



# The SME 10 Turntable

— Jeff Dorgay



In typical British understatement, the first page of the owners' manual that comes with the SME 10 says, 'This is not an ordinary turntable.' Right.

Actually, the model 10 is the entry level in the current lineup of four turntables. Our classical music editor owns an SME 20 and that is precisely how I got hooked on SME's way of doing things. Dan and I possess fairly similar reference systems and at the time I had a pretty cracking LP-12 that I was perfectly content with. Until I heard the 20, that is.

Believe me, I went into this kicking and scratching. After an hour of listening to the 20, I was ruined forever. Dan then said: 'With that concrete slab of yours, you could probably get close to this sound with a 10!' It didn't take much time to get an SME 10 in my hot little hands after that and his analysis was correct. Yes, the 20 has a bit more weight and throws an even bigger soundfield than the 10, but considering that I am only an occasional

classical listener, I felt that I could get by with the 10.

The SME 10 uses an elastomer-based suspension, so it is not quite a solid table, but it is not fully suspended in the way that the 20 or 30 are. For \$8000, it comes with the matching SME10 arm, which is a variation on the theme of the SME 309 arm having the cast magnesium arm tube from the SME V arm, but with the removable headshell functionality of the 309. It is also easier to fine tune the VTA on the model 10 arm fitted to the SME 10 versus the 309.

Though there is no mention of the bearings used in the 10 arm on the specifications sheet, it does seem to have a more delicate feel than the 309 arm on my other two turntables. *(continued)*

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The SME 10 has an outboard power supply and plays 33, 45 and 78 r.p.m records. My version of the 10 does not feature the 78 r.p.m. speed which was not at all a problem for me. However, this is where that removable headshell comes in handy. Should you have a collection of 78s that you would like to listen to on occasion, get a 78 cartridge that you can leave mounted. Because the settings on the SME arm are so easy

to change (and reset when you switch back), in a couple of minutes, you could be enjoying that sound. Just remember to take the small disk from the spindle, or your 78s will crack!

#### SETUP AND INSTALLATION

If there ever was a no fuss no muss high end table, this is it! With no sophisticated suspension to set up, even a novice should be able to be playing records in

under an hour. However, this brings up my only complaint about this turntable; the instructions, while concise have only a couple of line drawings and NO pictures. With the ease of downloading a PDF file these days; a few strategic color photos would cut the setup time in half. Hint: Download the PDF for the 309 arm from Sumiko's website, these arms are functionally identical and will make the job easier.

**Thanks to some good tools, the arm is pretty easy to set up and it STAYS set up.**

Because of the removable headshell you will have to make sure that you have the azimuth set correctly so that it stays parallel to the playing surface of the record. *(continued)*

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The SME V has a permanently mounted headshell, so should you make this plunge, you will not have to worry about this. The handy thing about the removable headshells is that even though a bit of ultimate rigidity is lost compared to the V, it's a lot easier to mount additional cartridges and that's what my job requires.

While on this subject, even though Sumiko does not recommend using the SME V arm with this table (they suggest moving up to the SME 20 table, which comes with their SME IV/VI arm), this is really the ultimate sleeper combination. But that is another story for another article. Our test here will focus on the SME 10 with the arm that it comes with from the factory. Hint #2: When setting up the SME 10, though this seems obvious, use a good bubble level and the adjustable feet to get it really level. Take an extra 10 minutes and level it at about six positions

on the clock and you will be rewarded with the most it is capable of delivering.

#### ENGINEERING EXCELLENCE

If you take a peek at the SME website and do a little bit of nosing around it's pretty easy to see they are an engineering company. Of note, they do a number of projects for BMW's Formula One team, which is all tightly under wraps.

In a world where the tiniest improvement can be the difference between pole position and tenth position and hundreds of millions of dollars are at stake, precision is everything. This precision is clearly evident the first time you tighten the record clamp on the SME 10;

this table is exquisitely built. If you appreciate attention to fine detail, you will love any of the SME tables.

#### THE SOUND, OR RATHER THE ABSENCE OF A SOUND

Granted, there are turntables that cost six figures that truly are amazing but 11 thousand bucks (with cartridge) is still big dough in my book and the SME 10 delivers music that is very free of tonal colorations. So far, it's the best I've heard at this price point. If I find something I like better, I'll be sure to let you know, but for now the SME 10 really floats my boat. *(continued)*

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I've been listening to this table for about five months now, with a number of different cartridges and regardless of what cartridge used, the character of the 10 always shines through. Some have accused the SME tables and arms to have a bit of bass bloat and I can't say that I have had this experience. My REL B2 subwoofer goes down to 20hz in my room and believe me, I'm just not hearing anything but tight, defined bass with a lot of texture.

Actually that really does define the overall character of this table; it resolves a lot of detail. Over the past 20 years, I've owned some pretty decent tables (Oracle, Sota, Rega, Linn), but the SME 10 is one of those epiphanies that you can't ignore.

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**Records that I was  
very familiar with went  
from being great to  
unbelievable.**

As it is, my reference system with the C-J Act2/Series 2 and the Premier 350 has a very seductive character to it and thanks to the REL B2 sub, my Tetra 506s make up a system that has a lot of weight, resolution and dynamics.

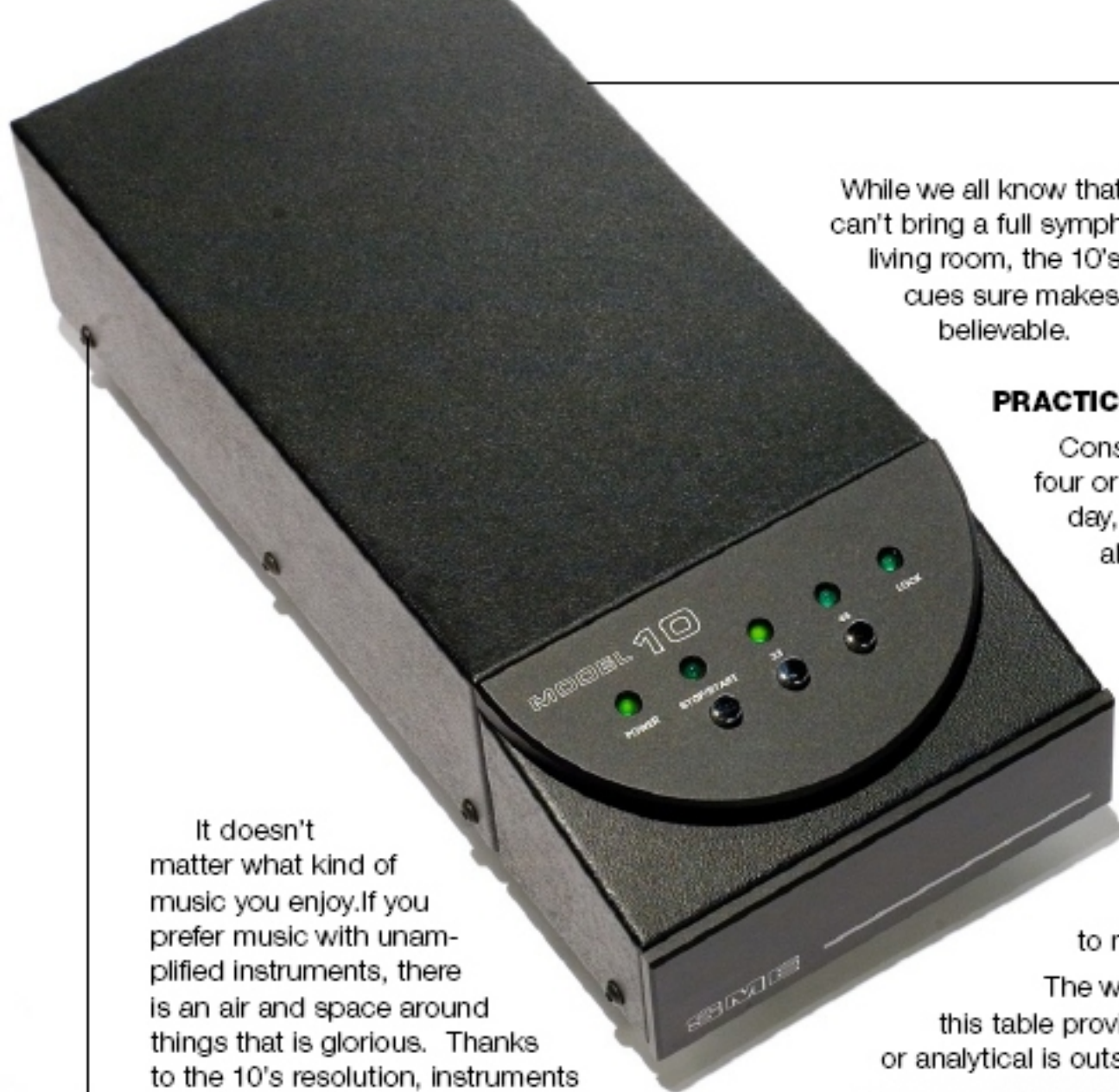
The SME10 never disappointed me. No matter what I put on the table, it sounded better than it ever has on this system. What I like the most about this table is the way the speakers seem to disappear; it's like the speakers just melt away and there is just music present in the room. This was what grabbed me at Dan's house when I heard the 20 for the first time and it grabs me every time I put a record on.

*(continued)*

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It doesn't matter what kind of music you enjoy. If you prefer music with unamplified instruments, there is an air and space around things that is glorious. Thanks to the 10's resolution, instruments not only sound tonally correct, they have a lot of air and a tremendous sense of space around them. Listening to the current Madeline Peyroux LP on MoFi is fantastic, the piano just floats and her voice roams around the stage and the brush work on the drums just emerges effortlessly from the background. If I had to describe the SME 10 in just one word, it would be effortless.

Should your tastes be more towards popular music or hard driving rock & roll, this too will benefit from increased resolution. Put on Pat Travers Crash and Burn (which was recorded analog at 30 i.p.s. with no Dolby) and not only will Tommy Aldridge's drumming pin your ears back, but you'll hear a few more layers of overdubbed guitars as well.

While we all know that even on the best system can't bring a full symphony orchestra into your living room, the 10's ability to resolve spatial cues sure makes an illusion a lot more believable.

#### PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Considering I listen to at least four or five records on any given day, I've probably listened to about a thousand records on this turntable by now, so I feel like I've had a lot of seat time with it and my opinion has not changed one bit. This turntable and given me more pleasure listening to LPs than anything I've heard up to now in my system.

The wealth of musical detail this table provides without being harsh or analytical is outstanding.

Granted, the SME 20 and 30 are even better, as well as a handful of other mega-turntables that I've experienced but if I'm in the position to write a 50-150 thousand dollar check, it's going to be something that has a Porsche badge on it. Yes Margaret, there is more performance to be had, but I'm happy right here.

However, I think for those more reasonable and prudent audiophiles (Is a 20k turntable/

arm/cartridge and phono preamp really reasonable?) the SME 10 is a turntable that you may never outgrow. I think you could probably buy a 10, drop a small fortune on records and still be a very content person indeed.

I have found it to be an excellent tool that I rely on every day to use as a reference evaluating other components. ●

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#### MANUFACTURER

##### SME UK

Distributed by Sumiko  
2431 Fifth St.  
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www.sumikoaudio.net

#### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifier:** Conrad-Johnson Act2/Series Two

**Amplifier:** Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

**Phono Preamplifier:** Aesthetix Rhea with Great Northern Sound updates

**Digital Source:** Meridian 808

**Phono Cartridges:** Shelter 90x, Sumiko Celebration

**Speakers:** Tetra 506 Custom with REL B2 subwoofer

**Interconnects:** Tetra Artet, Tara Labs The ONE

**Speaker Cable:** Tetra Artet

**Power Cords:** Running Springs Mongoose

**Power Conditioning:** Running Springs Duke (power amp) Running Springs Haley (everything else)

**Vibration Control:** Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks with Cerepucs and Cereballs

**Room Treatment:** GIK bass traps and 242 acoustic panels