

A B S O L U T E A N A L O G

SME Model 30/2 Turntable

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SME's top turntable, a treatise on turntable, arm, and cartridge matching, and a list of new and upcoming vinyl releases.

Good, better, best. A logical lead for this review, I thought, pleased with my cleverness. I may be the only audio critic who has formally reviewed all three SME turntables—in the same system and in the same room, no less. And as I reviewed them in reverse order to their introduction—beginning with the newest (and least expensive) Model 10A (Issue 129), proceeding to the Model 20/2 (Issue 141), and now arriving at the Model 30/2, SME's first and still flagship—my cleverness has the additional virtue of being literally accurate both to my experience and to the products' ascending excellence.

Well...maybe not *quite* literally. For true though they may be with respect to the 30/2's position in the SME line, "good" and "better" hardly do justice to the 10A and 20/2, easily among the finest turntables available. And as applied to the 30/2, the appellation "the best" gained much notoriety not long ago, owing to its rather liberal use by a reviewer not exactly known for restraint when it comes to all things vinyl. Perhaps "best" is an adjective wisest left unused or so severely qualified as to render it useless. I've had occasion to hear all the contenders for "Best Turntable in the World," but I can't confer that title upon any of them—too many different setups, settings, associated gear, and source materials to start making global pronouncements.

That said, there is undeniably *something* about the 30/2 that seduces even temperate men into using superlatives. One German reviewer called it "the best turntable of all time." An intelligent, articulate gentleman, and the designer of what is regarded as one of the best pivoted tonearms, was nearly at a loss for words when he started talking to me about the 30/2 a couple of



years ago at CES. As I recall he all but struck a pose and blew a fingered kiss to the sky, mumbling something like "the best, nothing like it, just the best there is."

Is there some basis in reality for such reactions?

Despite a breathtaking \$28,499 (table only) pricetag, the Model 30/2 is in such demand that its importer, Sumiko, could spare only the demo it uses to train dealers, and that for just a few weeks. The turntable

audio-ophile clichés, this setup is unsurpassed by any I've used and equaled by almost none, with colorations reduced to unimaginably low levels.

But what specifically accounts for the special effect this turntable seems to have on

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was delivered with a Series IV.Vi arm (see my 20/2 review for details) and a new Celebration moving-coil pickup already mounted.

I don't need a lot of words to discuss the sound. For tonal neutrality, pitch accuracy, highest resolution, transparency, clarity, control, rhythmic grip, attack and release, reproduction of ambience, breadth and depth of soundstaging, ease and freedom from stress, and the whole litany of desirable

even the most jaded listeners lies in three related areas of sonic performance: background silence, dynamics, and that elusive impression of liveliness, vitality, and whatever terms you use to describe that sense of involvement that persuades you the music has come alive in your living room and/or transported you to the venue of its making.

It wasn't long after cueing up the first LP—my trusty Bernstein *Carmen* on DG—that Melville's famous description of the

dark side of Hawthorne's imagination crossed my mind: "shrouded in a blackness, ten times black." This turntable does background black like no other I've heard. (Only the Sota Cosmos and SME's 20/2 might be its equal.)

Since any good turntable already has a lower noise floor than even the best vinyl, I got to wondering what accounts for the darker backgrounds you hear with some, and that seems to exist apart from the noisiness of the source. David Fletcher, the retired designer of The Arm and the Sota turntables, believes it has something to do with bearing noise or lack thereof. Bearings that are beginning to wear or that aren't as precisely machined or well-designed will generate a certain amount of sub-Hertz (i.e., below 1Hz) noise that, although extremely low in amplitude, manifests itself as a kind of vague background grunge.

This in turn leads us to the sensational dynamic range of which the 30/2 is capable—the 'table's fabulously wide whisper-to-roar window. Its dynamics are probably no better than those of several other fine turntables, but in combination with the incredibly low noise floor, they simply emerge in greater relief. The final movement of the Reiner *Scheherazade* [Chesky] shows this off to hair-raising effect.

The last thing I put on before the 30/2 had to be boxed up and taken away is my nomination for the greatest-sounding LP ever made: Ken Kreisel's direct-to-disc masterpiece *For Duke* [M&K], so palpable in its sheer physical impact that, a quarter of a century after first hearing it, "Take the A-Train" still drops my jaw. Such is the level of attention commanded by this setup that no activity other than listening was possible, because the musicians seemed to be in the room. When the music finished, I saw that the only note I had scribbled read, "VIVID!!!"

The Model 30/2 represents a damn-the-torpedoes approach to every parameter of vinyl playback that SME founder Alastair Robertson-Aikman deems important, including potential and theoretical ones. Despite its relatively compact size, the 'table weighs 92 pounds. The subchassis and base are manufactured from 3/4-inch-thick aluminum alloy plate, ensuring high mass and stiffness—the cornerstones of SME's philosophy—to sink all spurious vinyl resonances and other unwanted energies to ground.

But bulk isn't the whole story. The 30/2

also employs a unique suspension that seeks to resist acoustic feedback through a combination of tuning and fluid damping. A theoretical liability of all suspended turntables is their relatively high Q; that is, if sufficiently excited, they vibrate up and down or laterally. Because the stylus-groove interface is effectively filtered from structurally induced feedback above the tuning frequency, this is rarely a real-world concern. Still, in all sprung suspensions, compliance is controlled to some extent by damping the springs with foam inserts. SME goes a giant step further. While the subchassis is suspended from 48 custom-molded rubber "O" rings that are distributed over stanchions placed at each of the four corners of the base, the stanchions themselves rest in cylinders filled with a highly viscous damping fluid. Together, SME claims, "These eliminate overshoot and give almost zero 'Q' recovery."

One point SME's literature leaves unmentioned is that the motor is mounted on the base rather than on the subchassis along with the belt-driven platter (e.g., the Sota Cosmos). Without fluid damping, the potential for occasional speed instability would exist since the subchassis/platter can move independently of the base/motor. The likelihood of this happening outside of an earthquake or a construction site is freakishly remote. But, as noted, the 30/2 is designed to address potential as well as actual problems.


The most novel and perhaps most controversial aspect of the 30/2's design is how the fluid damping is employed in combination with the suspension; because in so stiffening the compliance, the damping must also work to some extent against the effectiveness of suspension. I asked a couple of experts about this. One of them feels that, owing to the high overall suspended mass and extreme viscosity of the damping fluid, SME's is a valid and extremely effective solution to excessive compliance. The other, however, feels that the real-world advantages of filtering from a properly-tuned suspension far outweigh any theoretical benefits that might accrue from reducing compliance. If your turntable is mounted on a sturdy platform that doesn't rock or respond to footfalls, there are few domestic disturbances that should cause even an undamped suspension to vibrate, and most of them would be so disruptive to listening as to render momentary speed irregularities beside the point.

When experts disagree, the amateur must make up his or her own mind. The

SME 30/2 is the only turntable I have used apart from the Sotas that does not require after-market platforms or other Band-Aids to ensure effective isolation from the listening environment. Indeed, though the turntable was situated within three feet of one speaker, there was never even a hint of acoustic breakthrough. No turntable I've used has bested the 30/2 in this regard, and only the Cosmos has equaled it (SME's 20/2 did about as well, but *only* if mounted on a Townshend Seismic Sink).

In the face of several competitors' offerings, with their oil-rig-in-your-living-room dimensions and Rube- Goldberg assortment of multiple motors, pulleys, belts, rings, pods, cones, line conditioners, and other contraptions, Robertson-Aikman evidently decided that his version of the Best Turntable in the World must be compact and elegant enough to fit gracefully into a domestic setting and be complete in and of itself, ready to use as is—apart, of course, from arm and pickup selection—with no additional purchases required to perform as claimed. He has succeeded without apparent compromise.

Whether all of the expense and overkill involved in the SME 30/2 are necessary for the turntable to achieve its level of performance is a question that remains debatable. One expert I know strongly believes as extravagantly wasteful *all* turntable/arm designs that cost tens of thousands of dollars are, noting that with creative engineering and clever design, improvements to real-world performance are achievable at much lower costs. It must also be observed that not everybody frames the problems or prioritizes the issues of vinyl playback like Robertson-Aikman.

But once this is said, it is impossible to fault any aspect of this magnificent instrument's execution. Everything I said in my review of the 20/2 applies even more to the 30/2, a masterpiece of mechanical engineering and industrial design that inspires the greatest confidence while rendering criticism principally a matter of confirming the realization of its high goals. 

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

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