

# Equipment Reviews

## SME Model 60 Turntable and Series VA Tonearm

Written by Jonathan Gorse | Created: 01 December 2022



### The Best of British

Quite simply, SME is one of the crown jewels of the British audio industry, and is as quintessentially English as the BBC, Windsor Castle, or strawberries and cream at Wimbledon. Nestled in the foothills of the beautiful South Downs in West Sussex, you'll find the magnificent art deco headquarters of one of the world's finest engineering companies. Note the lack of qualification there: not *audio* engineering companies, but engineering companies—period. For SME doesn't just build some of the world's most desirable turntables and tonearms; it also undertakes leading-edge engineering projects for Formula 1 racing teams and aerospace firms. It's no exaggeration to say that SME's astonishing capability in precision metalwork is world-renowned and globally respected. This is a company that builds analog replay equipment to the sort of tolerances that NASA specifies for its spacecraft. So when Stuart McNeilis, SME's charismatic CEO, offered me the opportunity to review the company's new flagship Model 60 turntable, he didn't need to ask twice.



The SME Model 60. To quote Spinal Tap's Nigel Tufnel: "None more black."

SME released its last flagship turntable, the Model 30, in 1990—over 30 years ago—so it’s not a company that releases new products just to appease the whims of the marketing dept. This is a company led by a CEO with a long career in aerospace engineering, whose staff are time-served materials science, mechanical, acoustical, and electrical engineers equipped with the very best five-axis metal-cutting machinery money can buy. If they don’t believe they have made a quantum leap in sonic performance they simply don’t release anything. This latest ultimate SME turntable arrived in the late Queen’s platinum-jubilee year and that sparked an idea.

The Model 60 is the culmination of over 60 years of audio development. I was sure this turntable would be something very special indeed, so it deserved far more than a mere review. I decided to assemble a system comprising the very best of British audio as a tribute to the Queen’s platinum jubilee and the nation that gave us stereophonic sound (Alan Blumlein), the world’s greatest broadcasting service (BBC), the world’s most respected recording studio (Abbey Road), the world’s first mixing desk (EMI REDD. 17), the world’s first electrostatic loudspeaker (Quad Electroacoustics ESL), and the world’s greatest band (The Beatles). In short, Great Britain has punched above its weight in the audio arena for decades, and has produced some of the most innovative and successful creators of music and audio technology on Earth. It felt like the right time to celebrate that heritage: the craftsmanship and the tireless spirit of endeavor that has made so many British audio firms household names across the world. A casual name-call only serves to reinforce the point: KEF, Tannoy, Rogers, Quad, Garrard, Linn, Naim, ATC, PMC, SME, B&W, Rega, Wharfedale, Michell, Cambridge Audio, Arcam, Chord, Monitor Audio, Mordaunt-Short, Celestion—the list simply goes on and on. That’s before you even consider the great names that now only exist in the memories of audiophiles—Ariston Audio, Pink Triangle, Leak, Royd, Alchemist, EMG, and Transcriptors. Seriously, has any other nation contributed so much to improve the art of music reproduction in the home?



**Still rocking the house—ATC SCM50s**

I was fortunate that I still had the magnificent pair of ATC SCM50 loudspeakers I reviewed last month in my listening room, so I pleaded a favor from ATC's brand manager, Ben Lilly, and persuaded him to extend the loan for another two months. This is the finest loudspeaker I have ever had in my home, and is universally regarded as both a superb professional studio monitor and a reference-class audiophile speaker system. A quick call to Jason Gould, my old friend at Naim Audio in Salisbury, Wiltshire, led to some enthusiastic support for the idea of assembling a Best of British system. Naim, whose amplifiers have propelled my own system for some 34 years, raced against the odds to ship one of its top amplifier combinations: the \$40,000 (all prices in USD, except where otherwise shown) tower of power that is the NAC 252 preamp, its associated SuperCap power supply, plus the NAP 300 DR power amp and accompanying NAP 300 power supply. I gather Gould practically had to tear it from the clutches of the R&D team at gunpoint. The Chord Company, based in Amesbury, Wiltshire, also joined the fray and provided some of its exquisite, hawser-like Chord Sarum T loudspeaker cables, which would set you back almost \$15,000 for a 7m pair. What we have here then, ladies and gentlemen, is a vinyl replay system retailing close to \$200,000, all of which is designed, engineered, and manufactured in the UK by firms who are masters of their respective fields. Not just a great system, then; but a setup that has the potential to be one of the most capable analog systems in the world, and the experience of a lifetime for any listener.



**Naim's tower of power**

To my knowledge, this is the first time all four leading UK brands have been combined in one system for a review. Collectively they represent the absolute zenith of the British audio industry.

These are the names I like to drop when chatting over a beer with my North American colleagues in the SoundStage! Network, to humble them when debating who makes the best-sounding audio equipment. They're firms of such impeccable pedigree and breeding that I couldn't help feeling that the system really ought to have been installed at Buckingham Palace, so I could review it in surroundings befitting its status.

As the equipment started arriving, the excitement was palpable; like the anticipation before a great band takes to the stage. One of the most endearing aspects of the whole venture was the genuine respect which each company had for the others' designs. I could tell that they were all very intrigued to hear how their products would sound when added to this dazzling combination of magnificent British audio.



**SME Model 60—the Best of British**

### **The Model 60—history, design, engineering, and philosophy**

SME can trace its history back to the early boom years of the UK audio industry. After WWII, thousands of qualified mechanical, electrical, radar, and radio engineers returned from the war and sought opportunities in the emerging audio field. In 1946, Alastair Robertson-Aikman established the Scale Model Equipment Company (SME) to manufacture scale-model cars for the motor trade and the collectibles market. The business grew steadily until the 1950s, when the firm started to shift its emphasis from model cars to precision aerospace engineering—principally, parts for aircraft instruments and business machines. During this period, Robertson-Aikman developed a keen interest in hi-fi, which was fast becoming a popular pastime. In 1959, when he needed a tonearm for his own turntable, and was unimpressed by what was available on the commercial market, he decided to design and build his own. Even then, SME's engineering and metalwork



capabilities were formidable, and the resulting prototype garnered widespread praise from audiophile friends and acquaintances. He was persuaded to put it into production, and from that moment on, SME pickup arms became a standard in the field.



**Arms as far as the eye can see**

After decades of success building “The best pick-up arm in the world,” the company launched its first flagship turntable, the Model 30, in 1990. Against a background of collapsing vinyl sales, the timing seemed as much like madness as the engineering was flawless. It was quite a statement from a company that had been at the pinnacle of vinyl replay for over 30 years, and had the engineering capability to build something truly state-of-the-art. Reviews from across the world poured in, praising the exceptional engineering and sound, and a new vinyl reference was born. Since then, the turntable range has expanded as SME sought to provide class-leading vinyl replay to those whose budget wouldn’t stretch to the exotic Model 30.

### **The turntable Brunel might have built**

SME acknowledges that improving on what was widely regarded as one of the very best turntables in the world was no easy task, and it’s one of many reasons why the Model 60 took so many man-years of effort to develop. The Model 60 launches at a guide price of £49,950 to £59,950, depending on the finish chosen (no US prices have been published yet). The available finish options are Brushed Black (black-anodized brushed metal), Brushed Silver (silver-anodized brushed metal), Honeycomb (machined honeycomb pattern, anodized in black, silver, or blue), and Diamond, which is a shiny diamond-cut and hand-polished aluminum finish with a subtle pattern. This price range isn’t surprising when you consider that the honeycomb pattern, for example, is diamond-cut into the top plate by a multimillion-dollar, five-axis milling machine that takes eight hours to complete the job on just one turntable!



**Model 60 Diamond-cut finish**

Although the design team started with a blank sheet of paper, they ruthlessly evaluated the current Model 30 turntable to assess which areas of its design could be improved upon. As an example, if you look under the subchassis of a Model 30 turntable, you will see a strengthening beam running through the center; the Model 60 obviates this need by making the entire subchassis thicker. Furthermore, the Model 30—in common with every other suspended turntable I’m aware of—only provides damping of external vibration in the vertical plane; the Model 60 has an entirely new suspension design that still uses elastomeric bands, but provides damping both horizontally *and* vertically. SME also acknowledged that the Model 30, with its exposed suspension bands, had a rather industrial appearance and has worked hard with the Model 60 to deliver a sleeker and cleaner design that will blend more easily into a living room.

The Model 60 derives its name from the fact that its launch was planned for 2019 to mark the 60th anniversary of the introduction of SME’s legendary Series 1 tonearm. This echoes the naming of the Model 30, which celebrated the tonearm’s 30th anniversary. Unfortunately, the pandemic led to a delay in the final design sign-off and release for the Model 60, so the date’s a little bit off.

SME has resolutely stuck to its philosophy that a high-mass turntable is better able to absorb unwanted vibrational energy, and the Model 60 weighs a considerable 106 pounds. It has a larger footprint than the Model 30, too, at 21.9”W × 16.4”D × 8.3”H. The associated speed-control unit and power supply weigh an additional 13 pounds and have the same utterly immaculate quality of finish as the turntable itself. In short, this is precision heavy engineering and the sort of turntable Isambard Kingdom Brunel might have built.



**Model 60 with motor control unit**

The Model 60 is a two-tier suspended design, with each tier hewn from solid, aerospace-grade aluminum. The bottom tier, effectively the base, is supported at each corner on four huge, circular feet, which are height adjustable for easy leveling and decoupled from the base chassis by an internal isolation system. The all-new 24V AC motor is claimed to offer more accurate speed control than the DC motor used on the Model 30, and is mounted to the rear left of the chassis base. SME has wisely chosen to outfit the Model 60 with rear-panel RCA phono sockets rather than flying phono leads. The tonearm wiring from the headshell to these sockets is a single length of high-purity silver litz wire made by Crystal Cable.

The power unit and speed control unit are in two superbly machined outboard housings. Switching between 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  rpm, 45 rpm, and off is at the press of a button, while fine speed adjustment is available via a long press on the speed control knob.

The turntable main bearing comprises a carbon-steel bearing spindle rotating on a high-precision ball bearing with sintered bronze bushings. A new addition is the silicone-fluid bath located at the base of the bearing housing to provide hydraulic damping. This silicone bath is designed to dissipate vibrations caused by the operation of the bearing before they even reach the chassis. For this design, SME's commitment to minimizing unwanted vibration was total.

The subchassis, or upper tier of the turntable, is suspended from the four corner columns on a total of 60 precision-ground rubber bands. Recognizing that turntables subject to unwanted external vibration can be deflected both horizontally and vertically, SME has completely re-engineered the suspension system to incorporate horizontal bands designed to provide isolation in the lateral plane of movement. Unlike on the Model 30, the rubber bands of the suspension system aren't



**showing silicone-fluid bath at the foot of the gigantic main bearing**

visible on the Model 60. This confers a far less industrial appearance than its predecessor. Stripped down, the suspension arrangement put me in mind of the suspension systems used on expensive studio vocal microphones, although what SME has engineered is vastly more complex.



**Stripped suspension assembly showing some of the lateral belt suspension**



I placed the Model 60 beside my Michell GyroDec (equipped with an SME IV tonearm) on an identical rack, with both racks spiked into the floorboards of my living room. I immediately discovered that the SME was far less susceptible to skipping if people walked by when it was playing records than the Michell. I could do the fandango in front of it, and it would be completely impervious to my antics, whereas the GyroDec would skip and rock even if I slipped past with the grace of a *Swan Lake* ballerina. I've tried numerous turntables, sprung and un-sprung, over the years in that spot and have never witnessed anything to match the effectiveness of the Model 60's suspension design.

The platter is the same oversized 16.5-pound one fitted to the Model 30 turntable, because SME could find no way to improve on it. The top surface is machined and then coated with an acoustically inert elastomeric damping material, which is also used on the rest of the chassis. It's worth noting that SME has worked hard to redesign the bearing so the platter sits lower than it does on the Model 30. This is more aesthetically pleasing, and the lower moving mass makes the suspension system work more effectively. The exquisitely machined screw-down record clamp is unchanged and works beautifully to clamp any record to the platter surface. I absolutely adore the way "SME England" is engraved on it—this kind of thing matters to me and maybe it matters to you, too.



**Polished SME record clamp—proudly made in England**

The final element of the Model 60 is the entirely new tonearm—the Series VA (“five advanced”). This arm has the same bearing housing as the Series V, but the arm tube itself is hewn from an advanced polymer-resin material, which is stiffer and offers better damping than the pressure-cast magnesium arm tube used on other SME tonearms. Keen observers will notice that the tube profile is subtly different on the VA, because it has a trilobed cross section for extra strength.

SME has also revised the arm cradle so the arm can no longer be locked onto it when not in use, because repeated use could mark the arm tube. Instead, the new VA employs an elastic loop system that is functional but feels like a step backward, ergonomically, compared to the retaining cradle on the Series IV and V.

One area that has been vastly improved is the headshell, which has been reshaped to follow the line of the top of the tonearm; on the Series IV and V, the headshell “stepped up” to be higher than the top of the arm tube. When accurately setting the VTA on the earlier models, the thicker rear part of the arm tube would sometimes ride perilously close to warped records; the new headshell profile means this is no longer an issue.



**The Series VA tonearm—unique to the Model 60**

SME supplied the turntable with an Ortofon MC Cadenza Black cartridge, which retails at \$2879. I did contemplate calling Goldring, the British cartridge manufacturer, to obtain its top-of-the-line Ethos cartridge—which is about half the price of the Ortofon in the UK—but eventually decided that would introduce an unknown quantity into the proceedings. SME evidently believes the high-quality moving-coil design it supplies complements the new turntable. Ortofon is a leading Danish audio brand, so for the purposes of this test I chose to regard them as honorary Brits!

I spent around two months living with the Model 60, and the only fault I found in its design is the lack of a dustcover. The Model 60 is a dust magnet, especially in black (as I discovered when it came time to photograph it!), so I do wish they would supply—or make available as an optional extra—some form of cover. The Loricraft record cleaning machine, which SME also manufactures, comes with a rather nice soft cover which is both effective and economical. Alternatively, something similar to the freestanding, clear acrylic cover Michell offer for its GyroDec or Orbe

'tables would be a nice option. This would ensure the Model 60 and any records left on the platter remain as clean as possible. It's not just dust, either—there's also the issue of children and cats. Both have been known to sabotage vinyl replay in many homes. Thankfully, my daughter is now a teenager, and I banished the cat from the room when the SME was in use.

Once again, SME has knocked it out of the park with its user manual. The manual is (like all other SME manuals) a benchmark for clear and well-illustrated instructions. Everything is labeled, photographed, and explained with total clarity, and there is guidance to cover any likely circumstance. This is further evidence of the care and attention to detail that the firm applies to everything it does.

## **Sounds and impressions**

Listening commenced on this Best of British system in my 33' × 14' living room, which doubles as my listening room. I fed the SME into my usual (and British) Trichord Dino Mk 3 phono preamplifier complete with Trichord's flagship Never Connected power supply and reference cables. At last it was time to cue the music!

I opened with an original 1969 pressing of the John Barry soundtrack for *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (United Artists Records UAS29020) and the sublime "We Have All the Time in the World." Louis Armstrong's fabulous baritone voice issued forth like he was in the room—rich, sonorous, expressive, dynamic, and just so very real. On lesser systems, Armstrong can sound slightly indistinct, but not here—every inflection or nuance had the clarity of morning dew. I swear I could tell he had a smile on his face as he sang this song. The track's subtle acoustic-guitar motifs were astonishingly clear and transparent, but it was those absolutely masterful Barry strings that jumped out as never before. I'm not sure anybody in the history of music ever wrote a more compelling melody for strings—it's utterly beautiful, utterly elevating, and utterly *Bond*. So iconic is that particular refrain that Hans Zimmer actually reused it 50 years later on the soundtrack for the latest Bond movie, *No Time to Die*, and frankly, that's the best bit of his whole soundtrack. The SME reproduced those strings with greater clarity than I have ever heard before—this is a turntable that doesn't subtract from or add to the music, it just plays what is there without artifice.

I was enjoying the sound so much I ended up playing the whole album, and reveled in the ease with which this special system conveyed the beauty of Barry's score. On "Try," the plucked double bass had astonishing depth, articulation, and timbre, and the accompanying piano sounded incredibly natural. Best of all, the system effortlessly reproduced the dramatic climaxes when the orchestra was going at full tilt, even at high volumes. There was a sense of boundless headroom and dynamics, devoid of compression. Sudden transient blasts of trumpet and drums on "Ski Chase" actually made me jump with their force and speed.

In terms of imaging, the Model 60 offered a soundstage that was so stable it felt like architecture hewn from granite. Nothing moved or drifted in depth or width, instruments and performers stayed absolutely secure, and were thus more believable. The soundstage extended far outside the confines of the speakers and I was sometimes surprised at just how wide this felt compared to other sources. Of course, soundstage is affected by a whole range of things, from the loudspeakers to room acoustics, but if the turntable isn't retrieving spatial information from the record groove then no loudspeaker can put it back.

Whenever I review a component, I'm always keen to see how it performs across a wide range of music, so I slipped my original vinyl copy of Michael Jackson's *Bad* (Epic EPC450290 1) onto the finely etched platter of the SME and screwed down the beautifully knurled clamp. This original vinyl issue is light years ahead of the later remasters I've heard, which have been brickwalled and compressed to hell. Quincy Jones did a superb job engineering the album, and it was expertly mastered by Bernie Grundman.

One of the revelatory things about the Model 60 was the way that it suppressed all extraneous noise—there was no rumble, little hiss, no environmental disturbance, and no noticeable resonance. As a result, the opening track positively exploded from the loudspeakers. I'm loathe to fall into the cliché of “inky-black backgrounds,” but time and again I was surprised at the silence between and before tracks. “Bad” is all about percussive impact, speed, and agility, and the SME got to the heart of the rhythms that make Jackson's music so enjoyable. With the SME at the head rather than my usual GyroDec, the system was punching deeper and harder than ever. The power of those drum and bass synth hits took me by complete surprise. The sense of menace was genuinely intimidating, but at all times the bass remained incredibly precise and controlled. Notes started and stopped with superb precision and the reproduction of dynamics was jaw-dropping. I've heard SME turntables criticized in the past for being too controlled, so that sometimes the musical mojo can be lost, but I detected none of that here. This SME wants to make you get up and dance!



**Built without compromise—and emotionally moving**

On “Man in the Mirror,” Jackson's beautiful and introspective message to the world about how change starts with a single individual and cascades across humanity, his voice and unique vocal inflections and finger clicks cut through with a level of transparency and raw honesty that sent



shivers up my spine. To be clear, I have never heard Jackson sound more emotive or more transparent. In addition, there was a whole new level of scale to the proceedings—the song was even more anthemic than it had sounded either via my highly respected Naim NDX network music player or my GyroDec turntable. This is what great audio is about—being touched by your favorite music in ways you scarcely thought possible in your own home. I played this track on my Best of British system to a number of visitors, and without exception, they welled up with tears.

I was keen to see how the turntable would perform on classical symphonic works, so I pulled out my copy of *Holst: The Planets*, with André Previn conducting the London Symphony Orchestra in 1974 (HMV ASD 3002). This is probably the best recording of the suite on vinyl and both the LSO and Previn himself are on fire here. Those plucked cello and double-bass strings in the opening to “Mars” exhibited tremendous malevolence on this system, like an army coming over the horizon. As the remainder of the brass section and orchestra entered, the SME continued to excavate the groove, revealing each element of the orchestra with superb balance so that no single group of instruments overwhelmed the piece; they worked together as an ensemble. Orchestral swells were conveyed with tremendous force and power; I got a real sense of being in a large hall with the might of huge orchestral forces being brought to bear. A system such as this can truly convey shock and awe. Those huge and heavy 9” ATC bass drivers were really moving now, propelled by the massive current delivery of the Naim power amps, which are capable of hurling massive power at each loudspeaker on dynamic peaks.

“Jupiter” never fails to move me, but this was a real tour-de-force rendition. The horns and trumpets soared magnificently, while the combined brass and timpani rolled and thundered on a beautiful, undulating bed of strings. The system presented the orchestra with a superb sense of depth and width. While some say that you can’t reproduce symphonic music properly in the home, I suggest they just haven’t heard a system of this caliber in action! The “I vow to thee my country” segment in particular was moving, stirring, humbling, and magnificent, with tremendous scale and gravitas.

After the glorious excesses of Holst I was keen to listen to something rather more intimate, so turned—as I so often do—to Kate Bush, and in particular, her debut album, *The Kick Inside* (EMI EMC 3223). I know that for many, Bush peaked with the album *Hounds of Love*, but for me it’s always been her debut album that I cherish most. Here the vocals are raw, the production and recording is considerably better, and I find the songwriting more honest and direct. On “Oh to Be in Love,” her voice was perfectly reproduced in all its sensual and expressive glory, while the fabulously recorded piano sounded incredibly lifelike. On the chorus, where Bush sings “oh, oh, oh to be, -e, -e, in love and never get out again,” she hits perfectly judged piano notes for emphasis during each “oh.” These, as well as many other fine details of the recording, were clearer than I have heard them from any other source. I’ve written before about how truly great hi-fi systems seem to be capable of separating the various instrumental strands of a piece and revealing them to the listener. The Model 60 does this more emphatically than any other turntable I have heard.

## **In conclusion**

The SME Model 60 is a landmark product from a legendary firm. This is the best-looking turntable SME has ever made—in terms of design, execution, and finish, it is the supreme example of its maker’s art. The suspension is more sophisticated and effective, the bearing with its new silicone-fluid trough is more refined, the subchassis is stronger and more inert, and the new VA tonearm

exceeds the quality of the conventional Series V. It harnesses the power of next-generation materials science and aerospace engineering, and incorporates quantum leaps in precision thanks to a massive investment in state-of-the-art anodizing facilities and five-axis milling machines in the factory.



**Cue the Elgar, spin the SME, “Rule, Britannia,” and all that . . .**

Sonically, this deck sets a new standard—not just for SME, but for vinyl replay in general. In short, I have heard no better way of playing vinyl records. It’s uncolored, stable, revealing, transcendent, dynamic, infectious, and powerful. Due to its absolute sonic neutrality it will prove ideally suited to the widest possible range of ancillary components, provided they are of the highest quality. Despite its massive footprint, the Model 60’s superb design makes it perhaps the easiest SME turntable in history to accommodate in a range of settings without needing the services of a good divorce lawyer.

Whenever I review a piece of hi-fi equipment I am usually left with one overriding impression: the ATC SCM50, revealing; the Lyra Kleos SL, neutral; the Naim NAP 500, fast; and then there’s the SME Model 60, and the word is *stable*. Stable because it feels as immutable and timeless as Stonehenge itself. Krakatoa could be erupting at the end of your street and you’d still be as engrossed in Elgar’s Enigma Variations as the Model 60 faithfully excavated the groove. Stable because the sheer solidity of the musical image never wavers, and the Model 60 is so even-handed in its retrieval of the entire frequency spectrum. Stable too because I suspect that in a million years when some future alien traveler lands on Earth to survey the ruins of human civilization, they’ll find crumbling buildings overgrown with foliage. As they explore deeper inside they will hear a strange sound and discover a Model 60 spinning on the endless run-out groove of *Sgt. Pepper*. Few things are built to last forever, but the SME Model 60 feels like it’s one of them.

. . . *Jonathan Gorse*  
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### **Associated Equipment**

- **Analog source:** Michell Engineering GyroDec turntable, SME Series IV tonearm, Audio-Technica AT-OC9ML/II cartridge; Trichord Research Dino Mk 3 phono stage with Never Connected Dino+ power supply; PS Audio Stellar Phono preamplifier.
- **Preamplifier:** Naim NAC 252.
- **Power amplifier:** Naim NAP 300 DR + NAP 300 PS.
- **Power supply:** Naim SuperCap.
- **Loudspeakers:** ATC SCM50PSL and SCM40.
- **Cabling:** Chord Company Sarum T loudspeaker cables, Naim NAC A5 loudspeaker cables, Naim interconnects on all Naim amplification, Chord Company interconnects for phono stage and other primary sources, QED interconnects for secondary sources.

### **SME Model 60 Turntable and Series VA Tonearm**

**Price: £49,950 to £59,950, depending on finish.**

**Warranty: Two years.**

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