



#### ► DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
SME Model 60/  
Series VA

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
Belt-driven  
turntable/tonerarm

**WEIGHT**  
48kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
557 x 212 x 417mm

**FEATURES**  
• 33 and 45rpm  
• Series VA tonearm  
• Electronic  
speed control

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
SME Limited

**WEBSITE**  
sme.co.uk

# A vinyl-lover's perfect dream

This icon of British hi-fi celebrates its own diamond jubilee with a new super-expensive flagship turntable, which means – amazingly – that the very best just got even better

**O**f the engineers at SME felt the need for a motivational quote or two while working on the company's new turntable, arguably Rolls-Royce co-founder Sir Henry Royce's: "Take the best that exists and make it better" would have been an ideal choice. This summed up the challenge facing the UK company in designing a successor to the previous Model 30 flagship – the result is the £50,000 SME Model 60, which has a pretty tough act to follow.

The Model 30, originally released in 1989, and its 30/2 and 30/12 updates are regarded by some as the pinnacle of turntable engineering, and the fact the arrival of SME's new flagship has been over 30 years in the

making suggests that the company wasn't in any rush to topple its own crown. For those wondering what happened to the Models 40 and 50, the 60's appellation celebrates the diamond anniversary of SME's first hi-fi product, the 3009 tonearm – released back in 1959.

#### Elegant curves

It'll therefore come as no great surprise that the Model 60 contains a heady mix of old and new technologies. The platter, for example, remains unchanged, with SME asserting that it can find no way to meaningfully improve upon the design of the 30. It's still slightly over sized at 330mm, weighs 7.5kg and has a machined, acoustically inert upper surface to

support the record. Also unchanged are the familiar record washer and screw-down clamp.

The two-tier chassis, now with elegant curves, is made from aluminium alloy and sits on four height-adjustable feet that are decoupled from the main, lower chassis by an internal multi-point isolation system. Also fitted to this are the motor mounting pod, and a connection box at the rear that serves to terminate the tonearm wiring to the output phono sockets.

One tower at each corner supports the upper (sub)chassis, using an ostensibly similar system to that of the Model 30/2, but one that has of course been refined and improved. Suspension is still achieved through a

number of rubber support bands but, on the new Model 60, the way in which they 'carry' the subchassis has been inverted – so they describe a wider circle at the top rather than at the bottom. The number of bands in each corner has also increased from 12 to 15, while the supporting towers no longer incorporate a separate fluid damper in each column – additional bands instead providing lateral anchorage and damping.

The Model 60's bearing is still a high-carbon steel type spinning on a precision ball bearing, ably assisted by sintered bronze bushings. What is new, however, is a silicon fluid-filled damping bath at the base of the bearing housing. This is designed to absorb any microscopic resonances generated by the rotating mass of the main bearing/spindle/platter assembly. In addition, the bearing housing has been lowered within the

## The fit and finish is superb and every physical interaction is a tactile delight

upper (sub)chassis, so the platter sits closer to the top plate.

Motive power to the platter is provided by a 24V AC motor, replacing the DC type used for the 30/2. This is a necessary update, says SME, to guarantee the desired accuracy over speed control. Power to this motor is provided by not one, but two external units. The first houses a large transformer and offers an unregulated DC supply via an umbilical to the second box. Here it's smoothed and regulated, supplying both the DSP-based frequency generator and main synchronous output.

This latter chassis also hosts the on/off and speed change buttons,

**SME advises against changing speed on the fly**

plus rotary pitch control. Be aware that SME advises against switching speed from 33 to 45rpm, or *vice versa*, on the fly – you need to stop the deck, change the speed and re-start.

The Model 60's speed controller employs a microprocessor to generate two independent sine wave signals that are closely controlled in amplitude, frequency and phase. SME claims this provides: "total control over the way the custom AC synchronous motor behaves and enables precise tuning of the motor to obtain the best possible performance".

Both transformer and control box are machined from solid aluminium and are as meticulously engineered as the deck itself. To wire everything together, the Model 60 is supplied with a Siltech Explorer mains cable and shielded Siltech Silver Gold connection leads terminated with latching LEMO connectors.

Perhaps the most notable addition to the Model 60 is a new tonearm, designated 'Series VA' – the 'Advanced' iteration of the longstanding Series V. This features a bearing yoke still made from a magnesium/aluminium alloy, but the arm tube is no longer metal. Instead it is hewn from an 'advanced polymer resin' and not



3D-printed but machined from a solid block just like the magnesium alloy armtube of the standard Series V.

Other upgrades include the shape of the tube, which now has a more rigid 'tri-lobular' cross section rather than one that's cone shaped. Also new is the semi-circular support cradle under the arm. The old arm lock was arguably more secure, but could leave a mark on the matt finish of the armtube. Not any more...

Furthermore, the tonearm is now directly wired into the RCA output panel on the rear of the deck and the swivelling 90° DIN connection on the base of the Series V is absent. So, if you must ask... the Series VA, like the Series V, will only be available with SME's turntables and not sold on its own separately.

The fit and finish of the deck and control/PSU enclosures is spectacular and every physical interaction a tactile delight. Our review sample comes in the standard anodised metal finish, available in silver (natural) or black. Up your budget to £55,000 and you can have a machined honeycomb finish in black, blue or silver. Stretch further to £60,000 and you can opt for the hand-polished bare metal 'Diamond' version.

## Sound quality

For listening, the Model 60 is set up in our listening room and fitted with an Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti cartridge feeding a Nagra Classic Phono stage, T+A P 3100 HV preamplifier and Constellation Inspiration Mono 1.0 power amplifiers, into Bowers & Wilkins 801 D4 (HFC 482) speakers.

Hearing the deck in full flow is an extraordinary experience and a vinyl lover's dream. Its presentation has an effortlessness and neutrality that is nothing short of enthralling and completely free of unwanted 'character'. This means we always feel we're listening to what the artist or producer intended, rather than a nicely polished 'Model 60' version.

This turntable also possesses one of the most eerily silent backgrounds we've ever (not) heard from vinyl – ▶

### IN SIGHT



- 1 Black anodised suspension towers, further stabilised with horizontal bands
- 2 One-piece headshell, tri-lobe cross-section tube Series VA tonearm
- 3 Screw-down record clamp
- 4 330mm inert machined platter
- 5 Phono outputs and grounding post

**IN SIGHT**



**WORTH THE WAIT**

Although SME's first hi-fi product – the 3009 Series I tonearm – appeared back in September 1959, we would have to wait another 30 years for its inaugural turntable, the Model 30. This was elevated to 30/2 status in the early Noughties and 'expanded' further a decade later as the wider, heavier 30/12 version complete with a 12in SME V tonearm.

The Model 30 introduced SME's signature rubber O-ring isolation system resulting in a suspended deck that, frankly, never really felt like one. Not here the delicate wobble we all know from the classic Linn/Thorens-style setup as the heavyweight '30 seemed almost completely immune to external factors.

Moreover, the deck was perfectly complemented by SME's Series V tonearm, itself first shown in 1984 and officially launched two years later. That arm has been seen in 12in versions and with gold-plated appendages, but only now – with the Series VA fitted to the Model 60 – has it witnessed a fundamental update of its own. Other SME decks have followed in the last decade – most notably the Model 20/3, which is based along similar lines. But it is still the Model 30 and features updates that have gained the most effusive plaudits across the world. Only now, some 30 years later, has the deck been comprehensively overshadowed.

levels of groove noise are astonishingly low and pops and clicks are only noticeable by their absence. And when not being quiet, the Model 60 turns in a performance that is utterly revelatory, playing familiar recordings in an almost unfamiliar fashion.

As a perfect example, there's a stray 'squeak' of a guitar string a few minutes into Rebecca Pidgeon's version of *Spanish Harlem* off her 1994 LP *The Raven*. I've always known this minor background flaw was there, but the Model 60 pulls it right into the spotlight. Fortunately, this isn't something the deck only does to side effects on recordings; we lose count of the number of times we look up from making listening notes, thinking: "What was that?"

So while the Model 60 won't transform your LPs into something brand new, it will introduce you to subtleties you might have missed in the past. This clarity and resolving power comes courtesy of the turntable's

midband and lower treble talents. To suggest its detail retrieval abilities are formidable would be a gross understatement. No matter what sort of music we choose to pass under the stylus, the Model 60 lifts every element out of the groove and serves them up in a way we've seldom encountered.

Jennifer Warnes' *Bird On A Wire* from her 1986 album of Leonard Cohen cover versions, *Famous Blue Raincoat*, is a masterclass in instrument positioning. Yet its semi-circle of musicians has never sounded quite as spacious or as beautifully defined than through SME's flagship turntable offering. Warnes is locked centre stage with millimetric precision and as each instrument does its stuff – from rich bass guitar to pristine percussion – we can locate its position with ease.

This astonishingly precise level of detail never once leaves the Model 60 sounding like a surgical instrument heartlessly dissecting the music.

**HOW IT COMPARES**

While the new Model 60 arguably warrants a 'best bar none' product status, this will not stifle debate among the most well-heeled fans of the black stuff. If money really is no object, then vinylistas should check out the £35,000 Air Force III Premium from TechDAS with its pneumatic suspension, vacuum LP hold-down and real estate for up to four tonearms.

Looking for something bolder still? Then check out Clearaudio's £136k Statement from Germany – a 350kg tower of alloy, stainless steel and 'bullet proof' wood incorporating a floating magnetic drive for its huge acrylic platter. Once seen and heard with TT1 tonearm and Goldfinger MC, this iconic turntable is never forgotten!

Rather, its level of insight works to knit the music together so we experience it as a whole.

The sense of sumptuous clarity continues into the top end, with vocal performances in particular an absolute joy to behold. On the 12in a cappella version of *Too Many Walls*, Cathy Dennis is a clear and vivid presence and even more striking is the reproduction of the track's few vocal plosives, although – again – rather than being a distraction this just adds to the sense of realism.

**Conclusion**

Across the lower registers, the Model 60 sounds impeccable. The deck's bass delivery is extended, fluid and taut, and when impact is required, it happily provides it. It is flawless, too, when it comes to the detail and texture of bass instruments. The prominent bassline underpinning Steely Dan founder Donald Fagen's *Morph The Cat* from the 2006 album of the same name is fruity, deep and slick in its tunefulness.

This track highlights yet another trump card that the Model 60 has up its sleeve, namely keeping this bass detail in the picture as the vocals and

**The Model 60 plays familiar recordings in an almost unfamiliar fashion**

other instruments join in – this feeling of balance is a constant so the swirling synthesisers behind Rosa Walton and Jenny Hollingworth's densely layered instrumentation in Let's Eat Grandma's *Donnie Darko* are loud and clear, as are the subtle percussive effects tucked away in David Axelrod's *Holy Thursday* off *Song Of Innocence* that has us simply purring with delight ●

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Exquisite engineering and finish  
**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** The price, obviously  
**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** The new standard by which all high-end turntables should be judged  
**FEATURES** ★★★★★

**OVERALL**

