

Hi-Fi · Reviews

SME Model 8 Turntable Review

Jay Garrett takes this brand new, premium-priced British superdeck for a spin...

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SME has never been a company to chase fashion. Its turntables are engineered around mechanical precision, stability and long-term reliability, and the new [Model 8](#) follows that formula. It is a compact, belt-driven deck that brings the company's redoubtable engineering into a relatively straightforward package. Despite being SME's entry-level offering, it is well outside impulse-buy territory for most.



The Model 8 in for review replaces the older Model 6 and is best understood as a substantial refinement rather than a radical departure. It retains the restrained, purposeful appearance of its predecessor, but adds more mass, a more sophisticated drive system and the company's highly respected 309 magnesium tonearm.

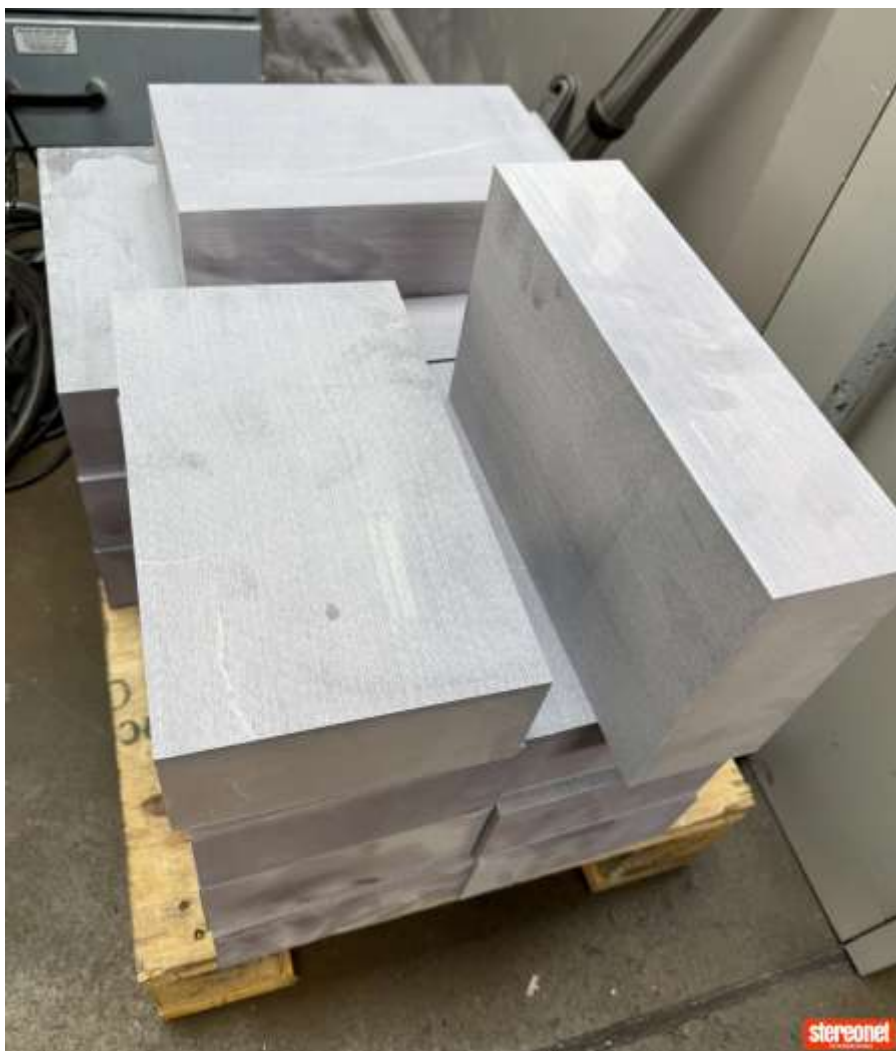


Up Close

The plinth is a CNC-machined, high-density polymer-resin affair, made from the same material used for SME's Vi and VA tonearms, chosen for its low-resonance characteristics.

Mass has been increased by approximately forty per cent compared with the Model 6, and the additional weight is intended to improve stability and control unwanted resonance. The result is a compact but solid turntable that feels more like a precision instrument than a conventional domestic component.

The deck is entirely manual and supports 33⅓ and 45rpm, with electronic speed selection through a separate power supply and controller.



Blocks of the plinth's raw material





The motor-drive system is an updated AC design derived from the flagship Model 60, said to offer better speed stability, and the outboard controller allows precise speed adjustment.



This is not a deck with superfluous features, so it has no built-in phono stage, USB output, or wireless connectivity. Its purpose is to extract as much information as possible from a record groove.



The platter is a 1.85kg Delrin design, supported by a carefully engineered bearing and driven by a belt.

The record weight is part of the intended operating arrangement rather than an optional accessory, and helps to couple the record securely to the platter to improve bass definition. Without it, some records can sound slightly less sure-footed, particularly where the pressing is not perfectly flat. You can remove the little washer-like addition at the spindle if you use thicker pressings.



SME supplies its 309 tonearm as standard. This is an important part of the Model 8's appeal – rather than requiring you to select and install a separate arm, the company offers its customers a complete turntable package.



It is a long-running and much-liked conventionally pivoted arm with a reputation for precise adjustment, broad cartridge compatibility, and fine sound.



It shares its overall design with the iconic Series V and sports a cast magnesium alloy armtube. It now has Crystal Cable internal wiring, and the premium bearings give a gossamer-smooth feel when hand cueing.



SME says it doesn't have measurements for rumble or wow and flutter. That said, tech specs alone don't guarantee great sound. However, to these ears, the Model 8's speed accuracy seemed more akin to that of a good direct-drive turntable than a belt-drive.



Vital statistics for the Model 8 are 435x320x150mm [WxDxH], and 12.4kg for the deck and 2.4kg for the off-board power supply. The deck comes in a choice of white, black or the tastefully different midnight blue of the review sample.

Getting Going

The rule of thumb for turntables is the higher the price, the harder the set-up. Getting going tends to be fiddlier, as you need to source and fit a separate tonearm, and ensure it is aligned correctly. Yet the Model 8 is much easier to live with.



The deck arrives with the tonearm fitted, so it's simply a case of fitting the platter and belt, and attaching the power supply. You need to level it too, but its adjustable feet make this easy. Fitting the cartridge to the 309 is a joy compared to almost any other type of tonearm; SME designed it to be very easy to calibrate, and the instructions are superb. It took me roughly half an hour to get everything up and running, which is the blink of an eye for a product such as this.



The silky action of the tonearm allied to the deck's effortless electronic speed control makes it a pleasure to use. The controls remind you just how top-notch SME's engineering is. Buttons and dials operate with precision, tolerances are tight, and everything feels all-of-a-piece. It isn't quite a plug-and-play design, but is far less demanding than many similarly priced specialist designs. All of which gave my better half courage to play a record by herself. She last tried doing this with my VPI, but its wobbly unipivot arm put her off playing records for a very long time!



For the purposes of this review, the SME Model 8 sat on my Solid Steel rack and connected to a YBA PH-1 phono stage, which ran into a Gryphon Essence pre/power using Siltech cabling. Speakers were Audiovector R 6 Arrete. During my listening period, the 309 was armed with a Shelter 901 III, Aidas Cartridges Malachite Silver and my Nagaoka MP-500. The 309's removable headshell made it refreshingly easy to swap between them.

The Listening

As you'd expect from an SME turntable package, the Model 8 does not impose a conspicuous tonal character on the music, nor does it attempt to make every recording sound larger, brighter or more dramatic than it really is. Instead, it provides a neutral and stable platform, letting your chosen cartridge get on with its job.

Pitch is secure, so the sustained piano notes of **Nils Frahm's** album *Felt* sound steady. Such stability also gives a convincing sense of order, particularly in complex recordings where a lesser turntable can let individual strands blur together. The Model 8 is also impressively quiet in operation, allowing low-level detail and reverberation to emerge without being masked by mechanical noise. Again, referring back to *Felt*, you get the full experience of the close-mic'd felt dampeners on the hammers of **Frahm's** piano. It's this sort of detail that reminds us of the SME's quality and class.



The midband is satisfying clean, open and focused, with just a touch of tonal warmth that prevents the presentation from becoming clinical. Vocals are placed precisely and confidently, while instrumental textures are easy to follow. Acoustic guitar has a believable sense of body, while brass and strings retain their lustre without developing glare. Surface noise, recording flaws, and differences between pressings and cartridges are easy to hear, yet the Model 8 presents these imperfections in an informative rather than aggressive way.





Bass is one of the deck's obvious strengths. Low frequencies are tight, controlled and extended through the 12-inch pressing of *Insomnia* by **Faithless**, while there are clean and crisp leading edges to kick drums and bass guitar on *A Fragile Thing* from **The Cure's** *Songs of a Lost World*. The Model 8 does not produce bass simply for effect, but rather gives bass lines proper shape and pitch.



Deeper electronic and orchestral material retains weight without becoming thick or gloopy. At the other end of the frequency spectrum, treble is similarly composed. Cymbals have plenty of bite, but the Model 8 avoids brightness. It lets me become enthralled by **Neil Peart** hammering his way through **Rush's** YYZ at hooligan volume.



The soundstage of **Nine Inch Nails' Tron: Ares [Original Motion Picture Soundtrack]** is tightly organised, with convincing front-to-back depth and stable image placement. One of the SME's key talents is keeping complex and busy musical passages intelligible. Percussion stays layered rather than collapsing into a single mass, and backing instruments occupy crisply defined spaces around the central performance.



If there is a downside to the Model 8's sound, then it is one of temperament. SME's entry-level deck is refined and composed, but it is not the most overtly exuberant or emotionally demonstrative turntable in its class. This is especially when recordings may benefit from more rhythmic propulsion and dynamic drama. In comparison, my reference VPI Prime generally sounds bigger and more physically forceful, delivering punchy lows and a lively, slightly forward character with stronger dynamics.



That is not the same as saying the SME sounds dull, however. For instance, the crescendos in *Rhapsody in Blue* with **André Previn** conducting at the piano arrive with authority, and the dynamics are carefully graded. I get the sense that this turntable simply prefers precision and poise to theatrical excitement. Listeners who value neutrality, image stability and low-level resolution are likely to find that balance highly attractive, while those seeking a more forward presentation may want to consider alternatives.

The Verdict

The SME Model 8 is an accomplished high-end turntable package that succeeds through refinement rather than spectacle. Its build quality is outstanding, and the bundled 309 tonearm is a huge plus sonically and in terms of ease of set-up and use. Furthermore, the outboard speed control brings pitch stability rarely found on belt-driven turntables, even high end ones. All of which let it produce a quiet, detailed and ordered sound with excellent bass control and accurate spatial definition.

Its premium price places it in demanding company, and while it might not deliver the explosive character or sheer physical scale of the VPI Prime for example, the SME Model 8 more than holds its own by presenting a cleaner, more evenly balanced view of the recording. Fine detail is reproduced with great control, and the tonal balance is less obviously shaped by the turntable's personality. So vinyl fans seeking a beautifully engineered, fuss-free source that is precise and revealing should walk this way.