

# SME Series IV (£1495)

While most tonearms fix the pivot point so you must move the cartridge in the headshell to set overhang, SME's system does the opposite. The cartridge's position is fixed in the headshell, while the arm's ingenious base slides fore and aft.

SME's precision engineering is legendary. Just to look at and feel this Series IV model – one step down from the flagship Series V which features ABEC 7 rather than ABEC 3 bearings together with on-the-fly VTA adjustment – is enough to see exactly why it costs what it costs. The attention to detail, fit and finish, are peerless – right down to the damped, swivelling output socket that provides easy 'dressing' of the supplied tonearm cable.

Made by SME using unpretentious plugs that nevertheless feature gold connector pins and sensible strain relievers, the cable is Van den Hul's D-501 Silver Hybrid, which is flexible and just 4mm in diameter. An extra £120 buys internal wiring with van den Hul MCS150 silver cable.

Accurate set up with SME's alignment protractor is simplicity itself. The arm is also a joy to use. The cueing device is precise in operation, with a smoothly damped action and no lateral drift.

## ROCK SOLID

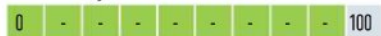
Even in standard issue with 'regular' internal wiring the Series IV sets a benchmark against which all others must surely be judged. Yes, it's the most expensive tonearm in this group by a considerable margin, but from the opening bars of 'Superstition' it sounded like it in a most obvious fashion.

Bass power was truly visceral, the bass synth and kick drum combining depth and muscular energy in equal measure together with an ability to stop and start with commanding precision. Meanwhile, subtle details of multi-tracked keyboards and natural percussive sounds were resolved clearly, never swamped or clouded by the immensely powerful low frequency energy that was being delivered. The reggae bass beat of Frank Zappa's

'Lucille...' packed a vigorous punch with the SME in situ, the metronomic drumming of Vinnie Colaiuta ricocheting around the listening room as his sticks cracked against hi-hat and rims. The master tape-like stability of the performance was simply spellbinding.

Further exhilaration was in store when listening to Stevie Ray Vaughan's guitar playing. Displaying what seemed to be the finest attributes of the Linn and Ortofon arms, all rolled into one and enjoying an extra layer of detail and dynamics, the subtle phrasing and shading of the band's playing was mesmeric. Likewise, the stability of the sound image reproduced by *Scheherazade* transported the mind to Chicago's Orchestra Hall as the instruments came to life, proving just how fine a transducer the Ortofon Cadenza Blue is when provided such a stable platform.

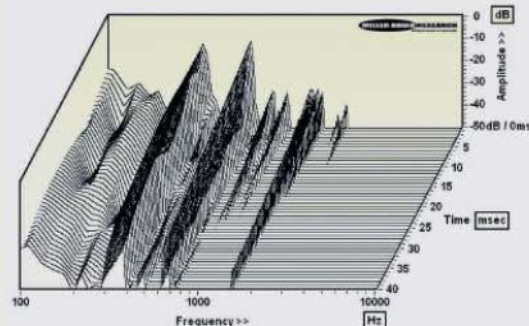
Sound Quality: 88%



**ABOVE:** Clamp bolts on the base release the arm for both horizontal and vertical adjustment. Underslung counterweight is a tungsten-alloy block suspended on a damped suspension

## HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

While the Series IV is structurally complex and heavy at 700g (an issue only with certain suspended subchassis turntables) its effective mass is a perfectly modest 11g and suited to a wide range of cartridge types. The key section of the arm – the headshell, tapered tube, bearing yoke and counterweight rail – are all fashioned from a single magnesium alloy die-casting. The lockable tungsten counterweight hangs below the plane of stylus and bearing as an aid to stability while the pre-loaded bearings offer almost zero friction and no detectable play. Despite its complexity, the IV benefits from a simple resonant behaviour [see modal waterfall, below], the tube bending at a relatively high 320Hz with a second mode at 600Hz. **PM**



**ABOVE:** Cumulative resonant decay spectrum, 100Hz-10kHz



**ABOVE:** One-piece pressure die-cast tapered magnesium arm pipe is internally damped. Anti-skate/bias compensation is by a tension spring and calibrated dial

Bearing / bias type	Gimbal / internal spring
Effective mass / length	11g / 240mm
Offset angle / overhang	23 degrees / 17.5mm
Downforce accuracy (at 2g)	+3%
Cartridge weight/compliance range	5-15g / 8-25cu



# GROUP TEST VERDICT

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**A**s highlighted in the introduction to this group test on page 35, a record player is a balanced combination of the turntable, arm and cartridge – and it transpired that in the test rig the least satisfying was Pro-Ject's 10cc Evolution. While delivering bags of detail and sounding fast and delicate, its lean bass robbed the music of texture, sounding too analytical.

Roksan's Nima uni-pivot was quite, quite different. This had an endearingly warm, smooth, 'analogue sound' but was marred by an indistinct bass bloom that was soft and coloured. In a small-scale system with mini monitors this might go largely unnoticed. Also let's not forget that it's half the price of most of the arms here, so value is high.

## THE REST...

Rega's identically-priced RB1000 was similar in its matter-of-factness to the 10cc. It too was fast and detailed and was well on its way to sounding too stark and unforgiving on the equally uncoloured Clearaudio test deck. But where clarity is judged ahead of warmth, the RB1000 proves very insightful on most decks.

While I observed marked differences in the way the Linn Akito and Ortofon TA-100 presented the music – the Linn sounding bold and forthright, the Ortofon sweeter

*'Want to hear what's really on your records? Buy this...'*

and more laidback – it was difficult to say which was 'better'. We've awarded them similar scores, demoting the Ortofon only slightly for its lush presentation and arguably somewhat less faithful

reproduction. Nevertheless, after almost three decades of spinning CDs and DVDs I've

become downright intolerant of the ticks and pops in my aged LP collection – and the Ortofon's gentler demeanour proved kinder to surface imperfections. Certainly Linn's Akito is something of a bargain considering the performance it delivers. Having been surprised by how much better Roksan's Nima sounded with its more expensive 'High Definition' arm cable option, I spent a couple of days reinstalling some arms and mixing 'n' matching cables.

Linn's plastic-plugged cable was substituted with both the Roksan HD and Ortofon's expensive-looking cable, but I discovered that the Akito sounded best with the cable supplied, despite it appearing to be somewhat cheap fare.

## ...AND THE BEST

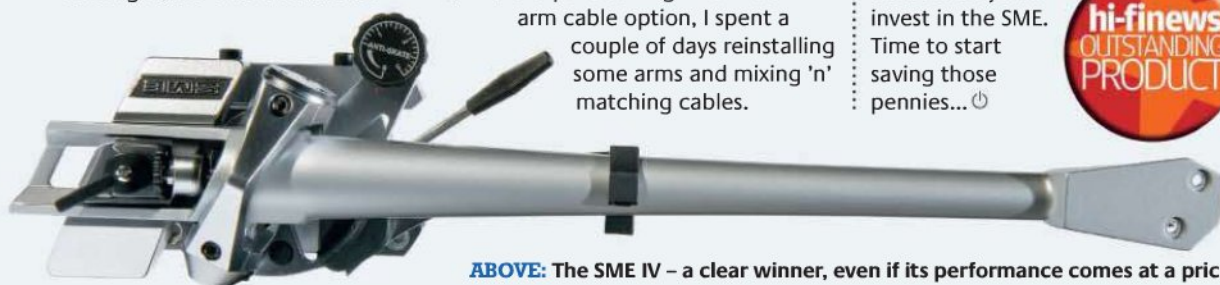
This leaves the considerably more expensive SME Series IV, which looks and feels like a fabulous example of precision engineering. This was the first time I've ever unboxed and installed one all on my lonesome and it proved an absolute doddle to fit and set up. Then I heard the sound. Detail? Fabulous. Transparency? You bet. Bass performance? Not only thunderous but solid.

If you want to hear what's really on your records and you can afford the high price ticket then you'll invest in the SME. Time to start saving those pennies... ⚡



**BELOW:** Linn Akito – utilitarian looks but vivid sound

**ABOVE:** Ortofon TA-100 – one sweet-sounding arm



**ABOVE:** The SME IV – a clear winner, even if its performance comes at a price

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