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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...

**J**ozefína 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 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, 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

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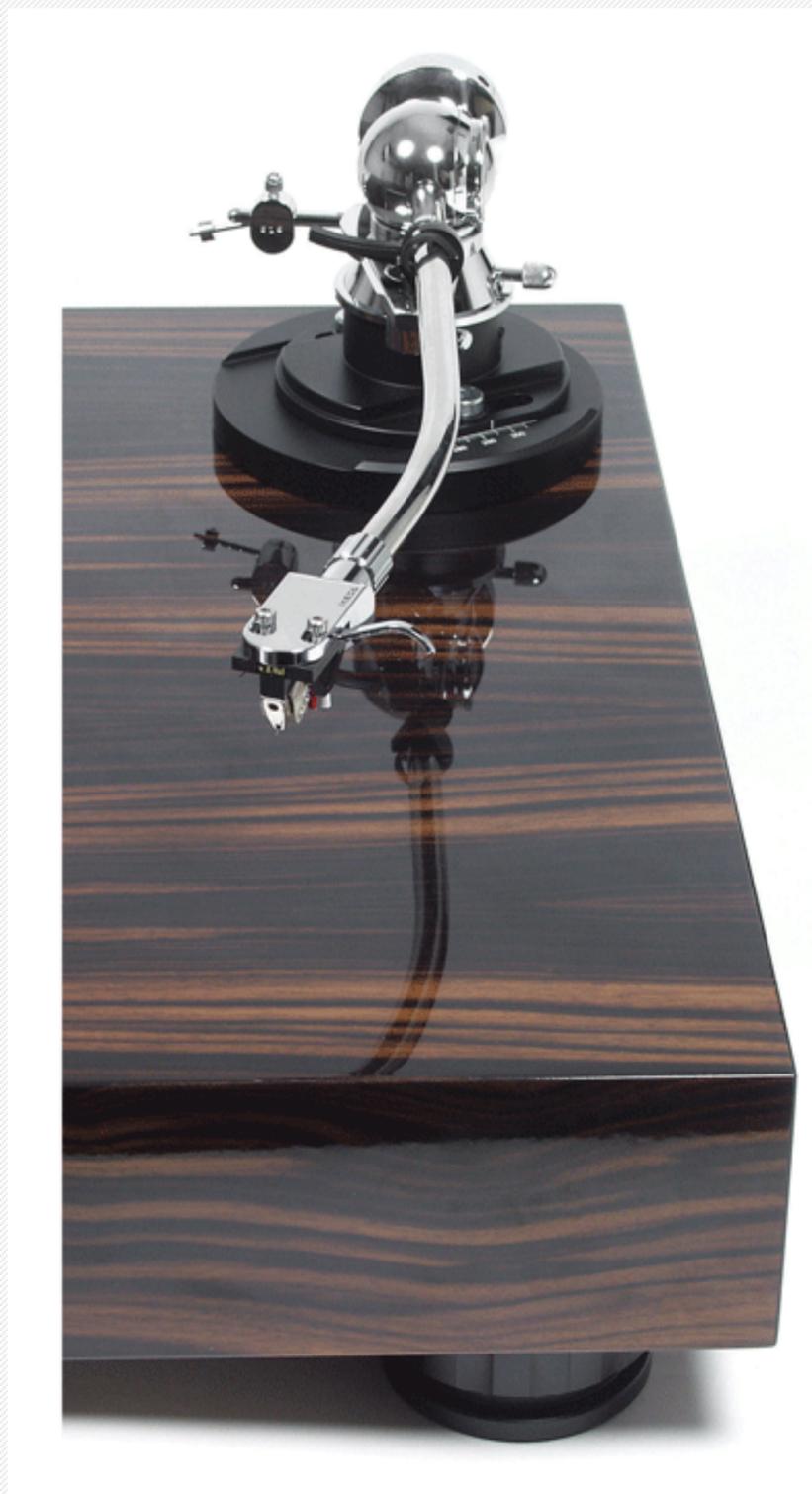
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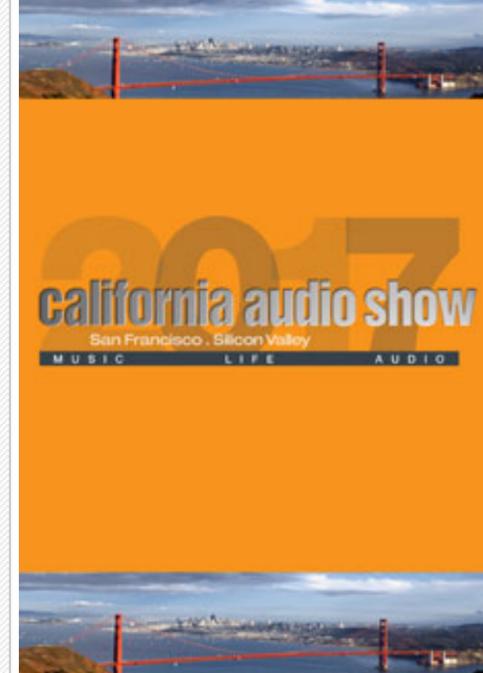


that period. Whilst the outward appearance may ring bells, so to speak, the inside engineering is quite different. The plinth is a metal filled, MDF box of backbreaking weight, with beautiful gloss lacquered wood veneer. Debates rage hard on online forums about the merits of this, but suffice to say 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...

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 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 below] . 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!

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