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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

EAT FORTE-S Turntable; Ikeda Tonearm; Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue cartridge

By Jimmy Hughes

Whatever you do, please take care if you have to lift a fully assembled EAT-Forte-S. It weighs in at a hernia-inducing 35kgs, and 15kgs of that is the massive 36cm diameter platter with vinyl mat. It's so heavy, you half wonder if it's stuck to whatever it's sitting on. Flimsy support stands? Forget it!

EAT stands for Euro Audio Team, and the company are based in the beautiful city of Prague. The Forte-S is the 'smaller' of two turntables they make, and S actually stands for, er, small. Do we detect a touch of irony here? Fact is, there's nothing 'small' about the Forte S. It's a *Monster* by any standards.

As previously mentioned, the platter weighs in at 15kg, and measures 36cm diameter. It's 6.5cm deep, and is made from alloy with Sorbothane damping. Given such

a heavy load, the centre bearing has to be pretty massive, and so it is – an inverted shaft, 2cm diameter, topped by a ceramic ball.

Due to the weight of the platter, premature bearing wear is a potential problem, as is rumble. To reduce both, the platter of the EAT Forte-S is partly supported on a 'cushion' provided by two powerful neodymium magnets. The massive plinth is damped with metal and sand, and supported by four adjustable magnetic feet.

Two AC synchronous motors are employed, each driving the platter via a silicon-rubber belt. Given the mass of the platter, you'd expect the motors to be hugely powerful high-torque designs. But, surprisingly they're not. Instead, EAT has deliberately plumped for a low-torque drive in order to reduce transmitted vibration.

Indeed, motor power is actually *reduced* once the platter reaches speed. The aim is for the huge mass of the platter to maintain momentum (in the manner of Nottingham Analogue); the motors simply keep it turning at the right speed. The intention is to achieve a smoother drive, reducing the 'cogging' effect one tends to get with AC synchronous motors. ▶



It certainly seems to work. The Forte-S sounds deliciously relaxed and effortless. Focus and detail are excellent; the overall impression is one of rock-like solidity and silky-smoothness. And we noticed something else – an *unforced smoothness* and *ease* perhaps sums it up best.

The music sounds graceful and natural. There's no sense of struggle or strain; the reproduction has a smooth flowing quality that is both effortless and beguiling. Now don't take that to mean the music lacks impact or presence – it's taut and immediate. Rather, there's an absence of equipment-added struggle and strain.

It's an almost impossible quality to describe. Only by auditioning the Forte S yourself will you understand and appreciate the point we're trying to make here. All we can say is - the music 'materialises' between the speakers; the physical mechanics of reproduction hardly seem apparent.

Our Forte-S came with the superb Ikeda 12in tonearm – a beautifully-crafted, well-engineered item costing around £6,500. This obviously played an important part in creating the smooth effortless sound delivered by the Forte-S. Even so, we'd say the turntable was the dominant factor here.

Hand-made in Japan, the Ikeda tonearm represents a luxury option for those wanting the best, and able to pay. It's a 12in design finished in bright beautiful chrome, with silky smooth bearings and a detachable headshell. While most Forte-S decks will ship with the cheaper Pro-Jekt Evo 12in arm (see main photo on page 63), the Ikeda is a gorgeous alternative.

The Forte-S is available in a choice of two high-gloss finishes; piano black, or a natural ebony wood finish called Makassar. There's a slight price premium for the latter; the piano black version costing £4,545 compared to £5,000 for Makassar. While the former looks deliciously cool and understated, the latter is more eye-catching.

Our cartridge was the superb Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue. Partnered with the superb Audio Research PH-8 phono stage and LS-27 line preamp, we heard a beautifully



smooth yet tactile sound – focused and highly detailed. Yet, despite delivering amazing detail, the overall impression was one of graceful ease.

This doesn't mean the music sounded soft-centred or lazy. On the contrary; it's taut, crisp and detailed. At the same time, there's an ease of delivery that so relaxed it's almost effortless. Voices and instruments exude a tangible 'real' quality that has the presence of a good live performance.

Pitch stability is absolutely rock-steady. Given a well-centred LP pressing even the most critical listeners will find the Forte-S hard to fault. Difficult instruments, like piano or guitar, showed no hint of pitch-wobble or wow. Listening, we were reminded of master-tapes or a good SACD.

However, we've yet to hear a digital source that combines incisive clarity and fine detail with such relaxed effortless precision. It's a difficult quality to express in words – partly because it's a slightly unreal mix of opposites. Like an exotic cocktail, ultimately, you have to experience it to appreciate what's being delivered.





▶ Surface noise is vanishingly low, and rumble completely non-existent. Four adjustable suspension feet pit opposing magnetic forces against each-other to suspend the heavy plinth from the surface that supports it. Being heavy and damped, the plinth transmits almost no vibration to the stylus, even when you tap it.

Because power to the motor is reduced after 10 or 15 seconds, the platter may not reach its proper operating speed from a standing start. We therefore found it helpful to give the platter a quick spin by hand. Once up to speed, the platter rotates with near-perfect precision, delivering a smooth ultra-stable result.

Really good turntable/arm/cartridge combinations always seem to produce results greater than the sum of the parts, and the EAT Forte-S is no exception. It delivers the focus and precision one associates with digital sources, while giving the relaxed ease and openness only obtainable from good analogue.

It's capable of producing holographic 'out of the speaker boxes' soundstaging that projects with impressive immediacy. The sound has impressive fine detail and clarity, yet – like a gifted gymnast going through a difficult routine – it has the knack of making everything seem easy and effortless.

The EAT Forte-S offers genuine 'high-end' turntable performance at a surprisingly affordable price. It's built like the proverbial battleship, and should last a lifetime. While partnering it with items like the Ikeda arm and a Koetsu raises the total price, it could of course be paired with less-expensive alternatives.

Inevitably, absolute standards of performance would diminish, but overall the smooth 'effortless' sense of ease we've mentioned should still be apparent. Such qualities are down to the turntable; the rock-solid foundation provided by the Forte-S gives any arm and cartridge a near perfect platform. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

EAT FORTE-S Turntable; £4,545 (£5,000 in Makassar)

Ikeda Tonearm; £6,500

Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue cartridge; £4,185.

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