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EAT

Forte-S

The 'small' Forte boasts a 15kg, 36cm diameter platter. Who said irony was dead?

When we first tried to lift the fully assembled EAT-Forte-S, we half-wondered if it was screwed to the floor! It weighs around 35kg and 15kg of this is the massive 36cm-diameter platter with vinyl mat. We had to laugh. But why? It's that letter 'S' – it stands for 'Small'. Small? There's nothing diminutive about the Forte-S: it's a veritable monster. But Small it is because – you've guessed it – there's an even bigger version available. As so often in the world of the high-end, words like 'small' and 'affordable' are purely relative terms!

As already mentioned, the platter weighs in at 15kg, and measures 36cm diameter. It's 6.5cm deep and features alloy construction with Sorbothane damping. The centre bearing needed to support such a heavy load is bound to be pretty massive and so it is – an inverted shaft, 2cm diameter topped by a ceramic ball.

To prevent premature bearing wear and to reduce rumble, the platter assembly floats on a magnetic cushion provided by two neodymium magnets. The massive plinth is damped with metal and sand, and supported by four adjustable magnetic feet. Two AC synchronous motors are provided, each driving the platter via a silicon belt.

One of the fascinating things about turntable design is the huge divergence of opinion when it comes to how things should be done. Obviously, EAT favours the 'mass and damping' approach. With such a massive platter, you'd expect the drive motors to be big and powerful. But, perhaps surprisingly, they're not. Rather than have a high-torque motor that really 'drives' the platter, EAT has opted for a low-power approach. Indeed, power is actually reduced once the platter has reached speed.

The idea is for the huge mass of the platter to maintain momentum, with the motors just keeping it turning at the right speed. The aim is to achieve a smoother drive, reducing the 'cogging' effect one tends to get with AC synchronous motors. And it seems to work. The Forte-S sounds unusually relaxed and effortless. Clarity and detail are excellent, creating an overall impression of rock-like solidity and smoothness.

But there was something more – and that word effortless best sums it up. The music just seems to 'happen' with this turntable. There's no sense of struggle or strain; the reproduction has a smooth flowing quality that is both natural and beguiling. We've experienced this before, notably with the French Platine Verdier.

Our Forte-S came fitted with the superb Ikeda 12-inch tonearm fitted with Koetsu's amazing Urushi Sky Blue phono cartridge. These obviously played their part in creating the smooth, effortless sound delivered by the Forte-S. Nevertheless, we'd say the turntable was the dominant component here.

The Forte-S can be had in a choice of two high-gloss finishes: piano black or – as seen here – a natural ebony wood finish called Makassar. The latter also has a slight price premium: the piano black version costs £4,545 compared with £5,000 for Makassar. The Ikeda arm costs £6,500, while the Sky Blue Urushi Koetsu comes in at £4,185.

The Ikeda tonearm is hand-made and represents a luxury option for those wanting the best. It's a 12-inch design in a

chrome finish, with silky smooth bearings and a detachable headshell. However, it's anticipated that most Forte-S decks will ship with the cheaper Pro-Ject Evo 12-inch arm.

SOUND QUALITY

The cartridge was the amazing Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue – enough said. This combination, partnered with an Audio Research PH8 phono stage and LS-27 line preamp (p84), delivers a beautifully smooth yet tactile sound that's both focussed and highly detailed.

By this, we don't mean the music sounds lazy and soft-centred; it's actually very crisp and detailed, yet there's an ease of delivery that so relaxed it's almost uncanny. Voices and instruments exude a very 'real' tangible quality that reminds one of hearing a good live performance.

Pitch stability is steady as a rock, and – assuming a well-centred LP pressing – we'd say even the most critical listeners will be fully satisfied by the Forte-S. Playing LPs of piano or guitar music, there is no hint of pitch wobble or wow. It was like listening to a good SACD; maybe even better...

Surface noise is very low and rumble completely nonexistent. The four adjustable suspension feet pit opposing magnetic

“Delivers real high-end turntable performance at an affordable price”

forces against each-other to suspend the heavy plinth from the surface that supports it. Being weighty and heavily damped, the plinth transmits very little vibration to the stylus, even when physically tapped.

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

The EAT Forte-S delivers real high-end turntable performance, doing so at a surprisingly affordable price. It's built like a battleship and should last a lifetime. While adding the fabulous Ikeda arm and a Koetsu raises the total price, it could of course be partnered with less expensive alternatives.

Jimmy Hughes

