

EQUIPMENT REPORT



SME Model 20/3 Turntable and Series IV.Vi Arm

A Classic Improved

Paul Seydor

There are a few companies in the history of audio who have built such solid reputations for design excellence, engineering expertise, and precision manufacturing that we can take for granted their products will work as claimed, be competitive with anything else, and last a long time. SME certainly belongs in this elite group: Its tonearms have been a known commodity for almost fifty years now, its turntables nearly twenty. Every SME product I've owned, used, or evaluated—a list that includes at least four arms and four turntables—has been outstanding. What's more, owners of SME products tend to keep them for a very long time, often decades, occasionally lifetimes. Thus from a certain point of view, you might almost say this review wasn't really necessary—which isn't to say that I wasn't thrilled to get the assignment or didn't enjoy doing it. On the contrary, it's long been one of audio's high pleasures to have a record-playing setup by SME. Some SME component or other has usually been in my system for over thirty years now, and during the past ten I've been privileged to review the entry-level Model 10A (Issue 129)—“entry level” being a relative term, as the 10A eclipses many manufacturers' best efforts—the flagship Model 30/2 (Issue 172), and the 20/3's predecessor, the 20/2, of which I wrote a long, detailed, and laudatory review in Issue 141 (to which I refer readers for a thorough description of its design and operation, the basics of which remain unchanged).

At the time (2003) I found the Model 20 so good I wondered how it could be improved without taking it all the way to the 30. The main difference between them is the greater size, weight, and mass of the 30, plus the inclusion of viscous damping in each of the four stanchions that suspend the plinth from the rubber O-rings, whereas the 20 employs damping only in the central bearing. One of the few ways I could fault the 20 is that its isolation from external disturbance, while of a very high order, was less effective than the 30's or such fully suspended designs as several Basis and SOTA models. In most home environments, however, where the 'table would presumably be securely mounted, this limitation would likely go unnoticed, its effects minimal, and would in any case still be considerably less than that provided by most turntables lacking any suspension.

But the engineers at SME evidently felt improvements could be made. A glance suggests almost nothing was done, save for the all-black platter mat replacing the familiar greenish gold of past models (the aesthetics of which, truth to tell, I rather miss). But looks, we know, can deceive. To start with, the outboard power supply, containing speed selection and adjustment, is now the improved version that has been stock for the 30/3 these last few years; and the new 20 is slightly larger in all dimensions and heavier, with thicker plinth and base, resulting in an overall weight of 63 pounds, up 23 from the 20/2. The number of

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O-rings that suspend the plinth has also been increased from 30 to 40. The damping in the main bearing has been improved, bringing it closer to the 30's, the platter is also larger and heavier (at 14 pounds almost a third over the previous one's), and the new mat (non-removable, as on all SMEs) is claimed to make for a superior interface with vinyl.

Although the handsome styling remains severely industrial, the late Alastair Robertson-Aikman, never an advocate of the oil-rig-in-your-living-room approach to turntable design, always judiciously applied the brawn with his brains, and his son Cameron continues in his father's footsteps. Not that SME turntables are insubstantial—far from it—merely remarkably compact, dense, and concentrated. AR-A always maintained that everything else being equal, a smaller footprint of intelligently applied mass and controlled damping is preferable to a larger one for sonic as well as aesthetic reasons. Fit and finish are, as always with this company, to the highest standards.

Like all SME turntables, the Model 20/3 is available as a turntable only, \$14,000 with a blank board for use with arm of choice, or outfitted with one of SME's arms. Sumiko, the domestic importer, offers it as a specially priced "performance package," with the Series IV.Vi arm, a proprietary version of the Series IV that retains the damping trough of the V, dispenses with the dynamic-balance mechanism in favor of static only, and is wired with a very thin phosphor-bronze internal harness (made by Magnan) to reduce the mechanical impedance of the arm. Under review here is this package, with which Sumiko also supplied its premier pickup, the Palo Santos Presentation (\$3995), enthusiastically reviewed by Neil Gader (Issue 206), who used it in his own Series V arm. Exclusive of pickup, the package costs \$17,000, identical to 20/2 with the same arm.

Most purchasers will probably elect to have their dealer do the setup, but thanks to SME's excellent instructions, anybody with some prior experience can do the job if he is willing to work slowly and patiently. I found it both instructive *and* pleasurable, something by no means true of many setups. One of the things I've always especially liked about SME's arms, with their fixed-bearing gimbals configuration, is that stylus overhang is not determined by sliding the pickup back and forth in slots in the headshell. Instead, since SME arms have correct geometry and the armboards are likewise correctly placed, the pickup is fixed at the headshell (i.e., holes, not slots, for the mounting bolts), and the entire base of the arm moved back and forth to achieve proper overhang (with another easy-to-use gauge).

To my way of thinking, this is far preferable because slots allow enough play that the act of tightening the bolts often causes the position of the pickup to shift slightly, thus requiring a second or third attempt to get it spot on. Not a major annoyance, perhaps, but no problem at all with SME arms, which helps make swapping pickups relatively quick and easy (see sidebar). Nor do SME's top arms allow for azimuth adjustment, which is also fine by me: As I've argued several times in these pages, any pickup costing hundreds, let alone thousands of dollars, with faulty azimuth should be returned.

Although it's been eight years since I reviewed the 20 and about half that since the 30, it does seem to me that the distance—as already noted, not large to begin with—between it and the top model has been not just shortened but shortened

by a helluva lot. Stability, control, and neutrality triangulate the virtues of this and every other SME turntable I've used. There is an extraordinary impression of what for want of a better word I would call *foundation* to the presentation: things are rooted, solid, and grounded, and they stay put unless they're meant to move, in which case they do so without ambiguity, vagary, or uncertainty, rather with purpose, point, and direction. There is no better test for this than my longstanding reference, the Bernstein *Carmen*, where in Act IV the stage outside the bullring in old Seville is as if anchored in granite, while the comings and goings of the principals, the children's chorus, and the crowd spring to life across it in a three-dimensional space that suggests a real opera house.

On the other hand, maybe there *is* a better test, like, say, a problematic recording. As I am writing this, I am listening to Handel's *Messiah* as performed by Bernstein in the first studio, also stereo, recording he made with the New York Philharmonic, dating from 1956. The performance, controversial owing to Bernstein's rearrangement of the text to make it a two- instead of a three-part work, is a fascinating example of a conscientious mainstream conductor attempting to apply what was then known of period-music practices to the performance of Baroque music. The recording *qua* recording is of no particular distinction, multimiked yet also very reverberant—a seeming contradiction Columbia's engineers managed with some regularity—with violins far left, cellos and basses far right, tonal balance a bit bright (again, typical Columbia). One of the unusual things Bernstein did for the concert performances that preceded this recording was to vary the size of both the orchestra and the chorus, as well as the complement of instruments, to suit the expressive and dramatic needs of the individual numbers.

The engineers followed suit by varying the miking, the consequence being that while the acoustic character of the space does not change, perspectives do shift, as if either the groups or the mikes have been moved back when larger forces are used, forward with smaller ones. Yet such is the control exerted by the 20/3, together with its ability to get out of the way, that I am completely involved in the performance and almost oblivious to the sonic oddities, unless I care to concentrate on them. Indeed, singing "I know that my redeemer liveth," Adele Addison almost sounds as if she is in the room, with uncommonly beautiful string playing despite the bogus brilliance and violins off a little too far to the left. When the perspective shifts for, say, the "Hallelujah Chorus," the 20/3 reveals the change loud and clear but my ear

SPECS & PRICING

Speeds: 33, 45, 78 rpm
Dimensions: 17-5/16" x 13-3/4"
x 8"
Weight: 63 lbs.
Warranty: One year parts and
labor
Price: \$17,000 (with tonearm)

SUMIKO
sumikoaudio.net
(510) 843-4500

Cartridge Matching

I have twice used SME arms and/or turntables to do phono pickup surveys. As with recordings, so with cartridges: SME components are among the most judicious and even-handed of hosts, so impeccably accommodating as to allow any pickup to emerge in the fullness of its personality without augmentation or diminution, provided of course mass (medium to high) and compliance (medium to low) are suitable. The Palo Santos Presentation sounded to me essentially as Neil Gader described it in his review: a bit on the sweet, laid-back side, very comfortable, perhaps fractionally recessed throughout the presence region. Sumiko designed this pickup to yield an ever-so-slightly forgiving sound, and so it does, in a pleasing and validly musical way.

But I really wanted to put the 20/3 through its paces with Ortofon's magnificent Windfeld, my reference these past few years, and I wasn't disappointed: here was a greater sense of vitality and transparency. Strings were paradoxically sweeter yet more naturally brilliant, and thanks to the Windfeld's peerless neutrality, the midrange/presence region is naturally forward, that is, in proper relationship to the rest of the spectrum. I also

felt the Windfeld allowed the whole presentation to open out more expansively with respect to dynamic range and the rendering of the characteristics of recording venues. It tracked better, too, not by a lot (Palo Santos is a very good tracker), but such as you'd notice on very demanding discs.

Even though I am writing this in June, I couldn't resist listening to one of my all-time favorite LPs, *Sing We Noel* [Nonesuch], Joel Cohen's wonderful program of early American and British Christmas music. Ensembles and groups of various sizes are used throughout and the vividness of singers and instrumentalists almost defies belief. In the fuguing tunes, you easily place where each soloist or group of singers is standing. The recording also abounds in antiphonal and other spatial effects, all set forth with rare precision and exactitude. In the closing *Gloucester Wassail*, where the group recedes as it finishes the carol, you clearly hear the choir increasingly enveloped in the resonant acoustics as it gets closer to the rear wall. The SME 20/3/Windfeld combination reproduced all this flawlessly with a sense of involvement and life that silences all critical voices.

PS

soon adjusts and I am again gripped by the performance.

In other words, whether the recording bodes fair weather or foul, you may rest assured the 20/3 will navigate you through it with supreme ease, confidence, and comfort.

When I reviewed the Model 30/2 its background quietness struck me as the best I had ever experienced from vinyl playback in my home up to that time, putting me in mind of Melville's famous phrase about Hawthorne's fiction: "blackness ten times black." To the extent that I can rely on memory and notes, I'd say that the 20/3's blackness is comparable, with similar improvements upon the 20/2's already impressive ease and authority, likewise its dynamic window and ability to project that elusive character of life and lifelikeness. The improvements in mass, damping, and suspension certainly seem to have resulted in an equivalent increase in isolation, the one (relatively) weak point of the previous model. The 20/3 now comes so nose-thumbingly close to the flagship in all respects that with most records and through the highest-resolution systems, the differences will more than likely require a strict A/B before they can be reliably identified, and even then I'd not want to bet I could tell which was which after a brief hiatus (say, a trip to the loo).

I have elsewhere addressed the issue voiced by some of the so-called "dark" sonic character of SME products, and I've made no secret of my belief that this a complaint typically made by the naïve against components with superior damping and control of spurious and unwanted resonances and the kind of isolation that only suspensions can achieve. The ear responds to and even up to a point "likes" information, even if it's information that's not part of the source, which is precisely what resonances and other noises that originate in the equipment or its relationship to its

setting are. And since such resonances can be subtle enough to seem part of the signal, when they're gone, something seems to be missing—as it is, but it's something that shouldn't have been there in the first place.

More insidious is that some of these resonances can even be appealing. I prefer not to name names here because I'd rather avoid disputes that might obscure my general point, but some popular turntables that lack suspensions have a "drummy" coloration that derives from the way their plinths respond to external vibrations, which gives them a kind of extra rhythmic "kick"; other turntables have an excessively articulate character that emphasizes resolution to the exclusion of all else ("listen to the tune"); still others have the "warmth" of slightly loose or excessively full bass or a bogus "airiness" due to inadequate damping of the record by the platter (ringing metal platters with thin mats or no mats usually evince this dubious "virtue"). These sonic signatures can have many other causes as well, not just from turntables but from arms and pickups. In every instance, however, the root cause has to do with how well the setup controls, damps, suppresses, or otherwise drains away the many resonances that disfigure vinyl playback, plus, of course, how effectively the design isolates the setup from external disturbances. SMEs are exemplary in this regard.

Imaging and soundstaging are limited by the source, as was demonstrated by a couple of famous jazz recordings. In the typical early-stereo, left-right-center-miked *Crescent* [Acoustic Sounds], Coltrane's sax is plastered smack up against my left-channel Quad 2805, the same for the drum kit on the far right, the piano in between (and sounding a bit hooded). Any setup that gives much "depth" is doing something wrong, however much it may

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please. Switch to the famous *Soular Energy* [Pure Audiophile] and you have a jazz group spread before you in a space integrated and continuous, the instruments set back slightly from the plane of the speakers and sounding in their dimensionality and physical relationship to each other like the real thing (not for nothing is this a highly esteemed recording).

Obviously in a vintage mood, I turned to one of the really great recordings from Stokowski's Indian summer, his RCA outing with the Chicago Symphony in stupendous performances of four nineteenth century showpieces. Just listen to the ferocious attack and impact of the doublebasses at the beginning of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2, Stokowski inspiring the Chicago players to heights of style and sheer panache they rarely displayed under Reiner, sonics up there with the famous RCA recordings, certainly for dynamic range, bass extension, and a realistic impression of a symphony orchestra playing in a great hall. Stokowski's *Moldau* was a huge favorite with critics and listeners alike back in the day and you can certainly hear why as the famous Czech river surges with the kind of sumptuous tonal opulence—the sonorous Chicago brass simply glorious—he alone seemed able to conjure.

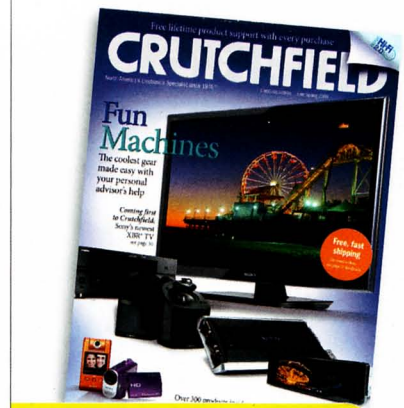
Another old favorite—literally from the dawn of my years as an audiophile—of quite different music is the old Connoisseur Society recording of Ali Akbar Kahn's *Morning and Evening Ragas*. The morning raga is one of those occasions in a studio where everything came together in a performance of real live-music vitality and excitement. I can always tell a truly great setup by the degree to which I am unable to remain still as Kahn and his colleagues reach a true fever pitch of rhythmic energy as the piece rushes toward its climax. By the end I was pounding the ottoman along with Mahapurush Misra on his tablas. Those for whom timing and rhythm are the be all and end all will love this setup, and it doesn't come with the liabilities of artificially hyped articulation, an etched, aggressive top end, or diminished bass.

I could go on about rummaging, if not rampaging, through my record collection, but time in this instance is not so much money as time away from doing exactly that with this splendid setup before the importer reclaims it. Instead, I take your leave with this thought: It's ridiculous to suggest that a record-playing system that sets you back over twenty grand once you factor in a suitable pickup represents “good value.” It doesn't. But once this is said, it must also be said that in no way is what you get should you buy this magnificent product disproportionate to the asking price. Very few turntable/arm combinations, including most of those I've seen and heard costing a whole lot more, can boast anything like this level of design, engineering, and manufacturing excellence or bring you much closer to how pleasurable, moving, even inspiring recorded music in the home can be. The value in this, to be sure, is somewhat subjective and difficult to measure, but that does not make it any the less real. **tas**

About That Dust Cover

The soft, cheesy dust “cover” that SME provides for its turntables has stuck in my craw for a long time now. The justification is that a hard dust-cover adversely affects the sound. True enough, as it tends to create a kind of resonant chamber that clouds the reproduction. But Acoustic Research solved this a long ago by making its sturdy dust covers unusable during play, but serve perfectly well to keep dust out when the setup is not in use. SME's covers, in my opinion, are worse than useless because they are relatively tight-fitting, which means that it would be all too easy to catch the stylus when removing the cover, something SME, in fact, even warns against in the manual!

Gentlemen, this is both a disgrace and an embarrassment in products that otherwise have helped set industry standards for manufacturing, attention to detail, and fit and finish. When a consumer invests in a turntable of this expense and quality, he has every right to expect a dust cover of comparable design and utility, if only as optional extra. If SME isn't willing to do something about this, maybe Sumiko can? **PS**



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