

TechDAS AirForce V turntable

by Alan Sircom



TechDAS? That's the 'open your wallet and repeat after me... help yourself!' turntable brand, isn't it? Everything rides on a column of money powered by several air compressors. That's not for real people, that's for those with hot and cold running Ferraris! Granted, the Japanese company TechDAS does make some extremely good turntables that are

priced well into the 'super-deck' category. In fact, at Munich this year, the company showed its strictly limited edition AirForce Zero, which costs close to a cool half a million (it doesn't really make much difference whether that is 'US dollars, 'British pounds' or 'Euros'... half a million of them is quite 'spendy' for a record player, no matter how good, how rare, or how many parts of it are held aloft by air). But this is often the way of things in audio; a company makes a range of products from the aspirationally priced right up into the stratosphere, and all that gets talked about is the one that frets the firmament. Meanwhile, devices like the AirForce V keep banging away, making a top-class sound that is universally liked almost under the radar. There Ain't No Justice! ▶

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► In fact, it's best to just ignore the bigger AirForce decks when looking at the V; not because they are intrinsically better, but just because they are bigger and attention grabbers, by virtue of the sheer amount of technology and, of course, that price tag. The size of even the smallest TechDAS model doesn't quite reach to EF Schumacher's 'small is beautiful' epithet (it's still a relatively stocky turntable fed by a very solid air plenum system), but it's an attractive deck in a form-follows-function kind of way – in its grey finish, it's got that 1950s laboratory chic down pat. And there's that price tag, which at a tenth that of the original model and lose to one fiftieth that of the limited run AirForce Zero, is worthy of note.

The primary difference between AirForce V and other models centres on the turntable's platter. Where the standard Air Force platter is made from a single piece of material such as aircraft aluminium or stainless steel, the V uses an inner and outer platter arrangement. This helps keep costs and size and weight down to manageable levels. It also does without many of the side posts and additional damping, giving a footprint akin to that of the AirForce III, but without the side motor tower; by making a platter with a sub-platter, the belt doesn't need to wrap around the outside of the platter, and the motor housing can be inside the main plinth of the turntable, in a manner not too dissimilar from designs like the SME and the Linn LP12.

Those aspects of design help take the top decks to the sort of levels required by systems at the absolute pinnacle of performance, but the AirForce V doesn't sacrifice much in the way of performance at all. Sure, if you have a system that is well into six and even approaching seven figures, then the sort of resolution most of those systems generate and demand will make the difference between this deck and its bigger brothers pretty noticeable, but for more normal humans, this might just be all you need.

Here's the big thing. If you are one of those who thinks a manual is for wimps, and is something that should only be read if the build-up goes off the rails, then have someone else build your TechDAS Air Force V. It's not that the manual is complex (although it is comprehensive) or that the AirForce V is twitchy or unreliable. It's that there is a set way of putting the turntable together, some of the construction process is slightly counter-intuitive, and if you don't move from logical step to logical step you can stress or even damage your AirForce V. It's also vital that you get that glass air-flow platter scrupulously clean before you build it up, anything thicker than a fingerprint will undermine airflow across the whole platter and isn't a good long-term plan. A lurking cat that seems to know the exact moment and tactically best place to shed fur is not a good idea.

Once built, however, the deck is a solid and remarkably stable performer. If radio stations were still using turntables extensively, this would be classed as a transcription type turntable for both its ability to keep on turning as it exudes solidity of design and purpose. There isn't much in the way of adjustment in the feet, however, so whatever it sits upon needs to be and remain extremely level. .

Like its bigger AirForce III brother, the small footprint of the plinth gives the listener the potential to go for a lot of tonearm options. You can have four arms on the same deck in theory, although most people opt for just one or two tonearms in reality. We went with just the one, but it was one hell of a good one – the Graham Phantom Elite unipivot. This is a common choice, in no small part because Graham is distributed in Japan by TechDAS. ►

► In fairness, this is more than a simple marriage of convenience, and the two work well together. Nishkawa-san (the designer of the TechDAS turntables) is enough of a gentleman not to design his own arm while he's distributing the Graham, and the turntables did use Phantoms in the set-up and use. In essence, the Graham might explain why so many TechDAS owners go with just one or at most two armboards; the arm wand is easy to replace, and spare arm wands are readily available, so it's entirely possible owners of AirForce V decks have three or four cartridges on arm-wands, sitting in a vase in the listening room like the most expensive flower arrangement in history. Other arms are available; some TechDAS decks sport SAT, SME, and Kuzma arms.

The air system in the AirForce V is both an air bearing and vacuum hold down, all driven from the one pump housing. I'm not a compressor nerd, so air compression systems are not easily distinguishable to me, but this isn't the usual fish pump, and TechDAS instead opt for the combination of a solenoid and smaller than usual air outlets with a condenser so the compression levels stay constant without the soft 'phut-phut-phut' of a conventional pump. The other option could be a reservoir tank, but that tends to work better for airbrushes and tyre inflation rather than a constant and active pressure. Maybe I am a bit of a compressor nerd after all!

With older vacuum hold-down and air bearing turntables (like the Forsell) being long consigned to history and the only modern alternatives (such as the Bergmann and Holbo) typically wedded to a parallel tracking arm, the AirForce V might be many vinyl lovers' first experience of what the combination of a platter effectively floating

on air coupled with a vacuum record hold down system can do. The usual dismissive stance is to say it will just sound like a turntable with a clamp and peripheral ring and a sound similar to a very free suspended turntable. And they will keep saying that until about 20 seconds after they hear the real deal. Then they go very, very quiet for a while.

You see, it's nothing like you have heard before, although in fairness the way the TechDAS works makes it unlike most air-bearing turntables, too. The TechDAS AirForce V's air system is designed to reduce ripple to near-zero, and its lack of imprint on the sound will be clear to anyone who has used an air-bearing platter. There's a confidence and stability to the sound that simply doesn't happen with the other air bearing systems. It's a subtle difference, except it's the kind of difference that, once heard, is impossible to 'un-hear'.

If your vinyl experience does not include an airy component (that sounds like a euphemism), the sound of the AirForce V will shock. Or, rather, the no-sound of the AirForce V will shock, because it makes you realise just how big a footprint that bearing and drive chain have on the overall performance. That 'no sound' drops away still further as you climb the ladder of TechDAS, but even at this nursery slopes level (by the company's standards), you quickly hear a more honest, more focussed, and just more free sound that you would struggle to find in the metal-on-metal world.

There's an authority to the bottom octave on all TechDAS designs, but is in sharper focus here because you expect cavernous, deep, and controlled bass from turntables that cost more than £100,000, but here... perhaps less so. That authority comes through on every track, but anything with a bass line, such as Jaco Pastorius playing on 'God Must Be A Boogie Man' from Joni Mitchell's *Mingus* LP [Asylum]. Here, the shape and texture of the bass and the astounding quality of his playing shine through. They are not emphasised, and the playing is definitely not distinct from the rest of the music. There is a very cohesive flow in and around the music, in fact. It's that the bass just 'speaks from authority.' That does extend throughout the frequencies, but is most immediately noticeable in the bass. Play AC/DC's mid 1970s live *If You Want Blood You've Got It* LP [Atlantic] and that sense of authority gives this album a sense of semi-controlled mayhem. And its transient response makes Angus Young's guitar playing seem even more frenetic, but in a wholly good way. After all, 'Whole Lotta Rosie' is not meant to sound like a ballad!

Then there is the soundstaging, which is absolutely first class. My go-to recording here is the overture to *The Pirates of Penzance*, played by the D'Oyly Carte company, and recorded in the late 1950s by Decca. You can hear every last floorboard squeak on that stage at the best of times, but the AirForce V's striking ability to portray a soundstage of rare width, depth, and height is outstanding. The image is not over-stretched or manipulated in any way; you are just aware of an old wooden stage with a cut-down version of the

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LSO in the orchestra pit. It’s like listening in 70mm or IMAX! Bizarrely, it’s more like looking into that old theatre than if they had filmed the recording

But perhaps most of all, what really draws you into the AirForce V’s performance is the vocal articulation, backed up by some extremely fine detail. Try this on something folksy first (you don’t want to Roberta Flack this from the outset, or you’ll be an emotional wreck), like Maddy Prior and June Tabor’s *Silly Sisters* LP [Chrysalis], and tracks like ‘Lass of Loch Royal’ become more vital than just some 250 year old song about dying in shipwrecks, it becomes plaintive and emotive. The same happens throughout and recordings you know well are brought alive again by the disappearing nature of the AirForce V.

The deck in combination with the arm is outstanding, and that rare thing; a fundamentally neutral holster for the cartridge. This was in itself a revelation, because it showed just how good some less than super-expensive cartridges can sound in a remarkable turntable/arm combination. Both the Hana ML and especially the EAT Jo No 5 sounded excellent in the clutches of Bob Graham’s Elite force. It’s beguiling without being aggressive, insightful without being intrusive, and dynamic without being over-excitable. In other words, the perfect host for cartridge and record.

There is no such thing as the One Deck at this or any price. Turntables introduce a degree of observational and subjective nuance that is only matched by the loudspeaker in a system. Different turntables will work best in different systems, but in the case of the Air Force V, it is versatile enough to work its way into several very good systems and sound good. Unless you have rigged the sound of the system to make it work in a very narrow set of conditions – making it ideal for one kind of turntable and few others – the TechDAS AirForce concept and the AirForce V, will always come close to or top of the list. There are very few turntables that could lay claim to the same universality, and all those that do are generally more expensive than the V and receive near universal praise.

In other words, in the very tightly wrapped and contended world of good turntables, the TechDAS AirForce V shines through. If it weren’t for its bigger brothers, this would be the front runner in the best and especially best sounding air-bearing turntable that has ever been made. It’s that good! +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Belt-driven turntable with air-bearing and vacuum hold-down

Drive system: Belt drive with surface polished polyurethane flat belt

Platter weight: 6.7kg

Chassis: Precision aluminium castings,

Platter: Two-piece aluminium (A5056),

Motor: AC synchronous motor built into the chassis

Speed: 33.3rpm / 45rpm

Wow & Flutter: below 0.03% (W.R.M.S)

Supplied accessories: Tonearm base (x1), platter cover, set-up tools

Turntable dimensions (WxDxH): 31.2 × 16.8 × 36.8cm

Weight: 18kg

Pump dimensions (WxHxD): 35 × 16 × 27

Weight: 9kg

Price: £12,500

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