



Prelude to a dream

Ed Selley listens to an entry-level deck that offers neutral sound at an attractive price

Since its founding a decade ago, European Audio Team has been steadily expanding its range of turntables. The company has adopted a 'top-down' approach to turntables with the flagship (and enormous) £12,000 Forte leading the way, followed by more affordable models embodying the same philosophy but simplified and reduced in size.

The Prelude is the latest arrival and drops the price of an EAT turntable to under £1,000 for the first time. To do this, many of the visual cues of the larger models have had to be eschewed but the design principles remain the same with an unsuspended,

belt-driven design that makes use of applied mass in critical areas.

The reason for this mass is simple enough. EAT argues that it is the only way of eliminating vibration, pitch instability and colouration. This mass is largely concentrated in the aluminium platter, which is mounted to a high tolerance stainless steel bearing fitted in a dense MDF plinth.

The other area where this philosophy has been applied is the tonearm bearing. The armtube is made from carbon fibre and incorporates a headshell that EAT has optimised for moving-magnet cartridges. The bearing housing is designed to act as a sink, pulling vibration away from

DETAILS

PRODUCT
EAT Prelude
ORIGIN
Austria
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable
WEIGHT
5.5kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
415 x 130 x 335mm
FEATURES
● 33 & 45rpm
● Fitted with Ortofon 2M Red cartridge
● Dustcover supplied
DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds Ltd.
TELEPHONE
0208 9713909
WEBSITE
absolutesounds.com

the playing surface. Interestingly, the deck doesn't use isolating feet, preferring instead conical spikes – which give best results in my setup placed on top of an isolation platform.

In order to further combat vibration, a direct current motor is placed in its own dedicated housing. There is no speed control, instead the belt is moved between an upper and lower pulley to select 33 and 45rpm.

An Ortofon 2M Red cartridge is fitted and correctly aligned so setup is limited to fitting the antiskating weight and setting the tracking force. At just under £1,000, I would argue that the £95 cartridge seems a little under specified at the overall deck price, but with the attractively priced 2M Blue 100 stylus readily available there's an affordable upgrade.

Once assembled and in situ, the Prelude is a handsome and well-proportioned offering and the major points of interaction feel solid and inspire confidence. The gloss finish on the plinth is of a very high standard, and the platter and details on the arm give it more visual appeal than many of its price rivals.

The considerable discrepancy between the weight of the platter and the weight of the plinth is a little odd,

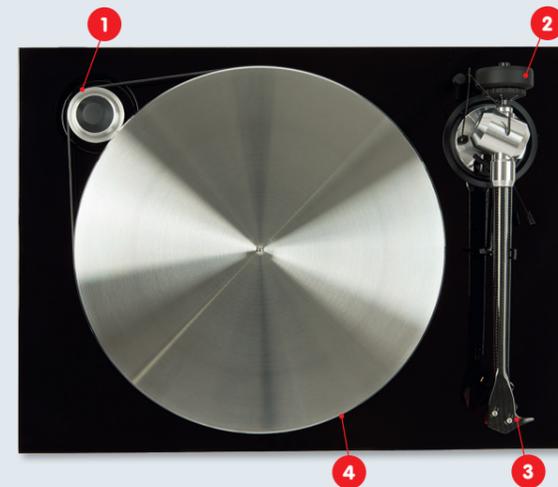
though. The plinth feels like the part to which the greatest savings have been made to allow for the smarter platter and arm to be used. It is also a little too easy to knock the belt which runs around the outer edge of the platter, requiring you to re-fit it.

Sound quality

Connected to a Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage (HFC 408) – a design that never has any trouble revealing unwanted noise further up the audio chain – the Prelude is completely silent and a quick strobe test suggests it is admirably pitch stable too. With the basics handled, it doesn't take very long to establish that it delivers EAT's philosophy of a 'neutral' turntable and that this has an effect on the way it presents music.

Kicking off with the hauntingly beautiful *Cascades* collaboration between pianist Jean-Michel Blais and electronic composer CFCF, the EAT immediately impresses. This is not a huge-scale performance, but anything with a grand piano requires a certain ability to deliver it convincingly and here the Prelude feels very capable. The piano sits centre stage in the recording with the strike and decay of notes delivered with real presence.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Belt-drive pulley (33 & 45rpm)
- 2 Counterweight
- 3 Ortofon 2M Red cartridge
- 4 Heavyweight aluminium platter



The Prelude includes a cartridge yet costs £50 less than the base price of Rega's Planar 6 (HFC 427), which has electronic speed control and sonically has the edge. Even equipped with an affordable cartridge like an Audio-Technica ATH-VM95E (HFC 444), it has a greater sense of get up and go and is close to the Prelude in terms of neutrality. For more refined and large-scale music, the EAT puts in an excellent performance and while the Planar 6 is the best turntable at the price point, the Prelude is an attractive alternative.

The performance is placed in a convincingly open and three-dimensional soundstage that extends effortlessly beyond the confines of the speakers. The bass isn't as seismic as some costlier designs, but is more than competitive at this price point.

This is not the preserve of simple material either. The more congested and complex *Tomorrow's Harvest* by Boards Of Canada is reproduced with a convincing balance of scale and three dimensionality. This openness is combined with an impressive level of refinement too. I often find the 2M Red a little fatiguing in some setups,

Cyrus phono stage and Naim Supernait 2 integrated amplifier generally need little invitation to get stuck in to Amadou and Mariam's *La Confusion*. When played on the Prelude, it lacks some of the album's usual get up and go and the elements of fun that I know the track to have.

How much this will matter to you will largely come down to personal preference. The catch for me is that timing really is the be all and end all of my path to musical pleasure, and the slightly detached nature of the EAT can be a bit of a barrier to how much I enjoy the overall performance.

The piano sits centre stage with the strike of notes delivered with real presence

but here it is difficult to unsettle and even the brittle pressing of *Resistance Is Futile* by Manic Street Preachers is handled convincingly.

In fact, the Ortofon 2M Red is such a sufficiently impressive partner to the Prelude that swapping to a 2M Blue doesn't step up performance quite as much as I would expect. Although there are gains to fine detail retrieval and the performance towards the inner edge of the record is better, the package feels admirably neutral and controlled and I wouldn't be in too much of a rush to change it.

Where this neutrality is less advantageous is that the Prelude can struggle to deliver the rhythmic energy of faster material. It never tips over into sounding slow or confused, but my partnering equipment of the

Conclusion

For anyone wanting to avoid any form of embellishment in their vinyl replay, the Prelude package has to be seen as delivering on the neutral virtues that EAT has set out to create. If you're looking to construct a vinyl-playing setup that focuses on accuracy and tonal refinement, this competitively priced turntable will help achieve that and so should be high on your list ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Even handed, neutral and detailed sound; solid build
DISLIKE: Lacks a degree of excitement; needs to be isolated to deliver its best
WE SAY: Delivers an admirably neutral presentation at an attractive price

OVERALL
★★★★★