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SME Model 60 review

Careful evolutionary engineering has resulted in one of the world's most capable turntables *Tested at £49,950 / \$50,519 / AU\$72,484*

★★★★★ By [What Hi-Fi?](#) published 27 June 2022

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(Image: © SME)

What Hi-Fi? Verdict ★★★★★

The SME Model 60 is without doubt one of the finest turntables money can buy. Start saving.

Pros

- + Exceptional detail resolution
- + Outstanding sonic composure and control
- + Immaculate build and finish

Cons

- Price puts it out of reach for most

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The Scale Model Equipment Company was founded by Alastair Robertson-Aikman in 1946. It initially designed and manufactured high-quality scale models for the exhibition and model engineering trade. Over time, the work expanded to the aerospace industry with precision parts made for the likes of Rolls Royce, Hawker and Martin Baker. The brand continues to cater for different industries to this day, with clients from the medical industry, Formula One and aerospace among others.

It wasn't until 1959 that **SME** made its first hi-fi product, the Series 1 tonearm. This arm was originally something that Robertson-Aikman designed for his own use, but such was the reaction from friends in the audio industry that he decided to put it into production. The Series 1 arm proved so successful that a new factory was built to cope with the demand and even the company name was changed to SME to reflect the changing manufacturing output.

It may surprise many to learn that the brand's first turntable wasn't made until 1991. That was the mighty Model 30, which still remains in the current line-up. It's some testament to the Model 30's design that it has remained the company's flagship turntable, essentially unchanged, for more than 30 years. That's how SME tends to operate; it doesn't launch many new products, but when it does they're obsessively engineered and then usually stay in production for decades.

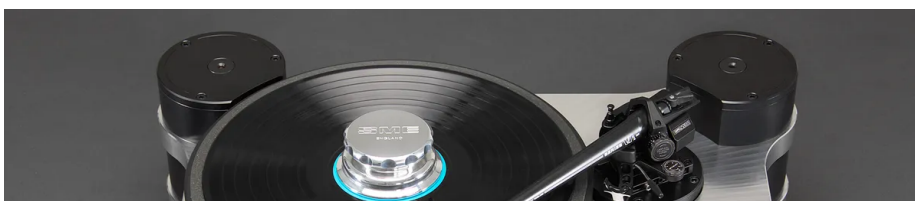
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(Image credit: SME)

This naturally conservative nature is very much in evidence with the new range-topping Model 60. This deck is an evolution of the original flagship; one that follows the same engineering principles but takes advantage of modern production techniques and materials where they're deemed desirable.

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Nowhere is this more apparent than in the new SME 5A tonearm. This is an update of a long-running favourite that was first introduced in 1984. The 'A' stands for 'advanced' and swaps the original's tapered magnesium armtube with one that's machined from a block of high-tech polymer resin. The rest of the arm's structure is unchanged from the standard version. It's interesting to note that the original SME 5 tonearm remains in production.

SME MODEL 60 TECH SPECS



Type Belt drive
Speed change Electronic
Speed 33⅓, 45RPM
Suspension Yes
Arm included SME 5A
Cartridge included No
Phono stage included No
Dimensions (hwd) 212 x 557x 417mm
Weight 48kg

Examine the 5A's armtube in cross-section and it looks like a Reuleaux triangle (a triangle with curved sides). It's a shape SME has chosen in order to improve rigidity. The move to a well-damped material such as this resin is a bid to reduce armtube resonances to a minimum. As is the company's current policy, it's not possible to buy the arm separately.

SME doesn't make cartridges, so our deck was supplied with an **Ortofon Windfeld Ti** moving coil (£3799/\$5159/AU\$6599). This is a highly regarded moving coil design that's known for its balanced and insightful performance, and as such makes a good choice as a partner for the package.

As is the brand's tradition, the Model 60 is mostly made of precision-machined aluminium. The standard versions come in conventional anodised black or brushed silver, while the hand-finished 'diamond' silver finish or one of the coloured options adds a 10 to 20 per cent price premium depending on your choice. The only coloured option we've seen is in an attention-grabbing blue, but the company is happy to be flexible in this respect.

Features

(Image credit: SME)

Each of the Model 60's corner towers houses a revised version of the SME's distinctive isolation system. This uses multiple rubber 'O' rings to filter external vibrations, and a silicon bath for the main bearing housing to dampen any

unwanted resonance in the turntable structure. Even the adjustable feet in the base of the corner towers are decoupled from the rest of the structure with a special polymer to provide further isolation. The aim is to make the deck more immune to unwanted external vibrations, so as to maximise performance.

The Model 60's AC motor is driven by a new outboard power supply that comes in two boxes rather than one. The main controller unit switches between 33½ and 45RPM, but as is the brand's way, also allows fine speed adjustments if required. The deck is supplied with a strobe disc to help with the settings.

SME's reputation is built on exceptional build quality and the Model 60 maintains that high standard. This is a beautifully made design that feels robust in a way that eludes most alternatives. The deck's hefty 48kg weight merely reinforces the point. The Model 60 may be a precision instrument but it still has the aura of something that's intended to be passed down between generations even with heavy use. We suspect it'll need little more than a drive belt change and a refresh of oil in the main bearing to fulfill that promise.

This isn't a piece of audio jewellery, though. While its stark and rather brutish appearance will appeal to some, to us it feels more like a specialist tool that's honed to the nth degree to do a particular job, rather than something to show off to friends. That's not always true for products at this elevated price level.

In our experience, all turntables benefit from careful positioning away from the speakers and being placed on a level, low resonance support. While the Model 60 is no different, all the work done on that elaborate suspension system does make it significantly less sensitive to disturbances than most we've tried. This shines through with the deck's sense of relaxed composure even when we're playing music loudly.

Wanting to dig deeper, we place the stylus tip on a record that's not spinning and turn up the volume on our preamp. We lightly tap various parts of the deck and can clearly hear just how effective the Model 60 is at eradicating outside disturbances. That suspension system may be unusual but it is highly effective.

Any record player at this level positively demands a top-class system. We partner the SME with our reference [Burmester 088/911 Mk III](#) pre/power combination and [Cyrus Phono Signature/PSX-R 2](#) phono stage. The speakers are the ever-trusty [ATC SCM 50](#).

SME has a house sound that's been present in every product we've ever reviewed from the company, and the Model 60 proves no different. It's a sonic character that majors in control, authority and detail retrieval. If you're looking for the deck to make all your recordings sound lovely and entertaining, then this isn't the one for you. It aims for unvarnished truth no matter how unpalatable that may be.

Oh, and make sure to use the record clamp; the Model 60's presentation is more focussed and solid this way.

Sound

(Image credit: SME)

We listen to a recording of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* and this record player couldn't sound more at home. We hear a breathtaking combination of muscle and authority that allows the music's dramatic nature to shine through. The Model 60 is almost brutal in the way it renders the symphony's savage dynamic swings, yet at no point does it sound anything less than in total control of the situation. There's a slight feeling of detachment in the way this player produces sound that makes it seem like an impartial observer to the act of music replay rather than the integral part it is. This isn't a criticism, more an observation.

There's also a very real feeling that the turntable is digging up every last bit of information from the record groove. We're hearing more in the way of instrumental textures and low-level acoustic information, of the type that defines the acoustics of the recording venue, than we're used to. It's a convincing performance that transports us in time and space to the point the music was recorded. We can't ask for more than that.

We're treated to an impressive sense of scale, with the sound spreading well beyond the physical edges of the speakers. The stereo imaging is focussed and nicely layered. It displays impressive stability when the music becomes demanding, locking instruments in place regardless of the complexity.

The tonality of any record player is pretty much dictated by the cartridge, and given that, the Ortofon Windfeld Ti MC is a fine choice. It's a lovely, even-handed performer that may not be the most dramatic or exciting option for the money, but remains a terrific all-rounder that works well across a wide range of musical genres.

As if to prove the point, we swap from Beethoven to Michael Jackson's *Bad* and the good news continues. Given the SME's weighty sonic presentation it's possible that music such as this can come across as a little heavy-handed and plodding, but that's not the case here. While the Model 60 – like other SMEs we've heard – is more about insight and analysis rather than delivering overtly entertaining results, it still has enough in the way of verve to keep us listening late into the evening.

The distinctive bassline that opens *The Way You Make Me Feel* charges along with gusto – it's powerful and articulate and brims with textural information. The 60 is sure-footed rather than enthusiastic when it comes to rendering rhythms, but in our system at least, it never comes across as mechanical or sterile. Given an appropriate recording, the SME 60 can still be immensely thrilling, but it has a ruthless nature that quickly shows shortcomings in the production or performance if they're there.

Over our time with this record player we listen to a large range of music, from Bob Marley And The Wailers' *Catch a Fire* to Orff's *Carmina Burana*, and never do we lift the Ortofon off the record at the end of a side without admiration of the job SME has done. Sometimes we wish there was a touch more in the way of natural sparkle; an ability to reproduce Marley's *Stir It Up* with less of a poker face. Then again, we struggle to think of an alternative that does this while matching the Model 60 across its formidable array of strengths.

Verdict

(Image credit: SME)

What can't be denied is that this SME is a hugely talented performer that quite rightly belongs high up in the ranks of the finest record players available. Add the immaculate build and the promise of decades of service, and that sky-high price almost looks palatable. Almost.

SCORES

- Sound 5
- Build 5
- Features 5

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