flawless engineering standards by a company that only makes turntables and tonearms, the SME Model 35 proudly takes its place among the pantheon of the world's greatest turntables.

... *Jonathan Gorse*
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Associated Equipment

- **Turtable:** Michell GyroDec with SME Series IV tone arm and Lyra Kleos SL cartridge, mounted on Townshend Seismic Platform
- **Phono preamplifier:** Trichord Research Dino Mk 3 with Never Connected Dino+ power supply, PS Audio Stellar phono stage, Michell Apollo with Muse power supply
- **Streaming DAC:** Naim Audio NDX 2
- **CD player:** Naim Audio CDI on Townshend Seismic Podium
- **Preamplifiers:** Naim Audio NAC 82

- **Power amplifier:** Naim Audio NAP 250
- **Power supply:** Naim Audio HiCap
- **Loudspeakers:** ATC SCM40 on Townshend Audio Seismic Podiums
- **Headphones:** Sennheiser HD 800S, Beyerdynamic DT 880 Professional, AKG K701 Studio Reference
- **Headphone amplifier:** Beyerdynamic A20
- **Support stands:** Ash Designs Cosmic 5 and Cosmic 7 stands, both suspended on Townshend Seismic Isolation Bars with load cells calibrated for individual rack weight
- **Power:** Dedicated 100A mains spur feeding two Grahams medical-grade, six-gang power blocks. Naim Hydra, Naim Power-Line Lite
- **Cabling:** Chord Company Sarum T loudspeaker cables, Naim NAC A5 loudspeaker cables, Naim interconnects on most Naim amplification; Chord Co. Sarum T Super ARAY XLR, Chord Co. SignatureX Tuned ARAY DIN-RCA, Chord Co. SignatureX RCA-XLR, Chord Co. EpicX ARAY RCA-RCA. Chord Co. EpicX ARAY interconnects for phono stages, Vertere Redline RCA-XLR between HiCap and NAP 250, QED interconnects for secondary sources
- **Setup tools:** AVID high-precision level with 45-rpm adapter, Suaoki laser level, Rega Atlas digital stylus force gauge, SME strobe disc, Ogetto laser measure



SME Model 35 turntable with Series Vi tonearm

Price: US\$38,999 or £35,999 for standard black or silver anodized finishes; US\$41,165 or £37,999 for special midnight blue or gunmetal anodized finishes (£4000 for Shelter Audio



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Harmony carbon cartridge provided with review sample)

Warranty: Two years, parts and labor, extendable to five years on registration

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