

MASTER EDITION



SME is one of the absolute masters of analog playback. Just recently, the British company presented its ultimate turntable. STEREO delivers the exclusive German review of the Model 60, which defies conventional standards in every respect – including price.

Matthias Böde

They say that the sweet poison of an exceptional hi-fi device does not act slowly, but rather suddenly, and that it paves the way towards a new, previously unknown realm of audiophile sensations. There is something to that; and it actually happened at the end of 2022 in the Victorian „Music Room“ of St. Mary’s House, located in the southern English town of Bramber not

far from the SME factory in Steyning. This elegant location was chosen by the long established manufacturer, often surrounded by the aura of perfection, for the launch of the super turntable „Model 60“. SME was founded in 1946 as a model car manufacturer and found its destiny in 1959 with its first tonearms, the by now legendary 3009 and 3012. The company’s 60th hi-fi anniversary was celebrated with the aforementioned launch of the fabulous €60,000 Model 60, officially presented to British dealers and international distributors at St. Mary’s House.

I personally had the honor as well as pleasure of presenting selected vinyl highlights at the launch. The first stage of the two-day event – as a warm-up and prelude, so to speak –, had the Model 12 MK2 from the English company (reviewed in STEREO 1/23) playing with Ortofon’s exquisite MC A95 on the tried-and-tested 309 arm and a



The sturdy connection panel of the Model 60 is equipped with either RCA jacks, or – for balanced signals – XLR outputs.

from the „Sheffield Labs Track Record“. Immediately, a completely different aura was present than with the smaller SME, which admittedly only costs a fifth of the Model 60. The performance seemed more mature, more relaxed and more sophisticated than the day before, so that the difference in class became immediately evident. The hefty impulses of the top recording stood completely natural in the room, the soundstage moved with authentic esprit and thus lifted the radiance of the illustrious direct cut to another level. Fairness dictates we mention that a Windfeld Ti from Ortofon was now mounted on the tonearm, which, however, did not represent any advantage over the A95.

High-End Key Experience

After the universal „shock“ about the sudden, in this drastic way unexpected jump in quality, sheer enthusiasm spread and everyone wanted to listen almost endlessly. These



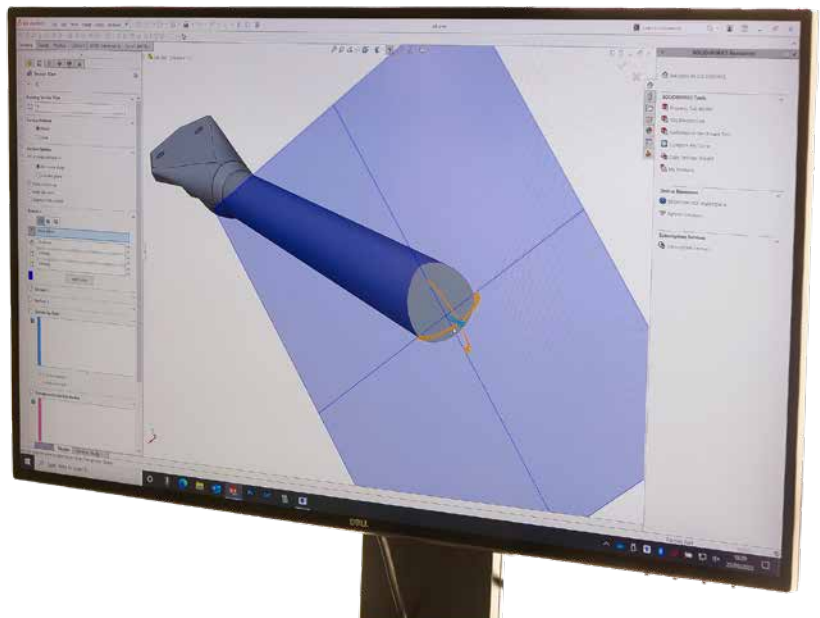
HANGING

The brass part – equipped with 15 short rubber bands for the purpose of suspending the sub-chassis – is anodized and then integrated into the mighty base of the Model 60 (above).



high-end stereo system made up of the Nagra Classic Phono, Boulder amps and speakers from Rockport. Everyone was indeed delighted by this, as this turntable captivated with its familiar high-class performance. It was the first to benefit from the technical insights gained during the development of the Model 60, in the shape of a thoroughly revamped drive section. For the following day, the Model 60 was announced as the highlight of the „concert“, at the same venue and with identical equipment. „But then we’ll listen to the same songs, won’t we?“ was the immediate response from some participants eager for a comparison. Well, so be it!

If you now think we spent the next day listening intently to our records to discover small differences, you’re rather wrong. The matter was settled within seconds! All it took was playing the highly dynamic „Amuseum“



The cut view through the Series VA tonearm illustrates its downwardly thickened egg shape, which SME identified to be particularly stable.



RUBBER INSERT

In the feet, machined from sloid aluminum, rubber bolts working as a multi-point isolation system absorb vibrations from the base.

TEST DEVICES

Turntables:

Kuzma Stabi R/4Point 9, Transrotor Rondino nero/TRA9

Cartridges:

EMT JSD Novel Titan G, Clearaudio Jubilee MC, Transrotor Figaro

Phono Preamp:

Nagra Classic Phono

Phono Cables:

Crystal Cable Micro² Diamond Intercon. Phono

Pre-/Power Amplifiers:

Audio Research Reference LS6/160M

Loudspeakers:

B&W 801 D4, PMC Fact Fenestria

improvements made it seem as if the entire system had been replaced overnight with an even better one. Everyone understood how important the source device is. If it is of outstanding quality, the other components seem to outgrow themselves and reveal a finesse that one would not have expected from them. Every experienced listener knows this, and yet it never ceases to amaze. After this high-end key experience, it was clear to me that I had to have – and if only once – the Model 60 in our STEREO listening room.

That did take some time, though. Time enough to take a closer look at the concept of the two-layer turntable, which weighs approximately 50 kilograms. The design is basically modeled on SMEs well-known Models 30, 20 or 15. In those, the upper board, which carries the platter and tonearm, is suspended by means of rubber bands. That ensures their effective decoupling both from possible motor noise and disturbing vibrations from the surface.

For the Model 60, this process has been refined considerably. Its four mighty foot columns, which support the ultra-precise 25-millimeter layers made of hard aluminum alloy, additionally incorporate a multi-point isolation system. This system provides damping in all directions, including horizontally. This can be precisely aligned independently of the height adjustment of the base plate via the rippled, smooth-running lower rings by

means of a key; with flat spacers defining the optimum distances.

Also known from other SME models is the 7.5 kg platter with acoustically optimized surface. It rests on a sub-platter, which in turn is supported by a bearing made of extremely hard and correspondingly durable steel with a high carbon content, is guided by sintered bronze bushings and rotates on a high-precision ball bearing. A silicone bath implemented into the bearing base is intended to absorb the tiniest residual noise of the platter-bearing-spindle assembly. Our laboratory indeed measured extremely low rumble values.

The Effort Is Enormous...

Another highlight of the Model 60 is its three-part drive system. The flexibly installed, adjustable 24-volt AC motor is joined by the separate, DSP-supported control unit, which is fed from an also separate transformer unit. In the speed control unit, a microprocessor generates the sine waves of the two speeds for the AC motor, ultra-precise in frequency, amplitude and phase. Each control unit is matched to the respective motor to ensure the



The shape of the key for adjusting the height of the sub-chassis is reminiscent of SME's model car history.



The included template makes adjusting the new Series VA tonearm a breeze – and it is ultra-precise in addition to that.



Flat shims provide the correct distance when adjusting the sub-chassis. If they just barely fit, the distance is correct.



In the elegant „Music Room“ of St. Mary’s House in Bramber, SME’s Model 60 with a top stereo provided a unique audiophile experience.

smoothest possible operation. The separate components are linked via high quality cables with secure and long-lasting LEMO connectors. For supplying this setup, a high-quality „Explorer“ power cable from Siltech is included. If this is plugged in with the correct phase (see diagram), this drive unit is one of the most impressive we have encountered to date in terms of musicality and timing – it already demonstrated its advantages in our direct comparison of the first Model 12 versus its MK2 version.

The audiophile community will also longingly look into the direction of the brand new Series VA tonearm. It was developed by SME exclusively for the Model 60, and is not available on its own. It actually comes close to a small sensation, as it is strongly reminiscent

of the Series V tonearm. That one was introduced in 1984 and has since been regarded as a kind of „archetype“ of a high-end tonearm; the new one is supposed to even surpass its extraordinary capabilities. The added „A“ stands for „advanced“, and there are indeed some significant design changes to report. The bearing yoke is still made of the familiar magnesium-aluminum alloy. The arm tube, which is egg-shaped for reasons of stability, is however no longer made of metal. Instead, it consists of a high-tech polymer resin and, like the magnesium tube of the Series V, is milled elaborately from a single block of the material. Naturally, the forces generated via spring tension for tracking force and anti-skating can be adjusted as precisely as tightly via the familiar small wheels.

The Series VA, internally wired with Crystal Cable’s Mono X-Tal, has a moving mass of around eleven grams and can handle pickups weighing from five to 18 grams. Their signals flow into a solid connection panel with RCA or XLR jacks plus ground contact.

... And The Performance Unique

Well, and then the flagship SME turntable was finally here, arriving in a large wooden crate! Assembling it is simple if you have some experience, and those who know one of the popular 309 tonearms from SME or even their Series V will immediately feel at home with the VA. Putting together the three components is as simple as it gets. Operation via



DECOUPLED

The motor, which is also flexibly suspended, rests on the lower board, while the sub-platter is supported by the upper board; the effective damping system operates between them.



TOP CABLE

To ensure that what the device has achieved is not stopped by a poor power cord, a power cable from Siltech's „Explorer“ line is included.

the three small buttons and the dial for sensitive adjustment of RPM using the included stroboscope disk is as easy as it is fun.

Then it was the same as earlier in Bramber: Did the Model 60 indeed clearly outclass our reference turntables, which seemed narrower, smaller, more compact and uninspired in contrast? We don't quite want to call it that, if only out of respect for the price difference. But the super-SME established a more than clear difference, thus effortlessly fulfilling its ultimate ambition and in addition defending the hefty price point.

But what makes our noble British guest so unique? On the one hand there is the sheer, unlimited size of the moreover perfectly organized soundstage, which is presented with an attitude of absolute ease and casualness. Bill Evans' live version of „My Foolish Heart“ from the superbly manufactured new QRP sampler stood in our listening room in expansive dimensions; the piano possessed exactly the right timbre and energy, at the same time seemed light and agile, just as all the other instruments. The recording breathed calmly and yet glimmered with tension and atmosphere – simply breathtaking! One does not reach such a standard easily.

The Model 60 produces the bass in a lively-dancing way, stringy as well as full-bodied. Impulses, whether fine or broad, appear as if from nowhere. The performance never

The measurement coupler in particular made it clear how extremely low the bearing noise, i.e. the rumble, is in the Model 60. Well done!



PROFITING

As the first smaller turntable, the new Model 12 MK2 (above, review in STEREO 1/23) benefited from the knowledge gained in developing the top SME, especially in terms of the drive. Including the proven 309 tonearm, it costs around 12,500 euros.



seems cramped, but rather fanned out and sovereign. It is indeed that often dreamed about but rarely achieved high-end grandeur which awaits the lucky owner of a Model 60. We'd better return SME's „Master Edition“, which plays in a league of its own and in every way pushes the boundaries of our familiar price and quality levels – before we become completely addicted ... ■

SME Model 60

Price: from €60,000 (in black or black/silver including tonearm SME Series VA, special finishes are also available)

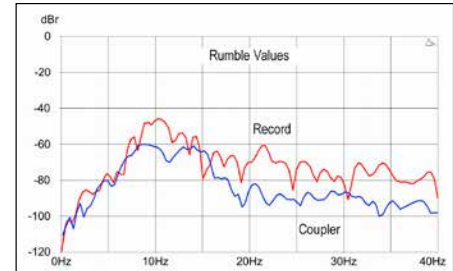
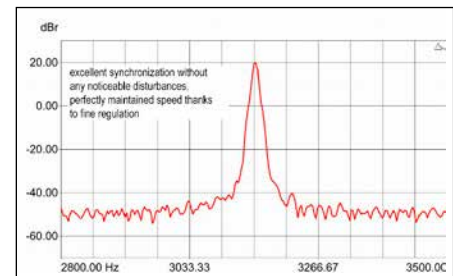
Dimensions: 56 x 21 x 42 cm (WxHxD)

Warranty: 5 years

Contact: SME Deutschland
Phone: +49 (0) 251 3270313
www.smeaudio.de

This turntable is almost impossible to beat in terms of effort and precision. It noticeably displaces our references. And so clearly that the price seems rather justified. You hear and marvel at the result of SME's entire knowledge and manufacturing know-how culminating in one spot: the exceptional Model 60!

Measurement Results



Deviation from the target speed: Adjustable

Lab Comment

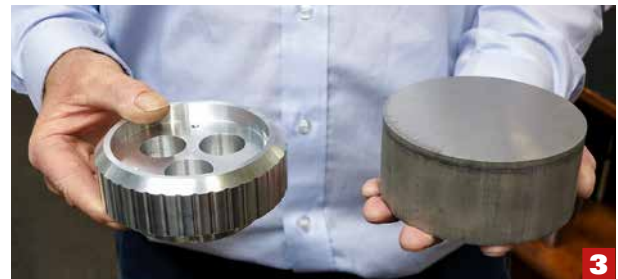


Practically perfect synchronization and, thanks to extremely fine regulation, precise retention of the target speed. Extremely low rumble even with test record, but especially via the measuring coupler.

Features

Control and power supply units separately, fine speed control, height adjustment for base and sub-chassis, record clamp

HIGHTECH AND PRECISION – THE MAKING OF MODEL 60



To ensure that the Model 60 looks flawless right from the start, a great deal of effort is required at the SME factory in Steyning, West Sussex, UK. The staff has never had a reputation for that supposedly typically English mentality of „a rough estimate will do“. On the contrary: SME founder Alastair Robertson-Aikmen has always succeeded in transferring his uncompromising dedication to quality to the manufacturing team. Thus, SME has stood for the highest standards throughout the decades.

It is hardly any different today, which is reflected in part by the fact that the highly motivated team manufactures many components itself. After the acquisition of SME by Ajay Shirke's Cadence Group, a number of state-of-the-art machines were bought and the standards renewed through that. These work controlled by processors and under expert supervision (5) in the large factory of the traditional manufacturer. It is impressive to see how, for example, one of the CNC multi-axis milling machines from DMG Mori produces a Model 60 foot quickly from a raw aluminum block (3). The foot is later anodized black in the in-house electroplating department and then processed further.

On a table, the mechanics have laid out several of the precisely manufactured parts for us. One of the SME

employees is visually inspecting a black board for the Model 60 (4). However, this is no substitute for the ultra-precise check on the vibration-damped Mitutoyo CRYSTA-Apex S 3D coordinate measuring machine (1). This detects even the slightest irregularities and deviations with its sensors and „scans“ the chassis from all sides without touching it.

Precision is also required when a pre-programmed milling machine gradually models the tube of the Series VA tonearm, developed exclusively for the Model 60, out of a polymer block (2). At the end of the process, this part goes to the paint shop for a perfect finish. The other parts, whether large or small, are also produced on site. After their surface treatment, we get to watch the fitting of the anti-skating mechanism, for example, or the process of inserting the internal wiring.

Of course, the other SME turntables and tonearms are also manufactured with such care. For example, we observe several „Synergy“ turntables on a shelf – a Model 12 MK2 completed with the Ortofon-MC-pickup Windfeld TI and a Nagra phono preamp on board – awaiting their swift finalization. Thus, SME still follows the motto of „precision engineering“ once defined by its founder.

