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(B)EAT This!

Hitherto known for their bespoke premium priced audio tubes, Euro Audio Team have just launched a brand new high end turntable featuring an Ikeda tonearm, no less! David Price gets into the groove...

Jozefína Krahulcová, CEO of Euro Audio Team (E.A.T.) is a redoubtable character. Bubbling with enthusiasm for this, her company's first (but not last, I am assured) high end turntable, she exudes confidence despite the time not being quite right for the launch of such an esoteric, luxury product. "I am a big fan of vinyl - it's the best way to listen to music," she tells me, "and I've got a very nice classical music collection. I wasn't happy about the turntables on the market, so I decided to do this..."

Ebullient she may be, because the new E.A.T. Forte isn't just another derivative design - another 'me too' premium priced product there to have a presence in the market. It shows some interesting thinking - certainly in its unique combination

featuring a separate motor unit, massive platter and string belt drive, it actually reminds me very much of Marantz's fabled TT-1800, their late high end design that never was - and also certain top Micros of that period. Whilst the outward appearance may ring bells, so to speak, the inside engineering is quite different. The plinth is a metal filled, MDF box of backbreaking weight, with beautiful gloss lacquered wood veneer. Debates rage hard on online forums about the merits of this, but suffice to say that just as the sprung subchassis approach works best when the springs are as unintrusive as possible (a la Avid), so the high mass approach works better the higher the mass is - and the Forte is certainly heavy...

"this massive machine gets the best out of your vinyl without you or it having to try very hard..."

of clever techniques used by various other designs - and the reappearance of a seminal tonearm from a past master of the art - Ikeda.

Costing £12,400 (in piano black or Zebrano finish, add £500 for premium Makassar), it is a fixed subchassis "mass design", in the tradition of the great nineteen seventies direct drives. Indeed,

The platter is the next most noticeable thing, largely on account of its huge 400mm diameter. It weighs 19.9kg, and is a two part affair with the inner section of the platter made from soft alloy, and the outer part made of a harder material. As you might expect, the main bearing (in the Forte's case inverted with a ceramic ball mating to a Teflon cup)

needed to handle this sort of weight and resultant pressure is vast, but it is given a helping hand by magnetism no less - with the be bottom half of the platter incorporating neodymium magnets to lower the pressure on the bearing. This 'semi magnetically suspended design is an elegant working compromise, but tweakers won't be delighted to learn that the bearing pressure is not easily adjusted and is best left to the factory setting. Finally, the platter comes with sorbothane damping, and the matt is made from recycled vinyl records; a massy record clamp is supplied.

Interestingly, the Forte is a twin motor design, the designers choosing to specify two low torque AC motors generating 2,700Kj of torque via twin pulleys and long diamond cut string belts. This is coupled with an active speed controller, and located in a separate enclosure which is made of sandwiched metal and MDF. This has two speeds, switchable by a push button, and there's a digital display offering stepped speed increase or decrease (if you so wish). One particular fun feature is the way this speed display counts its way up to 33.333RPM (or 45RPM) when you





switch on, steadily climbing to normal operating speed.

As you might expect, Technics SL1200-style 0-33.333 RPM in half a second starts are not available from a turntable with a platter that weighs more than most turntables. But this is of course to miss the point; the designers of the Forte assert that the higher the torque to the motor, the more intrusive it can be. By using twin motors, only gently connected to the platter which itself is so heavy it resists the short-term, momentary dynamic wow imposed by the stylus, the idea is that the motors spin the platter up to speed in a reasonable time and momentum does the rest. The motors then don't engage with the playback loop directly, that 20kg platter acting as a filter to speed variations. The twin motors seem to

work as twin turbochargers on car engines, supplying unstressed lazy torque rather than delivering needlessly (and possibly intrusively) high amounts. Regular readers will know I personally am a big fan of direct drives, but I do find E.A.T.'s approach interesting and very thorough. They have obviously designed the Forte well aware of the vagaries of belt drives, and all the problems it imposes, and would contend – I am sure – that it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it! This is reflected in remarkably fine speed

stability [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE].

I find the deck itself a paragon of simplicity; it really is the sort of turntable you buy if you're not into fiddling. Once located (which given its size and mass is easier said than done), you – ermm – just switch it on and off and that's your lot. No suspension springs to twiddle, no fine speed to set, no intricate assembly of umpteen bits from a kit before it works. Essentially, the EAT Forte is a plug and play turntable – but for millionaires! It is, of course, immaculately finished,

and whilst I may prefer functional, machine-like looks of the Avid Acutus or the arresting geometric grace of the Michell GyroDec, I can see that it is an attractive thing to have in your house – providing you've got one big enough, of course...

Another key part of the Forte is of course the tonearm. Although notionally badged as an EAT product, Jozefina makes no bones about the fact that it is designed and manufactured by Ikeda. Indeed it is a chrome finished Ikeda IT407 12" design, mounted on a sorbothane damped heavy metal base. If you're not a Japanese hi-fi nut, you might be shrugging and saying so what – so think of it as being a bit like Lexus getting Bristol to supply engines for their top limousine [see ARMS AND THE MAN]. More remarkable is that Osamu Ikeda was reputed to be in semi retirement, and extremely unlikely to ever make any tonearm for anybody ever again...

Originally launched in 2006, the 12" IT407 is a fairly high mass dynamically balanced design that traces its lineage all the way back to Fidelity Research days. Precision radial ball bearings are used along with a thread linked, weighted bias compensator and there's a locking counterweight at one end of J-shaped polished arm tube, and a detachable headshell at the other. The build quality and finish of this arm is equal to the SME Series V, which really needs no more explanation – but suffice to say it is absolutely exquisite to hand cue, feeling as silky as the top SME in use. My only gripe would be the slightly fiddly arm rest lock, which isn't the best ever devised, even if it does the job.

Once again, the debates around tonearms are manifold; everyone 'in the know' has their favourite, and just to make life interesting, they rarely agree. The Ikeda arm brings no innovation, no fancy tonearm materials, no special damping systems or clever 'active counterweights'; rather it's an utterly conservative high mass design that relies on impeccable and consistent construction to achieve its sonic goals. Put a decent moving coil in (in my case a van den Hul Frog), dial in the tracking force, bias and vertical tracking angle (all very easy and elegantly done) and you're off!

SOUND QUALITY

Having just spent a long and most enjoyable period with Avid's Acutus, and of course my own Sony TT-S8000 (a late seventies Japanese direct drive that makes most moderns look like Fisher-Price playthings), it was a

sobering experience to see the E.A.T. Forte in my equipment rack, let alone hear it. It is massive; bigger I would say than two Technics SL1200s in a row. The sound is concomitantly large, as imposing as the deck's physical bulk. I was fascinated, as in my system I haven't come across anything quite like it...

First then, a little bit of perspective. I found the Avid Acutus (at a mere £3,000 less if you fit it with the SME Series V tonearm that it so obviously wants) to be a breath-taking vinyl replay tool – masses of energy, vast amounts of detail and tremendous energy that had me perching on the edge of my seat. Put on some power pop like Simple Minds, or heavy electronica like The Prodigy and it was time to fasten your seatbelt for – as they say – the ride of your life.

Immense and covering as the Forte may be sonically, it is not like the Avid. It is an altogether less intense experience. Don't take this to be in any way disparaging, as actually it is more versatile. Slip on some John Coltrane and you can sip a snifter of Scotch, light up a Silk Cut and tap your toes just as the Right Honourable Ken Clarke would his Hush Puppies. You can relax into the music, think about next weekend's visit to the in-laws or what colour you're going to paint the front door when the weather gets better. With the Avid, you'd have the vagaries of the recording etched into your cranium, and may well be thinking, "a great piece of music, but this early sixties cross-paired mic recording isn't ideal". Back to the E.A.T. though, and you'd be bathing in the languid, luxuriant sounds of Johnny Hartman singing, 'Lush Life', sitting up straight totally transfixed with your heart up where your Adam's Apple should be. My point is simple; the Forte takes you into the music as far as you want to go, yet demands nothing from you.

On the very surface of things, it is less detailed than the Avid. It doesn't put a magic marker under every attack transient, underlining when the note starts, and yet it is no less fast and no more unstable – indeed it seems even more speed-stable than the Acutus, which is really saying something. I found with Yes's 'Owner of a Lonely Heart', my reference Sony only just nosed ahead in the leading edge of the bass guitar stakes. The TT-S8000 is utterly exceptional in this respect, and a little ahead of the Avid, whereas the E.A.T. was, figuratively speaking, just millimetres behind its back bumper. But whilst the lithe direct drive with its light platter and clever quartz lock

speed control servo system could just about inch ahead on leading notes, it lacked the E.A.T.'s immense stability. It was as solid as the proverbial lump of granite sticking out of the briny. The scale, the epic expanse of its soundstage and the utter unflappability of its performance beat the Sony into a cocked hat.

Peter Gabriel's 'Solsbury Hill' was another case in point. Brilliant of course as the song is, it's a slightly murky mid-seventies analogue recording and one that doesn't flatter a turntable of any size, price or weight. I found the Forte was able to unpeel the song, rather like an onion skin, giving me great insight into every layer of the production, yet without sounding in any way forced or strained. I remember the Avid doing this too, albeit



with more drama and seemingly more detail, although I still found the E.A.T.'s presentation more naturally 'right' on an instinctive level. Its dynamics were formidable, and yet less explicit. With such innate power, it was able to deliver the contrasts in a more effortless way, like a slumbering giant waking up to brush away an irritation without bothering to raise an eyelid. Again, by contrast, the Sony seemed a tad breathless – which is not something you ever say about it in less illustrious company...

Tonally, the Forte was superb. Its bass is immense, unflappable and without fault – save for being fractionally slower to switch on than the Sony. Alternatively, it may be right and the Sony is simply a little 'nervous' with the leading edges, etching them artificially hard in a characteristically direct drive way? The E.A.T. is also sumptuous in the best tradition of vinyl; cue up The Who's 'Won't Get Fooled Again' from an original seventies pressing of 'Who's Next' and you really know that's a valve bass guitar amp being used. It's the sort of bass that doesn't need to make any apologies – there's no issue with the recording, or the rest of the replay equipment, it's just there like the elephant in the room.

Yet it doesn't overpower, or slur

notes, or dominate the mix in any way; put on some nineteen sixties freakbeat from Ice (the most famous band to come out of my own Sussex University, which isn't saying much) and yes, sure enough, you can tell it's recorded in someone's bathroom in Brighton. Cue up 4hero's 'Escape That' however, and you're into low frequencies the like of which you rarely hear outside of Wembley Arena. Powerful as the E.A.T is below the stairs, let's just say it's not gratuitous.

Across the midband, you have a massively expansive sound. It makes the Sony – and to a less extent the Avid – seem rather stuck between the speakers. Yet instruments are not quite as accurately located as with the Acutus, which if it were a policeman would be a Miami-based member of CSI. The E.A.T. isn't imprecise, it's just big enough in its soundstaging for you not to have to ask questions; "the guitar's over there, the lead vocal is over there, okay, fair enough!" Nor is the midband quite as icily clear as the Acutus or the Sony, but it's actually no less detailed or informative, it's just the way it presents the information is altogether more relaxed. Now, I have a sneaking suspicion that the Ikeda arm is at least partly behind this state of affairs. It's so redolent of all those hours I used to spend languishing in Japanese hi-fi shops in and around Tokyo, listening to that country's high end fare. Think massively polished, with easy information retrieval that would never even think of throwing it at you. Yes, it's an ever so slightly 'hi-fi' sound, but a gorgeous one – and mates brilliantly to the E.A.T.'s mellow, moody, subtle sound.

As befits a turntable of this immense speed stability, the treble is a joy. It is slick and easy, beautifully polished and wonderfully atmospheric – yet sharp and incisive in a way that never dominates. Miles Davis's 'Kind of Blue' was majestic; smooth, vast in stage and deliciously, naturally musical, and with a wonderfully natural top end. If

ever there was a turntable/arm combination to flatter a cartridge's natural treble ability, this is it. Once again, my reference players both turned in a superficially slightly more detailed rendition, but it wasn't in any way more informative. Rather, it was if the brightness control had just been turned up a bit. The Avid was brilliant, pushing you right up close to the cymbals, the Sony had wonderful 'snap', whereas the E.A.T. took a gentle step back from the hi-hats, giving a less 'in your face' rendition that was – all said and done – a tad easier and more satisfying to listen to.

CONCLUSION

At this level, you're not going to get a bad turntable, so the question then is – *what kind of good one do you want?* As with fine wines, great watches, top restaurants and seven star hotels, at this price you're buying something that suits you like the best bespoke tailored suit. And so whom would the E.A.T. Forte suit? Well, the standard fitment of the Ikeda arm means this is far more like a turntable package than most decks at this price, which come *sans* tonearm, requiring you to make this big decision. The Forte is a case of 'add cartridge and go'; it even requires relatively little set up as it is not a skeletal design which demands various layers be bolted on to various others.

What it gives then is brilliant sound out of a (very big) box, with a superb fitted arm that sings with almost any highish mass moving coil cartridge. It presents a relaxed, easy, nonchalant sort of sound, but one that is nevertheless immensely satisfying. The best thing is that it's very devoid of character, or obvious strengths or weaknesses for that matter. Simply put, it's a massive machine that gets the best out of your vinyl without you – or it – having to try very hard. At nearly £13,000, it seems you can afford, not to!

ARMS AND THE MAN

In 1964, the former factory manager of Japanese tonearm specialist Grace decided to start his own business. At the age of thirty five, Osamu Ikeda formed Fidelity Research Kabushiki Kaisha and by the mid nineteen seventies his company was making world-class tonearms and pickup cartridges. Ikeda was no copyist, taking out several international patents and finessing his designs like few others. Indeed, so respected was he in Japan that his products were even used by the Imperial Family. The late nineteen seventies were the glory days for Fidelity Research, with the FR64 series of tonearms his strongest product, being a superlative device at a time when there was a relatively paucity of competition.

After the demise of Fidelity Research, the great man came back with Ikeda Sound Laboratories Company. An altogether smaller and specialist affair, he designed, built and inspected every product by hand. It was a chance for yet more innovation, not least the world's first MC cartridge without a cantilever. The new IT345 and IT407 tonearms were launched in autumn 2006; coming in twelve and sixteen inch versions respectively. E.A.T. use a specially modified, gloss finished version of the former.

VERDICT

Don't be fooled by its conservative looks, this is a brilliantly conceived, superbly engineered vinyl spinner. A memorably – seminal even – high end product.

E.A.T.

FORTE/IKEDA 12" £12,400

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FOR

- supreme musical ease
- unerring speed stability
- flawless engineering
- excellent fitted tonearm

AGAINST

- size
- weight

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

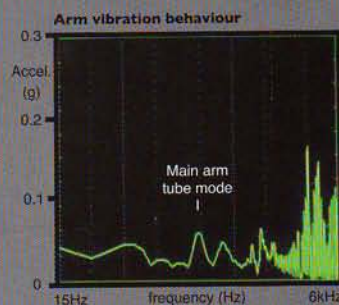
The EAT Forte carries an Ikeda IT407 12in (307mm) arm with detachable headshell. This is a solid affair made from various metals Ikeda say, rolled not diecast. The arm feels solid and 'dead' in the hand and indeed it measures like that too. For a long, tubular arm it is surprisingly free of a main arm tube mode, expected around 200Hz or lower. In this region there is no sign of vibration, although a small bump at 120Hz could possibly be due to primary flexure. Otherwise, the IT407 is a very 'quiet' arm all the way up to 3kHz and should give excellent bass quality and fine sound staging as a result, as well as a pure midband. Above 3kHz, as accelerations rise, the headshell becomes as active as most, so here the Ikeda is less distinguished. Also, 12in arms roughly halve the tracing distortion generated by a 9in arm and usually sound smoother and silkier as a result, although often not as 'fast'.

The EAT Forte turntable produced some amazing results. It was just 0.1% slow, a negligible amount and low speed drift below 1Hz was lower than usual too, resulting in a very low unweighted Wow and Flutter value of 0.072%. This suggests the EAT

Forte will have much the same grip on pace as a Direct Drive. Weighted wow and flutter was low too, as is to be expected, measuring 0.061%.

An unusual combo this may be in appearance, but it is a good deal more sophisticated under the skin than one might imagine. It's a great pairing. NK

ARM VIBRATION



SPEED STABILITY

