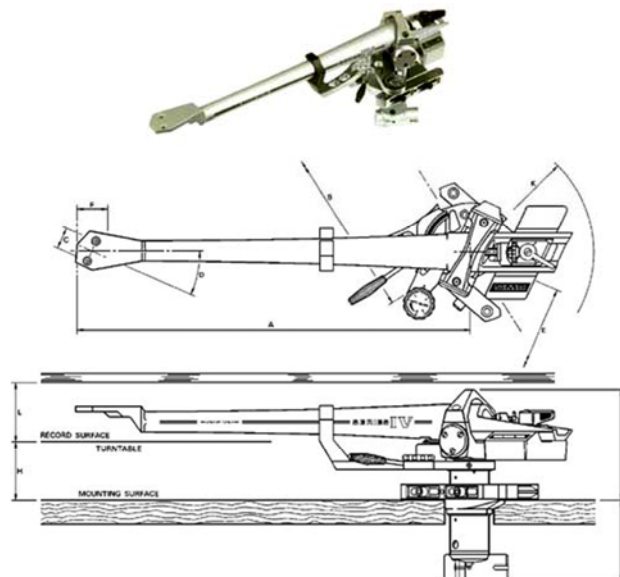




- Reviewer: Edward Barker
- Turntables: Kuzma XL with separate power supply and Kondo Mains lead, Garrard 301, 2 x Garrard 401, Systemdek Transcription
- Arms: Kondo-wired SME V, Kuzma Airline, Cartridge Man Conductor, Hadcock 242 SE, Ortofon 212, Mission 774, Kondo wired Rega 300, Scheu 12-inch
- Cartridges: Kondo lo-M, Cartridge Man Music Maker 2 & 3, Koetsu Urushi, Madrigal MC1, Empire MC1000, Shure V15
- Phono amplification: Kondo M77
- Digital: Teac transport, Audion prototype valve DAC
- Tuner: Rotel
- Preamp: Kondo M77 with phono
- Power amps: Kondo Gakuoh PP
- Speakers: Living Voice OBX-RW, Proac Super Tablettes
- Ancillaries: Kondo KSL LP and Kondo KSL VZ interconnects; Kondo SPC speaker cable and Kondo KSL ACz power cords; Clearlight Audio NFT cabling; Silver Arrow cabling and mains leads; Audiomagic Mini Stealth conditioner, Incognito wiring on Conductor and Hadcock 242, Living Voice Mystic Matt, Boston Audio Graphite Mat, Kyrna isolators, Cartridge Man Isolators and setup tools, Dr. Feickert protractor. 2 x separate 30 amp mains wiring spurs.
- Room: 16.40' x 14.75' x 11.12'
- Review component retail: £1.495

The rather wonderful thing about audio and in particular tone arms is how they are in effect a pure interface between art and science. Someone once said that an art is a process of discovery that contains more than three variables interacting at any given moment. What's interesting about the SME IV in my experience is, it tells us something, perhaps a great deal, about the tensions and contrasts between necessary world-class engineering and how that is an insufficient part of the overall recipe of the art. The thing about a tone arm is that its sound is the result of a multitude of interactions between components, just like a guitar. And sometimes what is done for good scientific reasons (like adding rigidity) will turn out to have incalculable and negative effects on other aspects of performance. Tone arms are in a sense attempting to do two contradictory things - to be completely rigid and lossy at the same time. Striking the right balance is still today more a matter of trial and error, of experiment and exploration than of



Dimensions	mm	Specifications	
Distance from pivot to stylus	233.15	Effective mass	10.0/11.0g
Distance from pivot to turntable centre	215.35	Cartridge balance range	5-16g
Cartridge fixing centres	12.7	Vertical tracking force	0-3.0g (30mN)
Offset angle (degrees)	23.635	Maximum tracking error	0.012 (degrees per mm)
Linear offset	93.47	Nullpoints:	
Overhang	17.8	Inner	66.04mm
Height above mounting surface	87.9 max 56.4 min	Outer	120.9mm
Height of record surface above mounting surface	57.9 max 26.4 min	Audio lead	
Depth below mounting surface	56.75	Length	1.2m
Radial clearance for balanced weight	73.0	Capacitance	140.0pF per channel
Clearance between cabinet lid and record surface assuming cartridge height at 17.0mm	35.0	Resistance	0.145 ohms per conductor
		Internal wiring	
		Capacitance	15.0 pF per channel
		Resistance	0.535 ohms per conductor
		Output plug and socket	DIN 5 pole 240 (degrees)
		Weight, net	700.0g



number crunching and finite element analysis.

An arm might be antiquated technology but it still is viciously complex and defies the modeling of our most sophisticated supercomputers and programs. From a programming point of view, Garbage In, Garbage Out is what we still seem to be getting. This does not mean a rigorous scientific approach is undesirable. Far from it. A deep understanding of materials science, acoustics, wave mechanics, electron flow and many other subjects

are critical to designing a good tone arm.

But we reach the frontiers of the known pretty quickly and the nature of translating theory into practice means making many decisions in the dark, each of which effects a multitude of others and each of which can be critical to the resulting sound.

Any one of them can drop the performance of an arm from Formula One to formula c. Certainly the trouble with the SME V seems to lie in the wiring. Even with Van den Hul silver, the arm still sounds sterile, clinical, CD-like, earnest and tonally grey.

Substitute Kondo wiring and all its faults are transformed into virtues. This is an astounding counter-intuitive discovery. For me it's been one of the biggest surprises in the last ten years. Yet if the idea with the V was simply that this is a magnificent arm ruined by bad wiring, what can we say about the IV?

Stupidly I failed by a whisker to get a Kondo'd IV but the word out there is that even the Japanese master's wiring cannot save the arm. There's something wrong with it.





As far as I can tell, the only other significant difference is in the grade of bearing. If that is the case, it would tell us that in this design a slight roughening of the surface of the ball bearings has a fundamentally disastrous result on the whole. And that's pretty much the conclusion I've arrived at.

SME is a great company. It's fantastic to see that they have committed to designing new arms. While the tonal DNA of the company might be towards a slightly austere and regimented sound, for me the Kondo'd V has remained my favorite arm for the last few years and is world class. And there are little birds telling me that the new SME20/3 is something else altogether, a turntable that could well walk off with 'the belle of the ball' sound at an ultimate turntable shoot-out.

Which is great news. It tells us that SME can do more than build masterfully well-engineered designs. It tells us that they make products that can lead the pack musically as well. But like everyone else it also turns out they are





not infallible.

The thing about the SME IV is that apart from slightly lower-grade bearings and the lack of a damping trough, it's pretty much the same as the V. In fact it's got one less connection at the cartridge end so some Americans prefer it to the V. I'd though like to focus on how extreme it is, from the magnesium the arm wand is made of to the radical shape of the counterweight which is beautifully offset in a cradle, the brilliant cartridge setup system, the crude but effective VTA adjustment and the top-quality SME machining throughout

still setting standards to this day. Inevitably of course there are whole swathes of the sonic universe that both arms share. With a decent well-constructed turntable on a wall shelf, both display a calm authority, an absolute

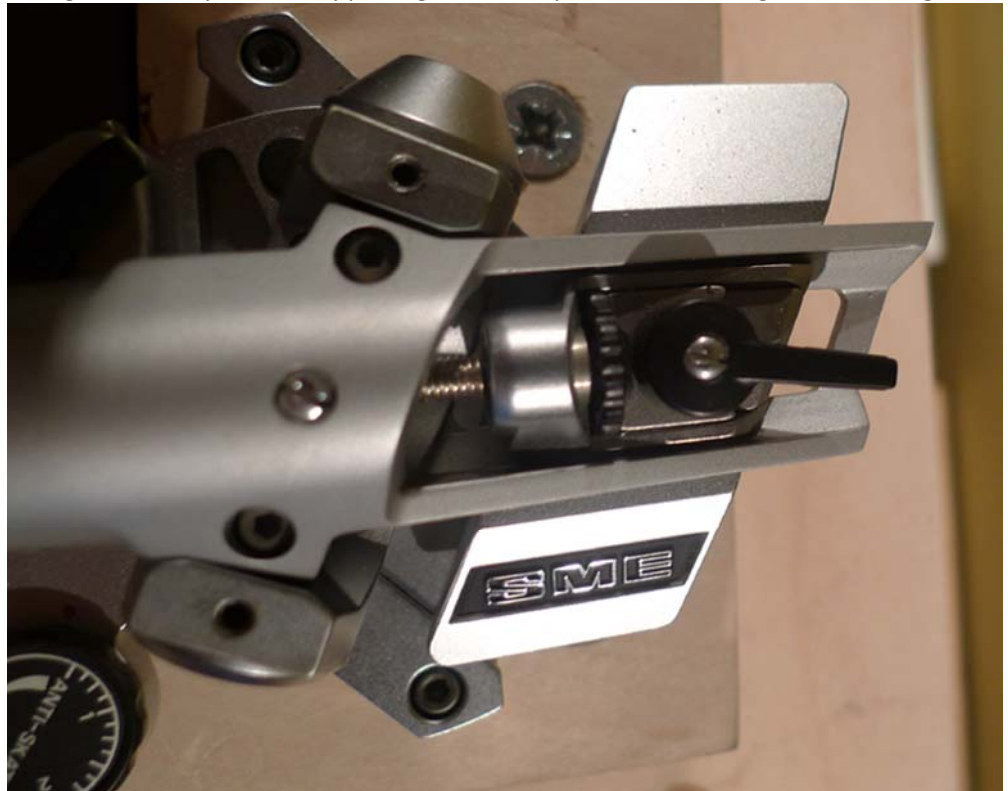




stability of image and instrument that reminds one of those benefits in CD. Scale is never a problem. They grow and lift dynamically reasonably well. They are unfussy and the opposite of neurotic. But then compare them directly and things come as a shock.

The IV in comparison to the Kondo'd V sounds dull, dead, boring, indifferent to what it's playing, tone-deaf and lifeless. Which is unfair and outrageous. Why is that happening? What aspects of this magnificent design and world-class execution are causing the problem? We know that the bridge was creating some havoc so everyone removes it these days. But it was designed to add extra rigidity to the support bracket rather like a roll cage in a convertible car.

Yet something (presumably in the way resonances are being absorbed and dissipated down the arm – or the way they are not) might end up in some kind of feedback loop there because it is obvious even to the uninitiated that removing the bridge brings a significant improvement all'round.



The SME IV exemplifies the prosaic. Put on Art Pepper's Today [CA 671] and the first thing it'll tell you is that it doesn't like cymbal shimmer, preferring just to kind of point in that general direction. It's like a dancer who used to be good but now has arthritis and a stiff neck. This is an arm that knows how to have fun because its maiden aunt once went to an Amish party and learned how to drink lemonade and say words like plain. Some might call it austere, forceful, unembellished. I'd call it challenged in the radiance department. So frankly even if it does so many things Spectacularly well, they are most of the things one appreciates in CD yet the magic that is vinyl sound is half way out the door. The other thing is that the arm's qualities come through regardless of cartridge. I haven't come across a cartridge with more sheer aliveness, air and sparkle than the Van den Hul Frog Gold but you'd never know it on the IV. Maybe I'm being a bit tough but on The Phil Woods Six Live From the Showboat [RCA pl 02202], the sax is pretty much devoid of harmonics and overtones. You get a solid earnest 'faithful' rendition of the facts but to my ear little of the musical truth, the snap, pizzaz and swing that make you want to learn to salsa.

It's not that it's completely dull and lifeless, more that you feel it's got an accountant's values and needs to go out, take a trip to Ghana and discover what life is about. Struck glass is close to a joke, a dull clunky thing with pretty much zero ring or afterspray.

On Yusef Lateef The Doctor is In and Out [Atlantic SD 1685] it gets the music's forward rhythm and drive, the power and muscular definition and the whole is well organized. In fact it sounds okay and if you came on just this track I suspect you'd find my other comments on the harsh side. But if you've heard better you will instantly



recognize that the drums sound soft dull and beige, the cowbells like Bakelite, the bamboo flute like a flaccid reed.



The overall sound is authoritative, bold and outlined but not to the point of caricature or cartoon. It's grey and there's no chiaroscuro, no shadow in the colors. Things are the equivalent of a graphic novel rather than a film. Am I being too harsh?

Such a hard question. I'm sure there are people who will be completely happy with this arm and others who would come in here and go 'what on earth are you on about?' But all I can do is try to be as honest about my own views as I can. For me this arm is two chopsticks short of a noodle. It's an ox and it plods. To turn it into a nightingale you need to change the wiring and upgrade the bearing. Do that and you have not just the keys to the kingdom, you also get the one to Juliet's door. It's called an SME V.

*Edward Barker*