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SME Model 8/309

Replacing SME's longstanding Model 6 turntable, the new 'entry level' Model 8 is not only more substantial but also features the latest Model 60-derived AC motor drive
 Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

For a company not exactly known for 'product churn', SME has been uncommonly busy with the release of several new turntables, including the flagship Model 60 [HFN Jul '22], the Model 35 [HFN Jul '25] and now the £9999 Model 8. The latter replaces the Model 6 that, fitted with an SME M2-9 tonearm, marked a departure for SME on its release in 2020. Not only was it the company's first 'entry level' design, it was also the first to utilise a solid, non-suspended plinth arrangement and the first SME deck to employ an AC motor.

Unlike many of SME's 'legacy' decks that remain in the catalogue [see boxout, p65] the Model 6 is wholly replaced by the Model 8, making a few key changes along the way. Most noticeable is the plinth, now both thicker and with a claimed 40% increase in mass, and made from a material similar to the well-damped polymer of SME's new Vi tonearms, promising improved resonance control.

LEVEL UP

This plinth has also been restyled over the Model 6, gaining an elegant 'waistline' machined around its edge. The arm mounting board is less obvious and the embossed '8' recessed into the plinth's surface is a welcome improvement on the 'M6del' labelling found on its predecessor, which always set off my grammatical OCD.

The deck is easily levelled using four adjustable feet – the Model 6's feet were fixed – and its AC motor is derived from that used in the Model 60. There's no separate transformer enclosure and control unit at this price level, but the Model 8's 33.3/45rpm controller [see inset picture, p65] bears a stronger family resemblance to that of its bigger brothers.

New colourways have also been introduced, so while the Model 6 operated

on the Henry Ford colour palette, the Model 8 is available in Black, White and SME's new signature Midnight Blue.

GET A GRIP

The Model 8's platter is also a little chunkier than before, tipping the scales at around 1.8kg. The top surface is styled to resemble a mat (and, amusingly, looks quite Garrard-esque!) but it lacks the 'grippy' diamond scroll finish of the manufacturer's higher specification turntables. This gave rise to an unexpected issue when the Model 8 was used *sans* record weight – more of which later.

At the rear of the plinth are high quality, gold-plated WBT phono sockets and an earth terminal. The AC input to the deck is through a low voltage power connector on the end of a flying lead from the controller.

Otherwise, another obvious difference between the Model 6 and Model 8 lies in

the choice of tonearm. The Model 6 came in standard and 'Classic' formats featuring the M2-9 and M2-9R arms, respectively, but the Model 8 is fitted with SME's 309 [HFN Aug '89] instead. Dating from 1988, this was the second arm developed from the original Series V [HFN Oct '84], following on from the Series IV [HFN Jul '87]. Available

originally in 9in, 10in and 12in versions, it became a firm favourite for delivering much of the Series V's performance at a lower price.

Today's 309 has been subtly improved but is still instantly recognisable.

It is based around a cast magnesium alloy armtube, with internal constrained layer damping, and a detachable die-cast magnesium alloy headshell for quick cartridge changes. Internal wiring for this Model 8 version comes from Crystal Cable.

Both vertical and horizontal movement of the arm are provided through precision

'New shades, including white, have also been introduced'



RIGHT: Machined black acetal platter sits on an alloy sub-platter and bearing, the latter with a stainless steel shaft running on a tungsten ball within a phosphor bronze sleeve. It's lightly pre-oiled with a highly refined jet engine lubricant!



'The 309 tonearm is a
stripped-down Series
IV, complete with
detachable headshell'



ball race bearings, and anti-skating is set using a rotary control that operates on a tensioned spring and filament. The usual SME sliding base, and pillar (height) adjustment, makes for easy cartridge alignment and VTA setting.

HEX APPEAL

The main way in which the 309 differs from the Series V is that its horizontal balancing and application of stylus tracking force are entirely manual and uncalibrated, seemingly necessitating the use of a stylus balance. However, SME provides a branded 3mm ball-ended hex driver that not only unlocks the base and the main counterweight but is also used to adjust the fore/aft position of the counterweight [see p63] to set the tracking force.

The clever bit is that this hex driver has the letters A, B, C and D marked on its handle, and one complete rotation of the driver from A back to A adjusts downforce by exactly 0.5g in either direction. It's a simple but ingenious touch, helping

to ensure the Model 8 is an absolute doddle to set up, aided by clear and well-illustrated instructions.

HALLMARK HI-FI

With the turntable connected to my regular Yamaha C-5000/M-5000 combo [HFN Aug '20] and fitted with a Clearaudio MC Essence cartridge [HFN Aug '17], it wormed its way into my affections very quickly. It has all the hallmarks of an SME product, its level of detail retrieval being first class, even if it presents the music in an arguably smoother, more approachable fashion to its bigger brothers.

There is one very important caveat, though, and that is you must always use the supplied record weight/clamp. A brief listen to the Model 8 without it revealed that it's an essential part of the design.

ABOVE: Available in white, midnight and black colourways, the high density polymer plinth is fashioned from a very similar material to that used in SME's new Vi tonearm tubes. The arm fitted here is the magnesium-tubed 309

With the record weight absent, bass is less sure-footed, as is that signature SME sound. As PM postulates in his Lab Report [p67], this may well be due to slight movement of the LP on the 'slippery', machined surface of the acetal platter [pic, above and p62]. The Model 8's record weight prevents any movement of the LP on the platter, and makes a big difference to the sound.

With the weight firmly in place, the result is a turntable that doesn't miss a thing. There's a subtle tinge of warmth to the overall sonic balance that's very appealing, but don't interpret this as the Model 8 being all warm and fluffy and lacking any substance. Nothing could be further from the truth – the deck has a crispness and sense of focus that many other models around the price struggle to match.

The Model 8 also crafts an alluringly tight and ordered soundstage. This doesn't reach far beyond the position of the loudspeakers but possesses excellent depth perspective and never sounds narrow or constricted. This performance packs in so much detail – but simultaneously defines it with such precision – that it soon becomes addictive.

ARMED AND READY

I suspect that a large part of this confident presentation is down to the inclusion of the SME 309 tonearm. The M2-9 employed by the Model 6 is a fine design, but the 309 brings about a step up in quality that is easily heard on the Model 8. This arm has always given a taste of the abilities of the Series V, and its inclusion allows SME's

CLASSICS UPDATED

Despite the raft of new models from SME, all with new AC speed controllers [Model 8, inset], vinyl fans might be surprised to discover that most of the brand's 'classic' turntable designs are still available. Only the original Model 6 and Model 10 have been fully laid to rest.

On the 'Legacy' side, one can still purchase the Model 15 [HFN Jul '24], 20 and 30 decks – albeit in MK2 guises with the new AC motor set-up derived from the Model 60. As standard, these turntables come with the Series Vi tonearm, or with the original Series V if preferred. The Model 12 MK2 [HFN Jan '23], also with updated AC motor and Vi tonearm, is retained in the main catalogue while a two-arm variant (the Model 12 MK2 Twin) is offered for those audiophiles who run a pair of cartridges...

The Model 20/12 MK2 and 30/12 MK2 decks have the 12in Series V-12 arm, as the Series VA-12 is currently reserved for the Garrard 301 Advanced [HFN Aug '24]. Meanwhile, the only tonearms currently for sale on their own are the M2 and M2-R models, both offered in 9 and 12in effective lengths.





ABOVE: The 309 tonearm's internal wiring is connected to high quality gold-plated RCAs and an earth tag. AC input is via a socket [right] and isolating feet are adjustable

most affordable deck to consistently punch well above its weight.

Listening to a track like 'Rikki's Shuffle' from Michael Hedges' *Live On The Double Planet* LP [Windham Hill 37 1066-1] was an ear-opening experience through this SME deck. The interplay between Hedges' steel-string acoustic and Michael Manring's fretless bass was easy to appreciate, each guitar pluck crisp and vivid against the more opulent tones of the bass. When Hedges slaps the body of his guitar, its woody, rich resonance was obvious and prominent.

This is a tonally revealing sound, the Model 8's ability to 'tell it like it is' ensuring every instrumental detail comes to the fore. The sudden, shimmering impact of the cymbals arriving at the beginning of 'You're Not The Rule (You're The Exception)', played by Little Feat drummer Richie Hayward on Helen Watson's *Blue Slipper* set [EMI SCX 6710], had me almost jumping in my seat. Yet, barely ten minutes later, I was gently sinking back into the same seat with the languid, resonant trumpet that backs Kari Bremnes on 'Ytterste Pol' [Ly; Strange Ways Records WAY 285].

'The impact of the cymbals had me jumping in my seat'

Forgive the anthropomorphism, but it seemed to be telling me that 'no, this isn't perfect, but there's still magic to be found in the grooves'.

BASS TO BELIEVE IN

Speaking of magic, the Model 8 casts a bewitching spell when it comes to the lowest registers. Again, there's a subtle but endearingly rosy hue to the tonal colour of the bass, but it isn't long since the direct-drive Technics SL-1300G [HFN Aug '25] passed through my listening room and the Model 8 brought it to mind

with the precision, control and punch that it confers upon low frequencies.

The bass drum on The Cinematic Orchestra's 'A Caged Bird' [To Believe; Ninja

Tune ZEN226] thumped with both snappiness and impact. Equally endearing was the way the Model 8 layered the track's percussive effects as they come in one by one. These can sometimes jumble together, and it can be a while before you realise something else has appeared, but each new arrival here was vivid and striking. Don't let that 'entry level' status fool you: this deck has aspirations of greatness! ☺

GET TO WORK

This was true of anything I chose to put onto the platter (and secure in place with the record weight). Hannah Reid's vocals on 'You And I' from London Grammar's *The Greatest Love* [Ministry of Sound MADART4LPD2C] hung authentically between my loudspeakers.

Admittedly, this pressing isn't one of the British band's best, being clean and detailed but somewhat two-dimensional in spatial terms. The SME Model 8 turned out to be the ideal foil, though, as its presentation didn't disguise this aspect of the mix while still making the best of what it had to work with.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The SME Model 8 takes an already impressive entry level design in the Model 6 and significantly uplifts its performance. The plinth developments, the new AC motor drive system developed from the Model 60, and the change of tonearm to the 309 have really given SME's baby a boost. Easy to set up, this stylish performer offers more than a tantalising taste of the brand's higher end turntables. SME is on a roll...

Sound Quality: 90%

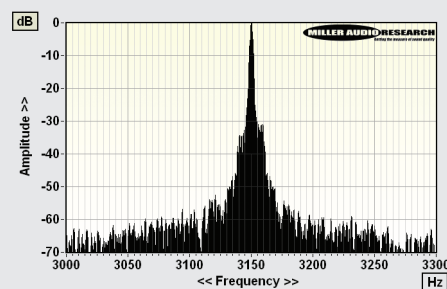


LAB REPORT

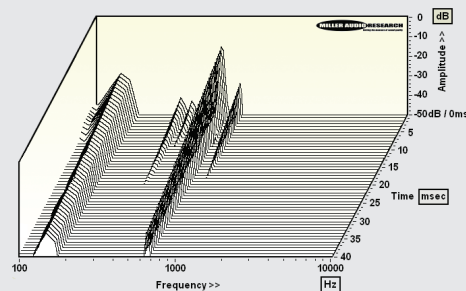
SME MODEL 8/SME 309

The Model 8's 1.85kg black acetal platter is a lot lighter than that of its bigger brothers but the compact alloy sub-platter and close-coupled belt-drive still take 5-6 seconds to bring it up to speed. The ramped torque of the AC motor protects the belt and assists in the spectacularly low through-groove rumble of -74.0dB (DIN-B wtd re. 1kHz/5cm/sec). However, while the latter figure is largely unaffected by the use of SME's heavy record weight, the same cannot be said of the Model 8's speed stability... Without the LP weight, peak wow/low-rate drift is a high 0.2% – possibly a result of the platter's low-resistance surface causing the LP to slip under load – but once the weight is in position over the (unthreaded) spindle, the deck's frequency resolution sharpens up very significantly. Peak-wtd variations in pitch fall to a mere 0.02% (wow) and 0.04% (flutter) while the speed adjustment facility allows a precise absolute speed to be achieved [see Graph 1].

The partnering 309 tonearm [along with the Synergy, HFN Mar '19] is not just SME's only remaining magnesium arm, but is also arguably a more elegant design than either the Series IV or V despite its detachable headshell. It's the very lack of spring-loaded downforce and other accoutrements, coupled with the one-piece tapered tube, bearing yoke and counterweight rail, that keep the effective mass at around 10g and also simplify the arm's overall resonant behaviour [see CSD waterfall, Graph 2]. In practice, the first bending mode occurs at around 150Hz but a higher-Q harmonic/twisting mode occurs at a (midrange) 680Hz thanks to the headshell. So the 309 will have a different 'tonal influence' than SME's other wands even if the pre-loaded bearings offer the same, near-zero friction and play. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ± 150 Hz, 5Hz per minor division)



ABOVE: Cumulative resonant decay spectrum for the 309 arm, illustrating various structural, headshell and tube vibration modes (100Hz-10kHz over 40msec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.33rpm (-0.013%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5-6sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.02% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-74.0dB (-73.8dB with clamp)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-69.6dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-62.5dB
Power Consumption	9W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	435x150x320mm / 12.4kg