

SME Model 20/2-IV.Vi Record-Playing System

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The initials stand for Scale Model Equipment Company, Limited, started in England in 1946 to manufacture scale models and detail-parts for the model-engineering trade. During the 1950s, it branched out to include precision-engineered parts, mostly for aircraft instruments and business machines. In 1959, Alastair Robertson-Aikman, founder, managing director, and serious music lover and audiophile, wanted a better pickup arm than any then available. When he had his factory build an experimental model that became the envy of his friends, he had little choice but to complete the job and make it into a proper product. Debuting in September 1959, this arm was designated the SME Model 3009 Precision Tonearm, the "best pickup arm in the world." The rest, as they say, is history.

It was inevitable that SME would eventually manufacture a turntable. The wonder is that it took them nearly a quarter century. The Model 20/2 (\$8,800 without arm) comes between the Model 10 (\$6,250) and the flagship Model 30/2 (\$25,000) (the "/2" indicates later, improved versions). As I explained in my review of the Model 10A (Issue 129), I believe record-playing components, particularly arm/turntable combinations, are best reviewed as a *system*. So although the 20/2 is available separately, I am here evaluating it as part of an ensemble marketed by Sumiko, the American importer. Called the "SME/Sumiko Model 20 Performance Package," it comes with a Series IV.Vi arm. This arm

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is a version of SME's best arm, the Series V, made especially for Sumiko: identical but with the V's Van den Hul internal wiring replaced by 50-gauge Magnan Type Vi, and the V's dynamic tracking-force eliminated in favor of static adjustment. According to Sumiko's James Alexander, both these changes offer performance advantages. He also believes there are better arm cables than the Van den Hul supplied by SME, so the IV.Vi comes without one, saving the consumer about \$500 that he can put toward a cable of his own choosing (Alexander is particularly fond of Kimber Tak and Bob Graham's—I used Tak and SME's own with excellent results). Although SME will supply any of its turntables with

SME arms (the model numbers then carry an "A" designation), the 20/2-IV.Vi is a Sumiko exclusive for the American market, its \$11,000 retail representing an \$800 saving off the pieces purchased individually. I've not used the Model 20/2 and IV.Vi separately, but I do have many years experience with several SME arms, including the Series 3009, V, and 309. The company manufactures most of the parts used in its products and oversees all aspects of production and assembly

with a care to detail that is an industry standard. The arm, for example, is a one-piece, large-diameter-tapered tube of pressure die-cast magnesium alloy with ABEC 7 bearings in a fixed configuration. Magnesium has excellent damping characteristics, here augmented by an internal constrained layer to handle any residual vibration in the tube. The arm offers all the usual adjustments, including VTF, VTA, height, and bias. Since it is a one-piece construction, including the headshell, there is no adjustment for azimuth, as that would compromise rigidity. In my view, it is also unnecessary; any cartridge costing over 100 dollars that comes with a misaligned stylus should be returned. Given its relatively high mass, the arm is best suited for cartridges of medium or higher compliance (though I know audiophiles who use it successfully with Shure V15s).

Not everyone agrees with the thinking behind these arms, some designers and audiophiles preferring unipivots with various sorts of external damping (e.g., the superb Graham and Mørch arms). But it is just about impossible to fault SME's realization of this particular design or of the larger goal of maximum rigidity to control and drain away spurious resonances from the cartridge/record interface through the arm down into the

subchassis of the turntable where they will dissipate as heat. And the proof, after all, is in the listening. My experience with the SME V and IV/Vi variation is that they provide the quietest, most stable and neutral housing for any suitable cartridges I've used. My cartridge survey a few issues ago was begun using the Model 10A and completed using this setup; no other in my experience has allowed cartridges to perform so well or revealed their tonal characteristics more obviously or quickly. Which is a roundabout way of saying that if this arm contributes any coloration of its own, I have yet to hear it.

In some quarters, SME arms (and turntables) have a reputation for a bigger-than-life bottom end and a less-than-fully involving presentation. I've never found the former to be true unless the arm is used with a cartridge of inappropriate mass or compliance or is mounted on a table that cannot adequately handle its weight. As for being uninvolved, this is a frequent criticism of any component, especially a record-playing one, of low coloration that damps or otherwise drains off spurious resonances. But once you've experienced the neutrality of these arms and turntables and their freedom from unwanted influence, and heard what *clean* presence, purged of false resonances, actually sounds like, it's

impossible to regain your patience with the colorations of other designs, however much their advocates may try to paper them over with such euphemisms as "tuneful," "lively," "toe-tapping," "pacey," etc. Just try playing records on this setup as background music and you may come to believe, as I do, that anyone who finds the sonics of SME products "uninvolved" is suffering from ADD.

If SME's arms appear physically gigantic next to most of the competition, its turntables are rather the opposite: relatively compact and, in the case of the Model 10, almost diminutive. Until you lift them. As SME points out—it's not size as such that matters when it comes to mass, it's *density*. Indeed, there's even something to be said for concentrating the mass as much as possible to minimize the effects of airborne feedback. Like that of its larger brother, the Model 20/2's subchassis is supported by four stanchions, each of which contains eight rubber O-rings, resulting in 64 strands of total suspension, which is adjustable (an easy-to-use spacer ensures getting it right), while a central fluid-damper helps control subchassis motion. All of this makes for an exceptionally high degree of isolation from structure-borne feedback. Leveling is via four feet on the base. A screw-down clamp in combination with SME's special mat ensures the most intimate contact between vinyl and platter that I have experienced this side of vacuum hold-down. The platter itself is heavy and superbly damped. The motor housing, with on/off switch and speed selection and adjustment, is outboard, and of course the drive is via belt. Once set up—manageable by an experienced audiophile but you might want to have your dealer do it all the same—the Model 20/2 requires no additional adjustments. Indeed, SME has deliberately designed the necessity for tweaking *out* of its turntables. They're made to spin records, which as a practical matter they will, do precisely and accurately, requiring only minimal maintenance, for the rest of your life.

Space constraints prevent me from describing the build, features, and con-

Model 20/2-IV.V vs. Model 10A

How does the Model 20/2-IV.Vi compare to the less expensive Model 10A, which I reviewed in Issue 129? While the latter's background blackness, control, and ease of listening are outstanding by almost any standard, the former's are even better. My overall impression is that the 10A offers a more incisive, forward presentation, lighter on the bottom with, if you will, a slight nod toward the yang. Without sacrificing articulation or becoming in any way yin (i.e., "dark"), the 20/2-IV.Vi is richer and fuller in a direction that sounds both more natural and more neutral, especially on large-scale music. It is important to note, however, that I am comparing these as *integrated* turntables. The 10A's Series 309—excellent but still "just" SME's entry-level arm—can be replaced with the IV.Vi for an obvious increase in performance that will bridge the gap between the two tables but not, alas, close it. As for the math: \$6,250 for the 10 sans arm plus \$3,000 for the IV.Vi brings the total to \$9,250, \$1,750 less than Sumiko's price for the 20/2-IV.Vi ensemble. This is hardly a negligible sum—it'll buy an excellent cartridge or phono preamp (for that matter, a full-function one)—but if it's SME's best arm you want on an SME turntable, it may be false economy at this price level not to go for the Model 20 Performance Package. **PS**


struction of this extraordinary ensemble in greater depth. Suffice it to say that SME's use of the word "precision" in the nomenclature of its several products is for once not manufacturer's hype but an accurate description. This turntable and its companion arm are masterpieces of mechanical engineering and industrial design that inspire the greatest confidence while rendering criticism principally a matter of confirming the realization of their high goals.

As for the sound, I don't need a lot of words, as I shall resist the impulse to purple prose and assorted other hyperbole of the audio reviewer's trade. I have found that really superior components make their superiority known by how starved they leave you for adjectives. The SME Model 20/2-IV.Vi exerts a greater degree of control over the playing of LPs than any record-playing ensemble of my experience. This is manifested particularly in the vanishing levels of background hash, noise, and grunge. On good to excellent sources—say, Analog Productions' reissue of Sonny Rollins' *Way Out West*, my treasured Bernstein/Vienna set of the Beethoven symphonies [DG], Classic Records' *Ben and Sweets*, Sinatra's *Only the Lonely* [Mobile Fidelity]—the music emerges against a background nearly as black as what I hear from digital sources. This is not an exaggeration. On less than the best sources, which is to say most records, the music still emerges in clearer relief—by an order of magnitude—from all the detritus of vinyl than anything else I've exper-

rienced. Each recording sounds immediately and clearly different from another, and the impression is always of complete ease, freedom, and authority in the reproduction, eliminating the usual stresses, strains, and fatigue that can make vinyl such a frustrating experience, particularly during this last decade of dramatically improved Red Book (CD) digital, to say nothing of the new formats. So clean and so right, true, and natural is the reproduction that the typical audiophile clichés ("speed," "transparency," "warmth," "clarity," etc.) don't even intrude upon one's consciousness.

The presentation is seamless top to bottom and front to back in frequency response, dynamic range, and coherence. Imaging is entirely source dependent, as it should be, but on those recordings known for spectacular soundstaging (the Bernstein *Carmen* [DG] or *The Christmas Revels* [Revels]), you'll find a depth, spread, solidity, and continuousness not likely to be equaled in your experience. However, the reproduction is not "big" unless the source is, not "sweet" unless the source is, not "tuneful" unless the source is, not "rhythmic" unless the source is (Klemperer at his most leaden will not resemble Toscanini at his most frenetic).

In sum, this setup is at all times sonically more absent or less present—however you choose to express it—than any other record-playing system with which I have had long experience. I can express no higher praise nor formulate a more resounding recommendation. SME/Sumiko's Model 20/IV.Vi is a

state-of-the-art system for the reproduction of vinyl sources in the home. If you want anything else, you should be shopping for a musical instrument, not a music reproducer. 

SPECIFICATIONS

SME Model 20/2 Turntable

Speeds: 33, 45, 78 RPM

Dimensions: 16.75" x 5.5" x 12.75"

Weight: 40 pounds

Series IV.Vi Tonearm

Effective mass: 10/11 grams

Balance range: 4.2-18 grams

Pivot/stylus distance: 233.15 mm

Maximum tracking error: 0.012 degrees/mm

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Boulder 2008 phono preamp; Boulder 1012 DAC/preamp; Boulder 1060 power amp; Phenomena Phono Stage; Dynavector Karat; Ortofon Kontrapunkt b; Sumiko Celebration; Transfiguration Spirit III; Denon 203D; Quad 988 speakers; Audio Physic Minos subwoofer; Kimber Kable interconnects and speaker cable; Sony SACD players; Musical Design and Quad CD players

IMPORTER INFORMATION

Sumiko

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Price: \$11,000