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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

SME Model 20/3A

By Jason Kennedy



A visit to SME's factory in Steyning, West Sussex is never less than an inspiring experience. The site of proper chaps in white lab coats meticulously machining, fettling and assembling pick-up arms and turntables in a real factory makes the heart swell with pride. The lengths that SME's employees go to in order to make their products as precise and well finished as possible is uncanny, I would be surprised to find this level of attention to detail in the audio industry outside of Japan. There are of course some pretty fastidious manufacturers in this business but few have the resources and experience that they have at SME. The black chrome plating for instance was pioneered by Alastair Robertson-Aikman himself in the company's plating shop. A place where there are so many toxic chemicals that the air has to be replaced at such a rate that it's nigh on impossible to keep the temperature up to a comfortable level in the winter. At that time of year there is no alternative but to don your thermal helmet (woolly hat) and wrap up warm. I wouldn't last a day!

SME is not just a turntable and arm maker it's a precision engineering company that works for the medical industry among other clients, the audio business has been

growing for them for over 15 years but would not support the scale of operation it runs. The company is now run by Alastair's son Cameron and he maintains his father's legendary music room in all its glory. I was fortunate enough to be given a dem of the Model 20/3 in that hallowed room, it sounded pretty spectacular but in a space that large with eight Quad electrostatics and two monster class A Krells driving them one's expectations are raised. Bringing the turntable and arm home to more familiar surroundings was more informative and in many ways equally impressive. This is a very assured and powerful turntable not to mention a rather substantial one.

The 20/3 is considerably bigger than the Mk2 version which was essentially a Mk1 with a different power supply. The 20/3 is a narrower version of the 20/12 that came out a few years ago, that 12inch arm equipped turntable seemed totally at odds with the 20/2 in production at the time with much thicker metalwork and a bigger platter. At the time I wondered why they called it a Model 20 at all as it had more in common with the mighty Model 30 but this latest incarnation pulls everything together into a coherent range of turntables. The 20/3 is a substantial beast that discourages you from picking it up with the platter in place, the figure is just under 32kg including power supply but when you've got a stylus protruding from a Van den Hul Condor cartridge sticking over the front edge it's not a straightforward lift. The turntable has a fairly compact footprint especially for its mass and it would be nice to have some form of cartridge protection bar such as is built into the Model 10.

The platter itself is bigger than it used to be at 13inches and weighs 6.5kg with a soft Isodamp facing on top of the aluminium metalwork, you are

discouraged from touching the top surface with anything but an LP as it's very easy to mark. The suspension is courtesy of 40 'O' rings spread over four towers, you can adjust the height of the subchassis with a trimmer in each tower and SME provides a simple but precisely executed gauge to achieve the desired height. They also provide a 3mm ball headed driver that's made in house to adjust the trimmers and set up the pick-up arm, a touch that you won't find with any other audio brand to my knowledge. Set-up is very straightforward, you can adjust the four feet for level but as is often the case it's better to use a level surface in the first place and leave the feet tight. The deck comes with rubber tips on its feet but these can be removed to reveal stainless balls if a firmer interface is preferred. There are now fewer than seven transit bolts, two for the suspension, one for the motor and four for on the subplatter. Unlike most turntables there is no need to lubricate the bearing as its 19mm shaft sits in a sealed oil bath "for lifetime lubrication". Nonetheless a syringe of oil and a device for piping it to the right place are supplied in the box. A reflex clamp and remarkably thin spindle washer to go under the vinyl are also included alongside a 12inch strobe disc - speed is adjusted using the buttons on the power supply .

The 20/3 is a heavily damped design, each of the four suspension towers are damped and there is a central fluid damper between top and bottom plates which "disciplines sub-chassis movement". All with the purpose of killing resonance that emanates from the cartridge itself as well as the environment the turntable has to work in. There aren't many other turntable makers that go as far SME in their use of fluid damping mainly because few others can muster the engineering expertise required. Others do accept the necessity to damped extraneous energy however, it's just that the methods they use to achieve this end are usually cruder.

This is also an immensely stiff turntable because the chassis is made from 16mm thick aluminium that's supported at four points. It's pretty much the opposite of an AR/Linn type suspended subchassis yet designed to achieve the same aim, in theory at least - there is no talk of 'following the tune' down in Steyning!

The suffix in the name Model 20/3A indicates that this turntable is equipped with SME's prime pick-up arm the Series V, as solid a piece of precision engineering as has ever graced a turntable. Enough has been written about this superbly built arm already but I would add that it remains the best thought out and easy to set-up example in the audio universe. The fact that it works rather well on substantial, well damped turntables can be taken as read.

The combination has an extremely assured, authoritative sound that is very high on detail and remarkably realistic. Compared to more eager designs such as the Well Tempered it seems a little ponderous but it doesn't take long to realise that this is a result of vanishingly low distortion, a fact evinced by the sheer depth of information it reveals. You don't have to try to hear into the mix it presents a fully three dimensional soundstage where every instrument, voice and finger click sits in its own acoustic - recording allowing. This was certainly the case with Rickie Lee Jones' Flying Cowboy which always sounds good but rarely gives up so much of its reverberant and acoustic character.

When this turntable was delivered the Series V came with a rather heavy counterweight for the Dynavector DV-20X2L moving coil I put on it, SME makes three, but it was possible to achieve the correct tracking force by using only a small amount of the pressure produced by the dial-in spring. The correct counterweight arrived a few day later and installing it brought

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about a considerable reduction in the sense of ponderousness first encountered, the lower mass eliciting a more dynamic sound with greater punch in the bass and more snap to the timing and with no reduction in bass extension or power. I recently reviewed a Pro-Ject turntable and arm where four counterweights were provided in order to achieve minimal resonance from the arm and cartridge combination, their philosophy is that more mass closer to the bearing is better but it didn't work this way with the SME.

Bass is a clear strongpoint with this turntable and arm, you get real low end power out of the vinyl, power that cannot it seems be emulated by lightweight designs. In fact the only turntables that can compete are the front end damped Townshend Rock designs which made me wonder if actually using the damping trough at the bearing end of the Series V would be beneficial. Despite having used SME arms on and off for some time it's not something that's ever seemed necessary. But filling it up with the supplied syringe of silicone fluid is a fairly painless process (the reverse will be rather more so I fear) and using the variable depth dip-screw is a novelty. One pleasure of any SME product is the manual they supply, these are comprehensive in approach and rather charmingly written which is not something you can often say about instruction books. It's one indication of how much thought goes into SME products, another is the ease of ▶

► set-up that the turntable and its associated accessories offer; a new one to the Model 20 is platter braking. A heavy platter can take a while to slow down so that you can remove the clamp, by adding a braking effect SME has made it rather quicker to do so.

With a VdH Condor MC the effect of adding damping to the arm is to reveal more of the information in the groove, musical and otherwise. Surface noise is more apparent but so is the music and the end result is a distinct net gain that increases the realism of the sound. There is clearly more tone colour which is surprising and the music seems to have a stronger aura if that makes any sense. Not a subtle effect and presumably one that will affect different cartridges to differing degrees but I feel no urge to take it out. The inclination is to play more vinyl and see what else you can hear, it's a highly entertaining even contagious process that reveals just how much difference there is between recordings even of the same genre. This degree of exposure makes the influence of things like VTA rather more apparent, switch from a standard weight pressing to a heavy one and there is a distinct thickening of the sound because the stylus is sitting at a different angle in the groove. Rega founder Roy Gandy might not believe in it but VTA variations make a tonal difference even if timing and dynamics are not significantly affected.

Fortunately the damping trough on the Series V also has a thread in it which accepts a VTA adjusting pin so small variations in arm height are easy to achieve. The SME alignment protractor is designed to make it very easy to level the arm as well but it's usually best to fine tune VTA by ear once the approximate position has been established. Having done this I was in a very good position to enjoy Simply Vinyl's repressing of Al Green's fabulous Let's Stay Together album, this slice of early seventies soul has a fabulous restraint and emotional integrity to it that is abundantly clear on a turntable like the Model 20/3. Green's voice is warm and feeling and this contrasts superbly with the slightly ragged sound of the horn section. The rhythm is subtle but compelling, building up a groove with real torque in the SME's grip, although grip is not the right word because you hardly feel the presence of the machinery at all. You can hear a change in character when you switch from another turntable but within a few tracks it's very difficult to hear the hardware under the music. This turntable is a slave to the rhythm, it doesn't bring it to the fore or slow it down it just plays it like it is, so ZZ Top's potent vibes are as obvious as Beatles' melodies. There are more obvious turntables in this respect but they can't offer the breadth and depth of musical detail that the SME reveals, just put on I'm Bad, I'm Nationwide from ZZ Top's Degüello and you'll hear what I mean. And then there's the tone of Billy Gibbons' guitar, the blues has rarely sounded sweeter.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Dimensions WxDxH: 440 x 350 x 172mm.

Net weight: 28.6Kg (63lb)

Speeds: 33.3, 45, 78rpm

Power Supply: 4-layer SMD PCB, user adjustable speed variation

Four point suspension

19mm high-chrome steel, hardened, ground and super finished main bearing

Optional steel ball feet or compliant feet

Extras: Height setting gauge, 300mm stroboscopic disc, reflex record clamp, record spindle washer, soft cover, operating instruction manual, set-up tools

Price: Model 20/3 £5,993

Model 20/3A £8,561

Manufacturer: SME Ltd

URL: www.sme.ltd.uk

Tel: +44(0)1903 814321

The changes to the Model 20 have brought this fine turntable in line with its stable mates and made it a serious contender in the market place. No one else can offer this build quality, not at any price and the sound takes some beating too. If all audio equipment were made this well the world would undoubtedly be a better place. +

