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SME Model 60 Turntable and VA Series Tonearm

REVIEW

by Michael Fremer | Dec 30, 2022

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SME could not have faced a more formidable challenge, nor could the stakes be greater: Design and build the first new, line-topping SME turntable since company founder Alastair Robertson-Aikman passed away in 2006—and be sure it outperforms the original by a considerable margin. Since Robertson-Aikman's passing, the

considerable margin. Since Robertson-Aikman's passing, the company has successfully filled in the lower end of its line. A new "statement" turntable is altogether something else.

When in 1989 Mr. Robertson-Aikman (known to friends and associates as AR-A) chose to design and manufacture a turntable, he was late to the game. By then CDs had eaten vinyl for lunch, both dollar and unit-wise, though the cassette had already inflicted lasting damage.

Vinyl's fall was steep and for some shocking. Even *record* stores by then had mostly lost interest. In the mid 1980s, Tower Records' flagship Los Angeles Sunset Strip store had mostly moved LPs out and "long box" CDs in. A depressing sight deep in the heart of the American record business. How many younger readers even know what a "long box" is? Or a CD for that matter? Vinyl's demise would come but a few years later industry experts predicted. We all know how that turned out.

Mr. Robertson-Aikman figured that enough vinyl enthusiasts with large collections and bank accounts to match would be interested in installing its Model V arm on a turntable of equal quality. The V, introduced in 1986, was a mid-to-high-mass arm featuring a tapered, pressure-diecast, magnesium arm tube designed to better accommodate the low-compliance moving-coil cartridges that were then becoming popular.

As with the original 3009 introduced in 1959 and discontinued in 2004 after selling, according to SME, approximately a half-million units, SME billed the new Series V "the best pick-up arm in the world," which, at the time, it surely was. But its relatively high mass proved problematic for spring-suspended turntables that either bottomed out or suffered from what became known as "porch glider effect," as the added mass produced undesirable lateral sway exacerbated by eccentrically pressed records—probably another reason AR-A chose, as the sun set on the vinyl record, to introduce a costly new turntable.

Thus, was born the belt-drive SME Model 30—named for its introduction 30 years after the debut of the 3009 arm. In fewer than four months, the Model 30 went from a design concept to a fully operational prototype, with every part (other than the arm's made-in-Chicago magnesium arm tube) down to nuts, bolts, and accessory tools designed and manufactured in-house, as SME still does today.

The Model 30 incorporated a carefully tuned, fluid-damped, "four-poster" suspension system that hangs the 35-pound subchassis on 48 specially made O-rings (12 per tower), totaling 96 strands, adjustably damped in each tower by a paddle in viscous fluid. The system eliminates "bouncy-bounce" "overshoot" with almost zero-Q recovery and lateral sway, providing both physical stability and effective isolation from both floor and airborne vibrations.

Though quickly developed, the Model 30 remains in production 32

years later more or less as originally designed (the “/2” designation refers to a power supply change). It was born a classic and remains so today. The 1990 introductory price of £9000 with arm (around £22,000 in today’s currency) put it well out of reach of most consumers, but the ones who could afford it got something mechanically and sonically special, though for some its machine-shop industrial look was off putting. Those original tables, unless destroyed in war, flood, or fire, no doubt still spin today.

SME later expanded its turntable lineup to include the smaller, less costly Model 20, followed by larger 30 and 20 models designed to accommodate 12” arms. A series of more compact and less costly models followed, only one of which, the Model 15, incorporated an O-ring-based suspension. The discontinued Model 10, the current Model 12, and the integrated (with Nagra phono preamp) Synergy feature less sophisticated, elastomer-based suspensions. The Model 6—SME’s least costly turntable, introduced in 2020 and so named because it’s the company’s sixth all-new turntable design—does without a suspension altogether, relying instead on four elastomer feet. It also does without high-mass, thick aluminum plates, featuring instead a chassis CNC-machined from what the company says is a “unique polymer high-density resin material.” The Model 6 sells in America for \$7995 about the same price in 2022 dollars as would the discontinued Model 10—around \$9100 (\$5995 in 2000). There’s something attractive and typically SME-precise about that symmetry.

Something Old, Something New, Nothing Borrowed, Something Blue

I’ve made four trips to SME’s Steyning headquarters, the first when Mr. Robertson-Aikman was still there to play records in his legendary listening space. A memorable experience! The last visit was for the SME 60’s debut, and it was equally memorable both for the new product roll-out and because it demonstrated that current owner Cadence Group’s Ajay Shirke has made major investments in SME’s future. He added to the already well-equipped shop several costly state-of-the-art CNC machines and other new production-enhancing apparatus including a state-of-the-art CMM tolerance-testing device, while leaving in place the many costly “done by hand” operations that helped define through the years SME quality and attention to the smallest details. As in the past, SME still produces specialty products for the medical, automotive, and aerospace industries, though the percentage dedicated to that has dropped as vinyl popularity surges.

Under CEO Stuart Mc- Neilis, a licensed aircraft engineer with 34 years of experience in that industry whose appointment SME announced in November of 2016, the company has moved into modern materials like the aforementioned “unique polymer high-density resin” used for the Model 6 and now the Model 60 Series VA tonearm.

While the tonearm pictured on the 60 may appear to be the familiar “something old” Series V—it is a *new* arm designated as the Series

VA tonearm, not made of die-cast magnesium but rather machined from a single piece of a “unique polymer high-density resin” (not to be confused with a “3D-printed arm”) that extends from the headshell to the counterweight stub. The new tonearm tube is a tri-lobe-profile shape, which provides strength and stability to the sonically inert polymer-resin material, enabling a low effective mass. The arm’s effective length is 233.15mm (9 inches). Internal wiring is Crystal Cable 0.1mm Mono X-Tal (Crystal Cable is another Cadence acquisition). The new arm retains the V’s familiar aluminum-alloy bearing housing with revised inner tungsten weight to achieve a cartridge balance range of 5g–18g.

Hard-wired RCA jacks fixed to a rear-chassis terminal block replace the Model V’s right-angled five-pin DIN-jack termination. This makes auditioning RCA-to-RCA phono cables easier (though SME includes a high-quality set from Crystal Cable). The new Series VA arm will be a Model 60 exclusive.

Mechanically and conceptually, though the 60 is a completely new design, it’s fair to describe it as a highly refined and upgraded Model 30. It shares both the 30’s oversized 13”-diameter, 17.6-pound platter with its diamond-turned, scrolled, isodamp top surface and world-renowned 6.75”-long, ¾”-diameter, sealed oil-bath housing, high-carbon, chrome-tooled-steel spindle bearing. SME says it couldn’t find a way to improve it, though in the 60 it’s hydraulically dampened with its lower extremity extending into a silicone fluid bath intended to control micro-resonances generated by the rotating mass.

The 60 retains the stable, “4 poster” concept introduced pre-1990 in VPI’s TNT and in the Basis Debut (which came first depends upon who you ask), along with the double aluminum alloy chassis, wherein the lower one holds the motor and the upper one, hung via a fully re-imagined, far more complex O-ring suspension system, the platter and arm-mount platform.

Four large-diameter, height-adjustable footers, each incorporating three silicone rubber cylinders that decouple the towers from whatever platform they’re placed upon, provide a strong foundation for the re-imagined suspension system. The new design inverts the O-ring system, now internally mounted, which, for greater stability, puts the wider end of the array at the top. An additional series of four horizontally placed O-rings produces lateral stability and additional damping sufficient to eliminate the four hydraulic dampers found in the 30’s towers. The suspended subchassis is damped on its underside, but with less of it covered than I recall there being on the 30.

A new, custom-made, bi-phase AC-synchronous motor, housed in a high-mass brass enclosure and isolated on height-adjustable points (as on the Model 30), drives the subplatter, controlled by a dedicated DSP engine that generates two independent sine waves that control frequency, phase relationship, and amplitude, tuned to the individual

motor. The output driver stage is a dual-channel, Class AB, bi-polar, low-distortion design, directly relay-coupled to the motor. SME removes the transformer from the superbly machined-from-an-aluminum-billet motor-controller box, which can then be placed close to the turntable with no worries about induced hum. LEMO-terminated Siltech cables connect the transformer, speed controller, and turntable. The transformer in its own box goes wherever convenient. Speeds of 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ and 45rpm can be independently pitch-adjusted if desired and stored in memory. SME also supplies a deluxe Siltech AC power cord.

So, what's "blue"? One of the Model 60s cosmetic options—a major change for the “any color you want as long as its black” company ethos. The 60 is available in the standard finishes of Brushed Metal (black and silver anodized), and at extra cost Machined Honeycomb (black, blue, and silver anodized) and Diamond Finish (hand-polished bare metal). The 30 series is also now available in the cosmetically enhanced Diamond Finish.

Setup and Use

As with the Model 30, setup is relatively simple despite the design's complexity. In about a half hour, using the supplied tools and gauges and an excellent instruction manual, an experienced turntable enthusiast should have the Model 60 spinning and in no need of further adjustments for years to come. Given the table's cost, it's likely a dealer will do the installation. Though, wider, deeper, and pleasingly squatter than the Model 30, the Model 60's 105 pounds is but 13 pounds greater than the 30's.

The Series VA arm sets up identically to the Series V, which means overhang is set by sliding the arm-mount sled fore and aft rather than in a slotted headshell. The advantages are that tracking force doesn't change when you set overhang, and the cartridge mounts more securely into small round holes rather than into slots. The disadvantage is that you cannot rotate the cartridge in the headshell to adjust zenith angle, which, given today's extreme stylus profiles and lax manufacturing tolerances, is becoming more of an issue—but that's a discussion best left for another time.

Series V and VA do allow for easy VTA/SRA adjustment but not azimuth, which is critical for maximizing channel separation and balance. There's a fix, however. WAM Engineering (wallyanalog.com) offers a cartridge inspection service. You send it your new or used cartridge, and WAM does the measurements and gives you a complete report, as well as a shim or shims that can correctly set SRA and azimuth without affecting cartridge/headshell integrity (if your arm does allow for zenith-angle adjustment, you can get a corrective set-up gauge). This process also makes cartridge setup quick, easy, and accurate, without your having to buy or use a digital microscope, an oscilloscope, or a Fozgometer. You'll also learn if your new costly cartridge has been so poorly manufactured that it's beyond set-up redemption, in which case you should return it for a satisfactory replacement. This happens more often than you might think.

sample. This happens more often than you might think.

While the supplied Ortofon Windfeld Ti that came pre-installed on the arm (but does not come standard) sounded as smooth, graceful, and detailed as expected, I chose to review the Model 60 with both the Ortofon Anna D and the Lyra Atlas Lambda SL, two more costly, higher-performance but different-sounding cartridges that I think are more likely choices for \$71,000 turntable buyers. Whatever the cartridge choice, owners will have to be careful because the arm lock found on the Series V (and a different one seen on the Model 60 last March) is not included in the final production arm—maybe because it mars the satiny finish? According to SME, “the Model 60/Series VA launched in March is the same as the final production version reviewed. The new type of arm rest is a U-shaped cup holder which retains the arm and protects against being accidentally knocked out of the rest. The old-style roller clamp holder was not retained as it can scuff the painted finish over time/use.”

Serenely Silky Sonics

When readers ask me about SME, most often I say my favorite is the Model 15. It has a lighter, freer, more graceful, and less damped sonic personality than do the bigger tables, though it lacks their scale, weight, and “slam,” which some prefer.

This is not meant to suggest the Series 30, 20, and the others reviewed over the decades are not extraordinary machines that have always offered “world-class” performance and build-quality, but for me they’ve always had a cool, austere sonic personality that elicited more respect than love.

Reviewing the Model 60 turntable and Series VA arm separately is obviously impossible. However, I’m thinking the silky, sweet, effortless presentation—a floating sensation so fundamentally different and more enticing than my sonic recollections of any of the many SME turntables I’ve positively reviewed in the past—must in great part be due to the new Series VA arm’s low to non-existent resonant character.

This may sound oxymoronic, but the arm is noticeably *not there*. Instead, it accurately delivered the sonic characteristics of both the Anna Diamond (intensely three-dimensional imaging and focus, *über*-detail, slightly aggressive attack, expansive soundstage, slight coolness in the midrange) and the Lyra Atlas Lambda SL (rich, well-textured mids, generous sustain and decay, less intense image three-dimensionality and focus, less aggressive attack), comparable to what the SAT CF1-09 manages, and that arm alone costs around \$50,000!

Combine that floating sensation (which has nothing to do with it being a suspended table!) with as black a backdrop as I’ve heard from only the best vinyl record playback, with speed stability and rhythmic vitality that’s direct-drive-like (the somewhat more speed-precise and far more costly OMA K3 sits adjacent), and you have a formidable

combination, more importantly one that elicits as much love as it does the usual SME respect.

The Nimbus direct-to-disc *Beethoven Piano Sonatas Volume One* (Nimbus DC901) performed by Bernard Roberts on a Steinway Model D concert grand and cut on a Neumann SX-74 using tube amplification is a great test of image solidity, attack precision, sustain generosity, and decay coherence. The recording also effectively captures the Steinway's timbral colors from the bright, pure, bell-like upper register to the warmer, woody, but still clarified lower keys. Dynamics from *pp* to *fortissimo* are unrestrained, and so is Roberts' playing. He's not at all intimidated by the D2D process. It's a remarkable recording and a fine performance by a notable pianist. When all correctly lines up and there's no mistracking, you are attending an in-studio recital, with a heightened sense of "being there" aided by a coincident-pair microphone setup with no added artificial reverb.

The Model 60 delivered this recording as effectively as I've heard it, with the piano's image solidly locked and unwavering between the speakers, with the modest studio reverb cleanly rendered in a space behind the piano, and with not a hint of the sound being from a vinyl record. When I added the DS Audio 001 Eccentricity Detection Stabilizer to correct minor groove eccentricity on a few of the very well pressed records, sustained notes were "wow free."

For a "max audiophile quality," musically satisfying vocal recording try Lori Lieberman's latest, *Truly* (Drive On Records 115115 18), a live-in-the-studio set engineered by Bob Clearmountain. Lieberman is backed by the piano, guitar, bass, and drums quartet of Matt Rollings, Lyle Workman, David Piltch, and Victor Indrizzo—all familiar names to liner note readers and all recorded three-dimensionally in the studio space. Mic'd closely in front of a nowhere-to-hide dry backdrop, Lieberman delivers her most affecting vocals on record, mostly avoiding a distracting breathy affectation. Yes, she covers her composition "Killing Me Softly." A superbly recorded and well-performed "songbook" album.

The table's bass performance checked out well using Ron Carter's *All Blues* (CTI 6037), a tightly sprung quartet record featuring Bill Cobham, Joe Henderson, and Roland Hanna. Speaking of "sprung," sprung tables often relinquish bass weight, articulation, and control in exchange for effective isolation. The Model 60 provides outstanding isolation and equally live bottom octaves. I think Ron would like how his bass sounds on this record played on the Model 60, especially on the ballad "Light Blue," where he shares center channel with Hanna's piano. You hear *strings* not "bass."

For a symphonic spin, I tried an original pressing of Jascha Horenstein's Tchaikovsky *Pathétique* with the LSO (EMI ASD 2332). The conductor best known for his Mahler and Bruckner delivers a non-weepee, sober Sixth with Brucknerian overtones that's not particularly well loved, but I like it, and the warm, three-dimensional,

dynamic recording is an added attraction that the Model 60 delivered with timbral generosity and spatial solidity. An encore on the OMA K3 turntable produced a different presentation, somewhat drier and less harmonically splendiferous but with other virtues I'll not elucidate to save space.

The recent Bernie Grundman AAA mastering of Little Feat's *Waiting For Columbus* (Warner Music R1 3140), one of the finest live rock recordings ever, indicated two things: First, that the Model 60 from staid Steyning can *rock out* with the best non-sprung tables, and second that this mastering, while not quite as hyped up and muscular on bottom (which can be a pants-flapping treat) and glistening on top as the late Stan Ricker's was for Mobile Fidelity, is a more honest accounting that highlights the outstanding vocals while not selling short the rhythm section or the juicy synth lines. From bottom to top the Model 60 does full justice to this spectacular concert recording.

Conclusion

Clearly, it was a big deal for SME to produce a brand-new turntable intended to better the company founder's original, now-classic design. Challenge met. The new SME Model 60 with Series VA arm is an overwhelmingly successful upgrade to what was formerly the company's flagship Model 30. It achieves new SME greatness without forsaking the vision of founder Alastair Robertson-Aikman, who would surely appreciate both this new turntable/arm combo and where his company is headed.

That said, if you want a table that allows you to swap arms or carry a pair of them, the Model 60 isn't for you. Otherwise, if you've got \$71,000 or a bit more for something blue or one of the other variants, you'd best check out the SME Model 60 before buying anything at or near the price point. The only remaining question is, who the hell really designed this thing?

Specs & Pricing

SME Model 60 turntable

Drive system: DSP controlled AC-synchronous motor, belt drive with speed control.

Speed range: 33.3 & 45

Dimensions: 557 x 212 x 417mm

Weight: 105 lbs.

Series VA tonearm

Effective length: 233.15mm

P2S distance: 215.35

Effective mass: 10g–11g

Cartridge balance range: 5g–18g

Connectors: RCA jacks

Price: \$71,000, Model 60 and Series VA arm; (extra-cost finishes and colors available)

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