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Issue No. 448

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Black to the future

As iconic analogue specialist SME unveils one of the world's most desirable turntable packages, **David Price** takes it for a spin

With LP sales up year-on-year – not by stunning amounts, admittedly, but it's a real and meaningful trend all the same – record shop owners and turntable manufacturers will tell you that the market is positively buoyant right now. One thing driving this is the growth of all-in-one, 'starter' turntables – like Rega's entry-level Planar 1 Plus package (*HFC 438*), for example. These are either for newbies who've never spun LPs before or for returnees to black plastic wanting a quick and easy way to bask in the sound of vinyl once again. Such packages tend to include the motor unit, tonearm,

cartridge and a phono stage – giving a line-level output that can be plugged straight into a basic amplifier. Most tend to cost under £1,000, some much less – so it's more than a little surprising to see specialist manufacturer SME introduce an all-in-one turntable with a price tag that comes in at a little under £15k.

The company was formed back in 1946 under the name The Scale Model Equipment Company and has an unalloyed, copper-bottomed reputation for excellence. This isn't just for sound, but in respect of build quality too and despite a change of ownership, we expect nothing less than genius from

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT
SME Synergy
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable package
WEIGHT
24.5kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
370 x 178 x 350mm
FEATURES
● 33, 45, 78rpm
● Tonearm based on SME Series IV and Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti moving-coil cartridge
DISTRIBUTOR
SME Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01903 814321
WEBSITE
sme.co.uk

its Synergy package and upon first inspection, it would appear that's precisely what we're getting.

The package comprises a compact new motor unit based on the Model 15, with a special tonearm that closely resembles a Series IV. This comes pre-fitted with an Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti moving-coil cartridge, and there's a bespoke integrated phono stage by Nagra, with all the wiring by Crystal Cable.

SME's new CEO Stuart McNeilis says: "It is aimed at customers seeking a turntable solution which is factory configured, setup and ready to play... The partners we selected match the stringent ultra-high quality and reliability disciplines of SME. It was critical to partner with like-minded high-end audio manufacturers with an impeccable track record." This is made even more seamless because the company's UK distributor (Padood) also imports Nagra – so it's keeping things very much in the family.

It's part of a strategy by McNeilis – a former aerospace man, recently appointed as SME's head honcho by owner Ajay Shirke's Cadence group – to grow its precision engineering side in a range of sectors from Formula One to medical and high-end automotive.

That's why it has taken the decision to get a UK distributor for its audio side, so the company can concentrate on design and manufacturing rather than selling. Currently, about 60 percent of SME's business is hi-fi, whereas just a decade ago about 70 percent was precision engineering.

If you're a fan of the brand, the Synergy will seem very familiar, yet strangely different. As you'd expect, it plunders the SME parts bin extensively – but that's one hell of a parts bin. The deck looks like a Model 15 that's shrunk in the wash. The motor is a derivative of the one found in the Model 20, the bearing is from the Model 15 but re-engineered to work effectively with the new subchassis and the platter is shared with the Model 15. The result is a

Elements of the mix sound so secure they could've been nailed to the wall

small, compact turntable that starts with an aluminium base unit that has rubber isolators inside three pillars, to decouple it from its surroundings. It sits on three adjustable feet. The upper tier carries the arm mounting, bearing assembly and inner platter; the motor is decoupled from the chassis by rubber bands.

There's also an electronic speed control unit that's housed in a one-piece CNC machined case, and gives microprocessor-controlled speed via a closed loop servo system, with 33, 45 and 78rpm with +/- 0.01 percent fine pitch speed adjustment. It spins the 4.6kg platter up to speed quickly,



The magnesium tonearm and Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti cartridge combine to dazzling effect

and the latter is topped by a special mat. The phono preamplifier is built in, but has a separate power supply that needs to be attached to the deck via its own cable.

The arm is basically an SME Series IV, but with new Synergy livery on its lightweight diecast magnesium tube. It gets special Crystal Cable Monocrystal internal wiring and phono cables. The arm bearings are superb, with a lovely feel when hand cueing, thanks in large part to the 10mm ABEC 3 ball bearing races. The yoke is mounted to the 23mm diameter heat-treated, ground and honed steel pillar, with a pair of 17mm ABEC 7 ball bearing races, widely spaced to resist tilt.

Sound quality

The highly capable Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti moving-coil comes pre-fitted and aligned, so all you need to do is take the stylus guard off and you're good to go – something that even I can manage without breaking anything. What strikes you about the Synergy is that there's something

almost magical about the sound – cue up your favourite record and you can't help but be amazed. You're instantly aware that you are listening to a deck that is totally top tier; everything about the package's performance is of an extremely high order, with nothing to fault and almost everything to love. Scritti Politti's *The Word Girl* is a whimsical eighties pop song that isn't particularly well recorded, but the way the SME handles it is impressive. It has a wide, spacious and three-dimensional soundstage with accurate image location, a fulsome tonality with more guts than you've a right to expect for the era, plus a relentlessly propulsive musicality. Above all, though, is the sense of polish and precision to the whole production, which makes me want to keep on listening all night.

Serious vinyl spinners always do soundstaging well, and this new SME turntable package duly delivers the goods. The Scritti Politti track comes right out of the speakers to meet me, filling the room with a supremely

IN SIGHT



- 1 Chrome-plated reflex clamp
- 2 4.6kg machined alloy platter
- 3 Earthing post
- 4 Motor stage PSU input
- 5 RCA stereo output
- 6 Phono stage PSU input

Q&A

Stuart McNeilis
CEO, SME Ltd.



DP: What brought you to this venerable company?

SM: I was attracted by precision engineering capabilities, coupled with the unique skills and ultimate craftsmanship. In many respects I matched SME to my career and experiences in the aerospace industry. From there it was considered that my skills, knowledge and experience would complement the highly skilled workforce at SME. I am an aircraft engineer by profession with over 34 years' experience within the industry. My career started as an aeronautical engineering apprentice at British Aerospace and progressed from licensed aircraft engineer to senior management positions in engineering, operations, customer relations and sales. I am not an audiophile, but I am a music lover and vintage audio equipment enthusiast.

Why did you launch the Synergy?

The decision to develop it came with the new management takeover of SME. Synergy was born from SME's desire to design, engineer and manufacture a precision integrated turntable. From market feedback it was identified that analogue customers below the very top of the high-end market wanted an out-of-the-box high-performance package without the need to match partnering equipment and set things up.

What challenges did you face?

To retain our values, engineering principles and our DNA. The design brief was for Synergy to be instantly recognisable as SME, incorporating the precision engineering we are famous for with a compact design, sleek and modern look. The research, development and coordination with the three other high-end audio suppliers naturally generated some integration challenges. However, the net result is the definition of synergy as: "producing a combined effect greater than the sum of the parts". It isn't a mass-market product, rather it's aimed at a specific type of customer and compliments our current turntable product range. Ultimately it opens up a wider customer base, too.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Electronic speed control unit
- 2 Tonearm based on SME Series IV
- 3 Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti moving-coil cartridge

confident and stable sound, acting as if it owns my listening room and I am lucky to have been let in to hear it. I've heard rival high-end turntables do slightly better in terms of scale from left to right, but the Synergy shows excellent depth perspective and places instruments with rifle-bolt precision within the soundstage. Individual elements of the mix sound so secure they could have been nailed to the wall.

Moving to Change's *A Lover's Holiday*, I am struck by the sheer smoothness, sweetness and polish of the package. This is a classic disco track from the seventies with actual acoustic

indie-pop stomper, and the Synergy steamrollers it along with super-fast attack transients – doubtless down to the motor unit's fine speed stability and the tonearm's grip – and the very lithe sounding Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti cartridge. It is real foot-tapping stuff, but interestingly the deck remains in complete control at all times. In conjunction with excellent dynamics – it's easy to hear the music's subtle accents as well as track serious level changes – the result is a gripping and highly engrossing sound.

Conclusion

It's very easy to love SME's Synergy; you can spend more on separate deck/arm/cartridge/phono amp combinations, but the jury's out on whether the sonics of this package can be beaten at the price. I love its no-nonsense styling, its physical compactness, the superlative build and its overall sound. If you're lucky enough to be able to afford it, SME's Synergy package is an essential purchase for all types of vinyl fans ●



There's little that really compares with the SME Synergy; it's in a gang of one at the price. There are, however, combinations of products from one manufacturer that you can include, such as Clearaudio's Innovation Wood turntable, Universal tonearm and DaVinci V2 moving-coil cartridge, plus Balance phono stage. This German combination is far larger than the British package. It has a colder, more precise sound – one that's a bit more mechanical and less musically satisfying – but is still very impressive all the same. Although seriously good looking, it isn't quite as well finished as the SME offering.

A wide and spacious soundstage with accurate imaging and fulsome tonality

instruments and the SME really brings their timbre to the fore, giving a largely translucent rendition of the record that has just a touch of extra warmth thrown in. Some of this elan is recognisably from the tonearm, which has an exceptionally solid low-end response that underpins the bass drum and bass guitar with more guts than you'd expect. At the same time, it shows great polish in the treble, rendering the hi-hat cymbal work with a delicious slickness that one rarely hears, even from high-end vinyl. All this makes for a powerful, barrel-chested and opulent sound, with an ever so subtle sepia tint for good measure.

Musically, the SME takes the rhythm by the scruff of the neck and delivers it right at you. The Teardrop Explodes' *Reward* is a frenetic early eighties

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Supremely open and detailed sound; sheer quality

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Nothing

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: One of the world's finest turntable packages, period

FEATURES



OVERALL

