



# THE DARK KNIGHT

Batman's record player? SME's stealthy matt black Model 15 turntable and tonearm remains unobtrusive, but musically it strikes a hard and fast blow for audiophile justice!

**M**ade in England": once it was understood as a warning rather than a promise, as many of the island's products – to say the least – suffered from quality defects. However, even at that time, back at the beginnings of SME's 70-year history, the standard of the tonearms and later complete turntables of the Sussex-based company stood out positively. Whether on functionality, precision, finish or longevity, SME products were, and are, beyond reproach, and the famous SeriesV, introduced in the mid-1980s, has since been regarded as the tonearm par excellence.

The 309 used here, also sold as the Transrotor 5009 (with a special internal cabling system) by the Rake HiFi distribution company here in Germany, was directly derived from the SeriesV, and like that model, it has an extremely stiff, low-resonance magnesium tube, from which the headshell – of the same material – can be

removed for easier mounting and alignment of the cartridge. Instead of the massless support force adjustment by spring tension of the SeriesV, in the 309 this is



▲ The one-piece platter clamp is screwed onto the spindle and fixes the record in place.

done classically via a sliding counterweight, which is then fixed by means of a set screw.

We have been working with and listening to the "TR 5009" for years, because it has a firm place on our Transrotor Rondino nero reference turntable, which consists of shiny aluminum and bright acrylic parts. Next to the Transrotor, the compact, matt black SME model looks like "Batman's turntable", while reminding others of the US Air Force's stealth bombers. The moral of the story? Be inconspicuous and achieve a more sustainable effect – or possibly "Walk softly and carry a big stick"!

So what does catch the eye about the Model 15? Well, could be the three turrets with ten short rubber rings, or the sub-chassis weighing more than eleven kilograms including platter adjustment, which also decouples the tonearm base from external vibrations. This simple and effective solution, in which a central

## TEST-COMPONENTS

TURNTABLE: Avid Diva II SP/Dynavector DV-20X2L, Clearaudio Ovation/Talismann V2, Transrotor Rondino nero/Figaro

CARTRIDGE: Benz Micro ACE SL, Clearaudio Maestro V2, Ortofon Quintet Black/Cadenza Red

PHONO STAGES: Brinkmann Edison, Electrocompaniet ECP2

PHONO CABLES: Furutech Silver Arrows, HMS Gran Finale Phono

dampening system made of tough gel controls all movements, comes from SME's superior Models 20 and 30, and the low centre of gravity of the suspension construction means that tumbling and tilting effects are minimal.

### Powerful & sensitively controlled

Each of the three towers is supported by a height-adjustable foot, which sits on a rubber ring. Internally, it is cleverly designed, because in the interest of uninhibited energy dissipation, a small steel ball ensures an intimate, defined transition to the base plate. The spike-bearing motor rests on three hard rubber discs, which on the one hand prevent the drive from slipping and on the other hand precisely dictate its distance to the subplatter. The small, quiet three-phase motor drives this via a flat belt.

An external power supply unit with a rounded and slightly slanted control panel carries out speed control. Its elongated housing is filled with electronics, whereby a microcomputer drives the motor with

up to 1.5-ampere peak current by means of a potent MOSFET power semiconductor. The signals for this are generated by a microprocessor from the quadruple-high frequency of the ten-megahertz quartz, which in a sense sets the clock rate. The three Hall sensors of the motor provide permanent, high-precision feedback for the control loop so that setting and actual values can be matched.

After pressing one of the three speed buttons – in addition to the usual 33.33 and 45rpm speeds, the Model 15 also offers 78rpm – the 4.5 kg platter spins up and stabilizes quickly, with the “Lock” light of the electronic unit flashing for a few seconds until the speed is right, at which point it shines steadily. Even a tiny disturbance, such as the insertion of a tracking brush or gently touching the screwable plate clamp, is sufficient to disrupt the closely monitored symmetry, and again it flashes for a short time until the target value is correct again.

If one of the speed buttons is held down for a longer period of time, the selected speed can then be fine-tuned in steps of 0.01 percent. With the stroboscope disc on top, the speed can be brought up to the optimum with super-exact precision – to match the overall impression of the SME.

Setting up the turntable raises no questions or problems: we align the base plate, with the adjustable feet and a circular bubble, on our rack. After that, the we move one floor higher up to the subchassis, where the simple procedure was repeated, except this time the three suspension towers had to be raised or lowered using the supplied tools. A spacer plate defines the distance to the lower cylinders, which enclose the holding domes, so that the subchassis neither hangs too high nor too

low at the end, but works in the range of its optimal effectiveness.

### An attractive offer

Since everything functions precisely, the necessary adjustments are neither a challenge nor as an effort, but rather a pleasure, also allowing the owner to familiarize themselves with the new turntable. The motor unit can of course also be acquired



▲ The subchassis is suspended with ten rubber rings apiece from each of three domes. These rings last for a decade and are easily replaceable.



▲ The small motor unit stands on three spikes in hard rubber bearings (r.). The distance between the subchassis level (o.) and the bolts around the supporting domes (l.) is specified exactly.



▲ The motor does not have firm contact to the platter and arm – instead the pulley peeps through a hole in the subchassis.

◀ The external electronic unit supplies and controls the motor with high precision at up to 78 revolutions per minute.

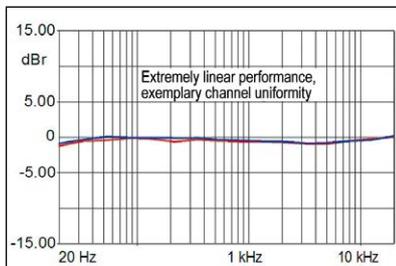


**SME MODEL 15**

around 12850 €  
 (drive solo around 7950 €, complete price with tonearm SME 5009 and MC-pickup Transrotor Figaro)  
 Dimensions: 45 x18 x36 cm (WxHxD)  
 Warranty: 2 years  
 Contact: SME  
 Phone: +44 1903 814321  
 www.sme-audio.com

An elaborately crafted turntable designed down to the last detail, which benefits from the manufacturer's decades of know-how and transfers essential design features of the large SME turnery machines to a more favorable price range. Extremely neutral, refined and audiophile sound.

**MEASUREMENT RESULTS**



**FEATURES**

External motor control with electronic speed change including 78 revolutions, phono cable, dust cover, various accessories, operating instructions

**STEREO-TEST**

**SOUND QUALITY 100%**  
**PRICE/PERFORMANCE**  
 ★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆  
**VERY GOOD**



◀ Open up the electronics compartment and you reveal expensive components used for the supply and control of the drive motor.



▲ SME's Model 15 had to head its class against the well-proven Transrotor Rondino nero equipped with the same tonearm and cartridge.

without tonearm, but this should only be considered if you have an alternative of equally high quality as the SME 309 or TR 5009. And of course, the cartridge must also be the finest, which is why Transrotor pre-assembled us its "Figaro" MC, which costs 2500 Euro solo, has very similar performance to our very close to our reference and is only 2000 Euros when bought with a motor unit and arm. Since the TR 5009 will then cost 2900 euros instead of 3230 euros, the total the buyer will save is 830 Euros.

The model 15, equipped in such a first-class way, proved to be a high-end premium straight away. What does that mean? Simply that the SME produced, from the first note, enchantingly coherent, completely unaffected and yet emotionally engaging sound images of extraordinary three-dimensionality and elasticity. Forget the low-slung, slightly weighty looks of the SME: its sound is mobile, firm and sinewy up to the lowest positions of the frequency register, and entirely bereft of fat.

It doesn't show the solid character of heavy mass drives, but finds its own way to a dry and fine tautness, a finely graduated and always audible nonchalance, which seems to be extremely natural. Does that sound more like a description of a wine than a drive? Perhaps so, but then the SME is provoking such comparisons.

**Perfectly balanced**

The neutrality of its representation unfolds an attractive side, since the sound images do not lean in any "direction", but remain strictly on the path of audiophile virtue. This tonal balance and finds its mechanical counterpart in a short pull

cable to the right underneath the sub-chassis, which compensates for the opposite moment created by the belt tension and thus prevents the board suspended on the suspension struts from tilting towards the engine.

The concentrated energy of the performances avoids slipping into the sober or even trivial: rarely have I heard Alex de Grassis playing the guitar from his debut album "Turning: Turning Back" in such a concise and honest way and therefore all the more catchy. The instrument had body, radiance and authentic elegance. In addition, the sometimes hefty, sometimes filigree impulses bubbled off the strings as fluidly as water. The Model 15 also sets standards when it comes to timing.

With Anne Bisson's outstanding "Four Seasons in Jazz" direct to disc production, where no mastering engineer of any kind was able to influence the beat, the SME revealed its entire grandeur by fine-tuning the pianist and singer as well as her companions with breathing vitality, down to the tiniest details and projecting them into the listening room in an extremely authentic manner.

Even our reference turntable had trouble keeping up. As mentioned, the Transrotor Rondino nero was equipped with the same arm and cartridge, with the geometry, arm height, contact force and antiskating matching on the dotted line. Yes, the German 'table always sounded more present with a certain nuance and for this reason it even seemed a bit slicker, but didn't get into the groove or grip as well as the unity of the "Dark Knight". Ultimately, it would be all about taste.

Conclusion: Batman's stealth turntable SME Model 15 hides its talents from the outside world, and thus has surprise on its side.

*Matthias Böde*