

ANALOG CORNER

BY MICHAEL FREMER

THIS ISSUE: A more affordable record player from SME and a French riff on the DL-103.

SME goes down-market

“I got some Audio-Technica ATLP120X turntables in the other day, which had been back ordered for maybe 6 or 7 months, so I called to see if they had more. She told me there were 17,700 of that model on back order,” a dealer I know emailed recently.

That number surprised even this diehard vinyl advocate. The \$279 direct-drive AT-LP120X looks somewhat like a Technics SL-1200; it could almost be a knockoff. For a few hundred dollars, it includes a tonearm that won't ruin your records, a built-in phono preamp, and an AT-VM95E cartridge—an upgrade from the AT-95SE, which is already stupidly good for not much money.¹ The AT-LP120X offers decent performance and even has a built-in A/D converter and a USB output.

If you want one, though, good luck. As I write this, Crutchfield's website says, “Temporarily out of stock, expected 4/30/2021.” Anyone who thinks the vinyl resurgence is a fad or a bubble about to burst is living in one.

Here's where I would normally say, “It's okay. For an additional \$100, buyers can step into a Pro-Ject T1 Phono SB, which offers far superior sonic performance,”² but when I again went to Crutchfield's site, I found that it and the basic T1 (\$349) and the Pro-Ject Debut Carbon EVO (\$499)³ were all “Temporarily out of stock.”

Even if you assume that the turntable shortage is due to COVID-19, is it because of COVID-related parts shortages and factory shutdowns or because people stuck at home are buying turntables and records?⁴

If you are having trouble getting new LPs or seeing release-schedule delays, it's because pressing plants worldwide cannot keep up with the demand.⁵ That's a better problem to have than idle presses—or worse, scrapped ones.

WITH THE MODEL 6, SME GOES DOWN-MARKET

An under-\$500 SME record player won't arrive anytime soon, but the company, which is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, decided it wanted in at the under-\$10,000 price point.

Twenty-one years ago (!), I reviewed the now-discontinued SME 10,⁶ which sold then for \$5995 with the M10 arm. I called the price “rather stiff.” My perspective has since shifted, as has the top half or so of the turntable market,

toward increasingly costly products. In today's dollars, the SME 10's \$5995 is about \$9100. Fitted with SME's familiar M2-9 arm, the new Model 6 sells in America for \$8995—about the same as what the Model 10 sold for in 2000.

Until the introduction of the Model 6, SME's least expensive turntable was the \$12,500 Model 12. Why Model 6? Because it's SME's sixth all-new

The Model 6 and the MC Cadenza Black produced a deep, taut, tuneful, room-shaking “thwack.”

turntable design. Models 30, 20, 10, 15, and 12 are the others.

SME manufactured its first turntable, the Model 30, in 1990, just as the LP was supposedly fading away. Called the Model 30 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the company's first tonearm, it's still in production 30 years later, enhanced and upgraded but relatively unchanged. It cost around \$12,000 then—around \$24,000 in today's dollars. Today's improved Model 30/2 costs \$38,400 without an arm.

The Model 30 and every subsequent SME turntable model until the

1 Herb Reichert auditioned the AT-VM95E in Gramophone Dreams #44. See stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-44-audio-technica-goldring-lp-gear-phono-cartridges.

2 See my review at analogplanet.com/content/project-t1-phono-sb-turntabl-born-frustration.

3 See Alex Halberstadt's review in the March issue of *Stereophile* at stereophile.com/content/project-debut-carbon-evo-turntable.

4 For Julie Mullins's Re-Tales column last November, Sunil Merchant of Covina, California's Sunny's Components told her that sales of a particular moderately priced turntable had increased dramatically during the pandemic. See stereophile.com/content/re-ales-2-dealerships-forge-ahead-during-pandemic.

5 The Apollo lacquer fire has had very little effect on record production.

6 See stereophile.com/turntables/376.



Model 6 was manufactured in-house, from aluminum. For good reason: The company's tooling, machining, and manufacturing capabilities—utilized for the medical, aerospace, and military industries—are formidable. When you buy an SME turntable, most of what's in the box is made at the Steyning, West Sussex, England factory.

I've toured SME twice, once in 2015 and again in 2017, after the Cadence Group bought the company from founder Alastair Robertson-Aikman's family and appointed aerospace-industry veteran Stuart McNeilis as CEO.⁷

For the Model 6, SME jettisoned the O-ring suspension and thick aluminum plates found on more costly SME tables in favor of a main chassis CNC-machined from what the company says is a "unique polymer high-density resin material," which it claims has "superb resonance absorption."

It's a relatively high-mass, compact platform weighing approximately 20lb (including the 4lb platter, with its ribbed surface, which appears to be machined from Delrin or a similar material). It sits on four elastomer feet made from what appears to be a silicone or another vibration-absorbing

compound. As with all SME turntables, there's no dustcover.

SME says that "the main bearing, spindle, and drive pulley are precision made to the same exact standards as all SME high-end turntables." There's no reason to doubt that: SME would have to struggle to *downgrade* anything machined in-house. A flat belt fitted around a crowned aluminum motor pulley drives what appears to be a black-anodized aluminum subplatter.

The tonearm is an "improved" (in what ways isn't specified) version of the familiar SME M2-09 9" arm featuring ball-race bearings and an internally damped stainless steel arm-tube, finished here in attractive black chrome. (The M2-09 was once available as a separate product for about \$2100, or about a quarter of the Model 6's price, but SME no longer sells arms other than mounted on its own turntables.) The M2-09 can accommodate cartridges weighing 5–12gm. The magnesium-alloy headshell allows for azimuth adjustment. VTA/SRA is adjustable, though not "on the fly," which is fine with me. SME supplied a set of Crystal Connect RCA–RCA interconnects. (The Cadence Group also owns

Crystal and Siltech.) For setting MM loading capacitance, it would be useful to know the cable's capacitance, but SME doesn't provide that information. Not supercritical.

A large, outboard power supply housed in a 4.5lb high-density-polymer chassis controls the 24V AC motor via a biphasic, DSP-based sine-wave generator; a dedicated, discrete power amplifier generates two pure sine waves that drive twin AC motor coils. 33 1/3 and 45rpm are supported, and the speed is adjustable in 0.0133Hz steps, allowing for precise pitch control.

Setup

The Model 6 sets up relatively easily, though its feet aren't adjustable, so you need to be able to level its supporting shelf. I found it odd that the SME's instructions do not mention the importance of leveling.

The instruction manual diagram shows the arm pillar sitting in the familiar SME oval-cutout base, which allows for easy, convenient pivot-to-spindle adjustability; the headshell is slotless, and overhang is set by varying the pivot-to-spindle distance. Loosen-

ing two base screws allows precise fore and aft adjustment.

Let me interrupt here to ask you to read this Analog Planet story,⁸ which demonstrates, thanks to microscopy from WallyTools's J.R. Boisclair, that setting the zenith angle (which, on most alignment gauges, is attempted by ensuring that the cantilever is parallel to "hashmarks" located at the "null points" where the stylus achieves groove tangency) is often grossly inaccurate as a result of poorly mounted styli. That's a problem cartridge manufacturers need to address.

Boisclair has a solution for the problem until industry tolerances are tightened, but it can't be applied to SME arms because of the company's slotless headshell overhang system—ingenious and convenient back when it was introduced but less effective at a time of exotic stylus profiles and lax cartridge manufacturing precision. SME should add some slot "play" to allow zenith angle adjustment without giving up its classic system, even if only on an optional headshell.

While I'm high on my horse: The manual's instructions for setting VTA/SRA and azimuth are inadequate—not



that SME is unique in this respect. Setting up a cartridge so that the arm-wand is parallel to the record and the cantilever is, by sight, perpendicular to it are inadequate ways of setting VTA/SRA and azimuth. Woah, Nelly! I'm dismounting.

SME sent a \$2729 Ortofon Cadenza Black mounted in the headshell of the M2-09, but Ortofon had previously sent me a new, limited-edition \$999 2M LVB (Ludwig Von Beethoven)

Black that utilizes the Cadenza's boron cantilever and nude Shibata stylus as well as a newly developed elastomer suspension-damping material, so I first set up that cartridge.

Despite my griping about the lack of zenith-angle adjustability, there's something to be said for being able to set the tracking force first and have it

⁷ See youtu.be/usXKl8p6kuk.

⁸ See analogplanet.com/content/zenith-angle-correction-final-set-frontier.



not change when you set overhang. VTA/SRA adjusts by loosening a locking screw and rotating a large circular ring that raises or lowers the threaded arm post. It's an effective (and cost-effective) way of adjusting VTA/SRA. The antiskating system is the weight-and-monofilament type.

Easily adjustable speed means you can get the turntable spinning at precisely 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ or 45rpm. The PlatterSpeed app indicates that the SME 6's platter ran with good speed consistency, with $\pm 0.02\%$ relative maximum deviation.

Use

Once set up, the SME Model 6 was easy and enjoyable to use, and it performed well consistently—except for the screw-down three-piece record clamp, which I found unusable. The



plastic-collet center piece gripped too tightly, making clamp removal impossible without rocking or prying, which

I felt was bad for bearing health. My solution was a lightweight, \$30 clamp from Record Doctor.

Press the small, chromed button to the left of the large rotary knob atop the power supply and the platter starts to spin. To change speeds from 33 1/3 to 45rpm, or vice versa, turn the motor off then push the large knob atop the power supply.

The SME 6 is a slow starter, but unless you plan on using it at a disco, that's no problem. To fine-tune the speed: With the motor running, hold down the large rotary knob until the speed LED blinks, then turn the knob clockwise or counterclockwise to increase or decrease the speed. Once set, push the large knob down again. The Model 6 holds speed well.

Rich, full, well-controlled sonics

For a moving magnet cartridge, the 2M Black LVB sounded detailed, open, and extended on top—but the Model 6 exploded to life with the MC Cadenza Black. I played a 1997 test pressing of a spectacular-sounding reissue of the 1961 Argo Records release, *Ahmad Jamal's Alhambra*, cut in 1997 by Bernie Grundman for the German Alto Analogue label (Alto AAO05), about a decade before the Universal fire destroyed the tape.

This 1961 Ron Malo recording has drum *slam*, transparency, and bass

finesse. Jamal is playing upfront, and there you are, sitting front row, center. When Vernell Fournier lands hard on the drums to end the opener—Rodgers and Hammerstein's "We Kiss in a Shadow"—it should be a well-controlled dynamic surprise, and the SME 6 delivered the goods (and how!) through the Wilson XVX (reviewed elsewhere in this issue) [\[p.# when available\]](#). Israel Crosby's bass lines were taut, well controlled, and nimbly reproduced, whether he was subtly or insistently plucking.

I know this record well, and while the Model 6 left some stuff on the table compared to the big rigs played back through far more costly phono preamps, the Model 6 delivered sonic satisfaction, and the differences were around the margins. This 'table has been carefully and thoughtfully tuned to produce control but not a thick, overdamped personality.

The double-45rpm Analogue Productions reissues of three of Dave Wilson's famous Wilson Audiophile recordings cut by Kevin Gray at Coherent Audio (release date March 12, 2021) arrived too late to include in the XVX review but in time for this column. I covered the 33 1/3 reissues on Analog Planet. (If you want to read

insanity, read the comments.⁹)

One of the three records is *Winds of War and Peace* (APC-8823-45), which includes the famous "Mallet of Death" ("MoD") bass drum thwacks on the opening track, "Liberty Fanfare." The Model 6 and the MC Cadenza Black produced a deep, taut, tuneful, room-shaking "thwack." The National Winds sounded quite fine.

The 'table is competent for sure, but I think what most sells the musical goods is the M2-09 arm. Tonearms are SME's core competency, and now if you want a new one, it must come with an SME 'table.

There's some stiff competition at the \$9000 price tier, but if you're looking for a turntable at this price and want the full range of cartridge setup flexibility (other than zenith angle), you should check out the Model 6 before buying anything else. Other than that fakakte clamp, SME's latest entry is a thorough turntable reboot for the company and a complete success. The more I used it, the more I enjoyed its open, airy sound and its solid bottom end—and right now there's more than \$1 million worth of turntables set up in my listening room!

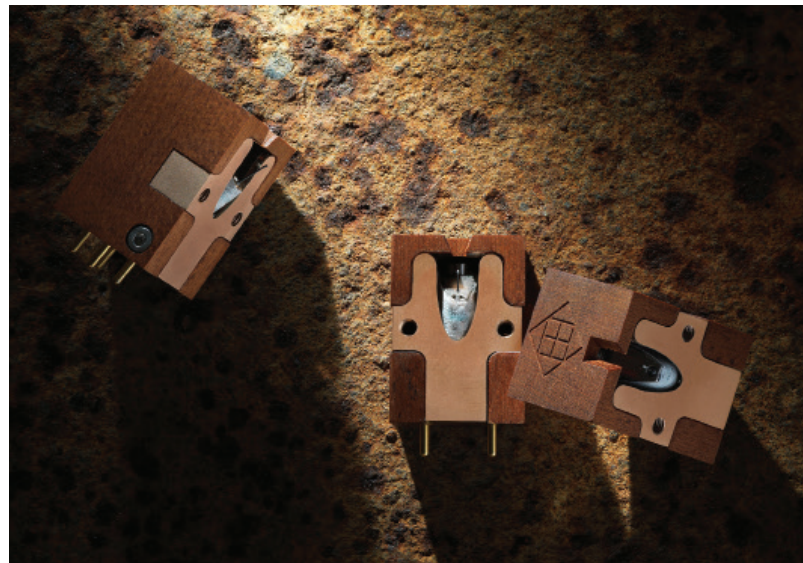
⁹ See analogplanet.com/content/wilson-audiophile-recording-series-reissues-analogue-productions.

THE SCULPTURE A.3L MC CARTRIDGE AND MINI NANO STEP-UP TRANSFORMERS

I first met this intense group of French analog fanatics at Munich High End a few years ago as they carried around an assortment of cartridges on a plate like waiters serving hors d'oeuvres at a cocktail party. As I remember it, they excitedly showed me an almost dizzying assortment of custom cartridge retips and mods.

Their website explains that Sculpture A is a France-based consortium of European audio and broadcast professionals who are *way* into analog. (The "About" page features a torso, the head of which is blocked by a copy of the first Dead Can Dance album, so I was all in.)

The wonderful story I was told in an email about the assembled team deserves retelling, but this column hasn't got the space to tell it in full. For now, here's a summary: All Sculpture A products are conceived, designed, and built in Europe by Luxembourg designer Philippe Galowich, German industrial designer Hamlyn Terry,



and the Hungarian team of cartridge builder Laszlo Szalai and step-up-transformer designer Zsolt Bodnar.

One of the ringleaders is Francois Saint-Gérand, who in 2016 left his life as a civil servant to invest himself fully in analog hi-fi. He sent me a Sculp-

ture A.3L MC cartridge based on the venerable Denon 103 generator, but which they *heavily* modify. The cost is \$1955, which in today's cartridge world is moderate.

Today, a "base" 103 costs approximately \$229, but the Sculpture

A version is an entirely different beast. It features a nude, line-contact III stylus attached to a boron cantilever. Mr. Saint-Gérard, who owns an associated retail store, told me that the modifiers try to achieve lower moving mass than the original's. There are other Sculpture A versions at different price points, featuring alternate stylus profiles from spherical to Ogura PA, as well as a mono version.

The body is of vaporized and impregnated wood—a material that's light and relatively soft with good damping properties. A brass internal

stock coils, but the company offers versions with hand-wound coils of copper or silver. The .3 range is said to achieve channel separation of at least 28dB and as much as 30dB, while the hand-wound coil versions are said to achieve greater than 30dB separation. Other specs include 2.4gm tracking force and a relatively high 43 ohm



structure adds mass and lowers the center of gravity. The Denon generator is sandwiched between this brass "horseshoe," an internal decoupling material, and the vaporized, impregnated exoskeleton.

Attaching the cartridge to the headshell adjusts the coupling of the brass element and affects the cartridge's behavior, Mr. Saint-Gérard averred. Light tightening (0.4mN) is recommended, which, conveniently, is what the Rega torque wrench I use is set to. An Allen screw on the cartridge's side adjusts lateral damping.

The Sculpture A team also alters the damper to achieve 12µm/mN compliance; adjusts the piano-wire tension to produce lateral tracking better than 90 microns@315Hz; changes optimal VTA from 15 to 23 degrees (incorrectly referenced as SRA in the spec sheet); and adds an additional neodymium magnet to the circuit. Each sample is then hand-tuned.

The version I was sent uses Denon's

internal impedance, close to the 40 ohm impedance of the original Denon DL-103.

I was also sent two Sculpture A nanocrystal core, 99.99% copper coil, toroidal step-up transformers: one 1:10 (20dB) and one 1:20 (26dB). These sell for approximately \$750 each, which is dirt cheap for a nanocrystal-core SUT. The enclosure is plebian, which surely helps keep the cost down.

I suggest you read what *Stereophile* writers have written over the years about the "stock" Denon DL-103 and its kin.¹⁰ JGH wrote, "The DL-103S is incredibly clean-tracking, with a light, airy high end, a subtle zizz on string tone, and a very slightly withdrawn quality." Much later, Art Dudley wrote, "Like Bill Monroe's lost love, the DL-103 gives you body and soul—and it's a hell of a bargain."

Art also wrote, in December 2007 (Vol.30 No.12), that "the Denon DL-103 is one of those products that cries out to be *maximized*." Based on my cor-

respondence with Mr. Saint-Gérard, I think it was Art's plea that set him and his colleagues on his quest to build a better 103—and they did! Damn I wish I could forward this cartridge, and the two SUTs, to Art, who loved step-up transformers as much as anything.

I installed the A.3L on the SAT CF-1 09 Ti arm mounted on the SAT XD-1 turntable and ran the 1:10 Mini Nano Step-Up into the Ypsilon VPS-100 Silver edition's MM phono preamp: a circa \$2000 cartridge on a \$250,000+ arm/table combo and a \$700 SUT into a \$50,000 phono preamp.

A stereo system is only as good as its weakest link, right? If I could sit you

¹⁰ See stereophile.com/content/denon-dl-103-phono-cartridge.

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down and play for you *Bill Henderson Live at the Times* (Discovery Records DS-779), recorded in 1975, a used copy of which cost me \$6.00, you would hear Henderson center stage surrounded by his quartet as live, liquid, 3D-solid, artifact-free, and *present* as any transducer chain at any price might produce. I played it through half a dozen times in one sitting. (Sorry, I didn't let the vinyl "rest" between plays.)

The cartridge and SUT were magic on that record, and on others where the sonic stars aligned. With fairly dry, closely miked recordings with acoustic

instruments, the listenability was off the charts. But with other kinds of recordings—hard rock and especially ambience-rich, distantly miked ones—the cartridge had a “wet kiss from your least favorite aunt” quality that, while *still* magically liquid, artifact-free, and you-are-there enticing, can swallow detail and transient information in a sea of warmth and

atmosphere that is not, strictly speaking, on the record.

JJ Kirkpatrick's trumpet on the wonderfully recorded, richly atmospheric *Yuko Mabuchi Plays Miles Davis* (Yarlung YAR45588-171V) just about disappears, lost in the ambient fog. This recording has plenty of room sound, which the cartridge overemphasizes. Same with Frank on *Concert Sinatra*, discussed at greater length in my *XVX* review.

On the other hand, the cartridge's reproduction of “La Nevada,” from the Gil Evans album *Out of the Cool* (Alto

Analog AA005, or Impulse AS-4)—wonderfully recorded by RVG—while more liquid and ambient than I like or am accustomed to, kept me mesmerized for the entire 15 minutes. The cartridge's liquidity and lushness did not overwhelm the recording's outstanding transient detail, and the soundstage was unusually generous and deep. Both ingredients may be artificial, but in this context, it worked.

Mr. Saint-Gérard wrote in one of his emails: “We know it is not the best cartridge in the world, but it clearly reflects parts of each one of us, in our ideas, in our way of listening to music and enjoying, of being a team and friends.” True, they've not produced “the best cartridge in the world,” but those of you who love the single-ended triode tube's liquid, lush, and “pure” sound will love this affordable, hand-tuned cartridge/SUT combo that, though lush and somewhat distant as JGH described the original, has a nicely extended and well-developed top end. If you are already a DL-103 fan and you get an A.3 fitted with the stylus of your choice, you may conclude that it *is* the world's best 103 variant. ■