

Stronghold

David Price finds that Euro Audio Team's brand new Forte S turntable retains much of the magic of its bigger, older brother...



For most of its early life, the microgroove LP was a workaday format designed to do a simple, practical job; carry music to the masses. Thousands of millions of discs were pressed, in its heyday from the late nineteen fifties to the early nineteen seventies, and vinyl did a sterling job in bringing some of the modern history's greatest popular, jazz and classical music to an adoring audience. The transformative power it had was amazing; no longer was it necessary to attend live concerts to hear great musical works, because they could be faithfully recorded and distributed to millions of music lovers around the world. Also, some amazing new strands of popular music were created in the studio, especially for the Long Playing record format - from The Beatles' 'Sgt. Pepper' to 'Pet Sounds' from The

Beach Boys. There's no denying the impact this small slice of black plastic had...

Nowadays of course, vinyl is a niche format, selling just a *fraction* of what it used to do. But these days it's all about quality; countless specialist labels have re-released seminal LPs of yesterday at premium prices with enormous attention given (in some cases, at least) to the mastering, pressing and packaging. One aspect of vinyl that was previously taken for granted and/or under exploited - the immense fidelity the format is capable of - has now come to the fore. The result is that more and more high end turntables are being made, and sold...

One embodiment of all this surely has to be EAT's Forte. Launched in May 2009 for the princely sum of £12,400, I can think of few turntables more expensive and

opulent. Kind of like the way the Rolls Royce Camargue personified the excesses of nineteen seventies luxury cars, so the Forte captured the late naughties high end vinyl zeitgeist. It was unfathomably (and unendearingly) big, equipment rack-breakingly heavily and as lavish in appearance as it was in sound. Even though many would aspire to it, few could own it, on the grounds of size let alone price. Wouldn't it be nice, thought yours truly, if EAT could make a smaller version using the same key elements...?

The Forte S is precisely this, the 'S' apparently standing for 'small', no less. If it was me, I'd have suffixed it, 'ABS' ('a bit smaller') because it's not exactly a P-mount cartridge toting midi-sized parallel tracker. It's still 55cm wide, which is Michell Orbe territory - itself not a compact disc spinner. The other 'small' thing about



it is the platter; on the 'big' Forté this approaches the diameter of some tractor wheels; the vital statistic for the 'S' is 36cm (down from 40cm), while it's 5kg lighter and a piffling 15kg. The aforementioned two aspects of the deck are key; this is not some Avid-style confection of clever suspension systems and sub-systems, rather the philosophy follows the old Japanese high end direct approach of simply making a very heavy, unresonant structure. This means, errm, a big plinth and a big platter. The latter is damped with sorbothane on the inside, whilst the vinyl record mat is said to make the

record support system 'completely quiet'.

A record clamp is supplied, which feels nice to use but isn't as heavy as that of the original deck, if I remember rightly.

The original Forté's clever magnetic inverted bearing system is retained. The main bearing employs a ceramic ball mating to a Teflon cup for super-low friction, and this gets a helping hand by magnetism; the bottom half of the platter sports neodymium magnets to lower the pressure on the bearing. Unlike its

bigger brother, the Forté S doesn't have an offboard motor housing, its two AC motors are built in to the main plinth, positioned symmetrically on the left side beside the platter, so two diamond cut string belts of the same length are used. These are low torque designs for lower noise, and are aspirated by an electronic speed control circuit inside the plinth. This has two speeds, switchable in this case by three push-buttons (33, 45 and off); unlike the big Forté there's no snazzy digital speed display. A small outboard power supply is included, which can sit a good distance away from the main deck thanks to a generously long captive power lead. Pressing the '33' button causes a slow, gentle augmentation in platter revolutions; it takes about ten seconds, during which time the blue speed LED flashes until it's up to

speed.

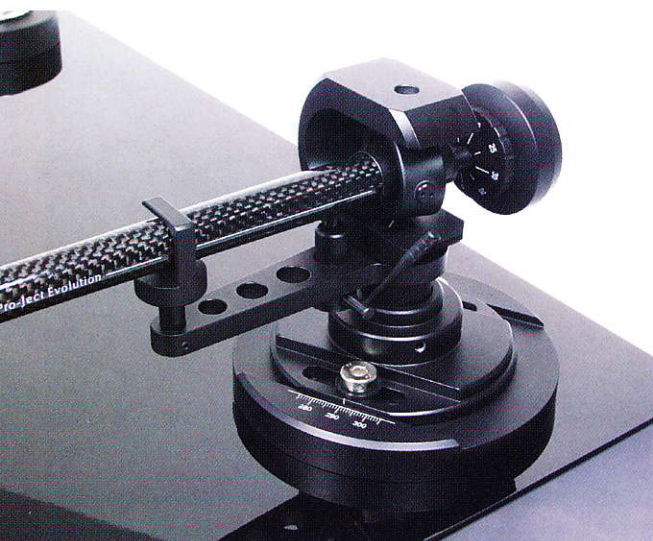
The turntable plinth comes finished in an excellent piano black lacquer, and sports huge magnetic feet, "which act as the subchassis", according to EAT.

The price for this is £3,850 supplied with no arm, or £4,650 complete with a Project Evo 12" tonearm (which is the one you see here). There's also a premium version of the Forte S in Makassar finish, retailing at £4,390 without tonearm and £5,200 with Project Evo 12" tonearm. I'd say the deck certainly feels worth the money, with an elegant finish, although it's important to remember that it's up against some pretty exotic opposition even at this price; the Michell Orbe feels just as well presented for far less money, whilst the Brinkmann Bardo (admittedly a bit pricier) is on an altogether higher level. Compared to the latter, for example, the Forte S's control buttons do feel a little cheap. Still, ultimately the sound is the primary consideration, and this certainly proved impressive...

SOUND QUALITY

If you've ever heard the original EAT Forte, you might be surprised to find that its little brother shows a closer family resemblance than you'd expect, given their dramatically different prices. It simply sounds like a lower fat, reduced sugar Forte, rather than something completely different. That is no bad thing, as I loved the original EAT turntable's relaxed assuredness, smoothness and ease - coupled to massive visceral power. That's pretty much what you get with the Forte S too, just in slightly smaller measures.

The standard arm mounting arrangement is SME style...



The Rolling Stones' 'Emotional Rescue' showed this turntable in its element. Issuing forth from the loudspeakers came a big, powerful, confident bass line that underpinned the track beautifully, giving it a wonderful swagger that was totally in keeping with the proceedings. At the opposite end of the spectrum

on 'Every Little Thing She Does is Magic' was another ear opener; the Forte-S simply scythed through the dense mix to capture Andy Summers' string picking with great aplomb; fast, accurate and beautifully carried. Likewise Sting's backing vocals, often buried right of the back of the soundstage with so many other

"the Forte S is fast and lucid, but focuses on stringing everything together rather than excelling in one particular respect. A brilliantly listenable bit of kit..."

came a deliciously crisp and smooth treble, the humble Ortofon Cadenza Bronze sounding like a million dollars. Charlie Watts' percussion was a singular delight, the deck revelling in the taut, bouncy snare sound whilst highlighting an almost eerie silence between the notes. It's fair to say that the S version of the Forte has a good degree of its bigger brother's power, poise and stability, offering an easy musicality that just lets the music spool off the disc with no sense of stress, and yet a large degree of urgency. Also impressive were Mick Jagger's falsetto vocals; the EAT showed its fabulous command of timbre, giving an 'in the room' immediacy to the proceedings. It's rare that you hear such a natural, open and fluid midband, even from a high end turntable.

Its clean, smooth, open midband came in very handy at unpicking the dense layering of The Police's 'Spirits in The Material World'. Suddenly it all seemed so simple, the EAT letting each strand of the mix play along with another, in complete harmony but very much unsullied by what was going on 'next door', so to speak. Again, the turntable showed

its trademark big, fulsome bass which stamped its authority on the system; although it's not quite as fast at starting and stopping as a high end direct drive such as Sony's TT-S8000, it's very tuneful and highly articulate, and certainly not just a big, imprecise thump coming through the bass drivers! The guitar work

turntables, it was so clear that his vocal booth might as well have been right in front of my nose.

Again, despite these vast tracts of detail being dug up from the bowels of the song, the EAT strung everything together in such an enjoyable and naturally musical way. Some high end decks simply lose the big picture in their desire to carry every little forensic fact about what's going on at the back of the mix, whereas this turntable sounded calm, relaxed and effortless.

Yellow Magic Orchestra's 'Technopolis' is a vast, towering slice of early electronica, epitomising (the then young) Ryuichi Sakamoto's embryonic love of expansive soundscapes - no wonder he went on to compose film soundtracks. The EAT lapped this up, again showing its exceptionally capacious soundstage; it's as if someone had pressed a 'stereo wide' button. The classic analogue synthesisers shimmered with harmonics, above a massive Moog bassline that was about as rich and fruity as electronic instruments can ever get. Behind this, layers of keyboards noodled along in the background, the Forte S picking them out like a sharpshooter and locking them into the song's four-on-the-floor beat. Yukihiro Takahashi's electronic drum work pounded out of it all, the EAT showing how beautifully syncopated the track can sound. I've heard some direct drives snapping this material into even sharper focus, but perhaps without the same natural musicality.

This Forte S distinguished itself on dynamic crescendoes too, reminding me of its bigger brother in the way it holds on tight even when things get very loud and compacted; there's real grip here that you just don't hear on many of the other high end turntables. It's so utterly calm and unflustered; a sort of vinyl



...which the Pro-ject Evo 12" tonearm uses; this was a happy combination.

equivalent of a turbocharged eighties Bentley.

Cannonball Adderley's 'Autumn Leaves', on an immaculate Classic Records pressing was pure pleasure. 'Somethin' Else', the 1958 Bluenote album from which the track is from, is regarded as something of a classic as 'cool jazz' goes, and the EAT shows why. These early Bluenote recordings were brilliantly simple and yet musically captivating, with a wonderfully open soundstage inside which instrumentals hang in an ethereal way. The Forte captured it with immense skill; simply dissolving itself out of the picture, letting the flavour flood out like tea in a pot. It's not an easy trick this, and is born from superlative pitch stability (as an amazingly stable and solid rendition of Hank Jones's piano work showed) and a lack of coloration. Even with the modest (in the great scheme of things) Pro-ject Evo 12" tonearm, there was simply no sense of listening to a turntable; 30ips reel to reel tape would have been more like it.

Excellent though this deck was with rock and electronic music, it seemed to love jazz all the more. At times like this, you really struggle to understand how anyone could enjoy jazz via a digital source, however good, such was the utter ease, smoothness and sweet, seductive sophistication of the music. Moreover, the sound was so good that I was struggling to think why I'd want a more expensive arm/cartridge combination; how possibly could the likes of an SME 312S and/or Lyra Titan i improve on this, I pondered, brilliant as they are?

The excellent speed stability of the Forte S, allied to that secure twin motor drive system and vast platter, make it a great tool for replaying classical music too. I found my aged Philips

pressing of Debussy's 'Preludes' to be a joy; the piano work on 'The Submerged Cathedral' was a sight for sore ears, sparkling as it was with harmonics, and showcasing the rich harmonics of the instrument. As with all other types of music, this deck is a superb classical music tool.

Where does the Forte S fall down? Well, it's impossible to argue it has any flaws as such - even at this price - but you could certainly say it lacks the forensic, back-of-the-concert hall detailing of designs such as the Avid Volvere Sequel. It has oodles of detail, but it's delivered in a more relaxed way than the Avid, which scoops it all up and seemingly fires it at you like a guided missile. The obverse of this is that it's more

lackadaisical, relaxed, laid back and generally amenable in nature; the Forte S is less of an edge of the seat performer and more of a late night listening treat, record sleeve in one hand, glass of scotch in the other. The bass, it's fair to say, doesn't have the LED-like on-off abilities of the (admittedly pricier) Brinkmann Bardo, either. The Forte S's drive system is excellent - arguably one of its key strengths - but in my book you can't beat direct drive for sheer speed. Once again, the Forte S makes a virtue of this; it's certainly fast and lucid, but focuses on stringing everything together very well rather than excelling in one particular respect. The result is a brilliantly listenable bit of kit.

CONCLUSION

Quite a surprise this. I'd expected the EAT Forte S to be a pale shadow of its original self, so to speak, but it wasn't. It has much of its £12,000 big brother's charm - a powerful, weighty, authoritative sound allied to an easy calm and confidence - but without that hefty price tag. Importantly for me, it also lacks the former's girth; the Forte S is big alright, but no so big that you'd need to rearrange your listening room. It's simple to set up, fuss-free in operation and feels very nice to use. I'm very impressed; sometimes less is more!

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Project Evolution is a 12in (30cm) arm, longer than the usual 9in. Long arms have more mass and a commensurately lower main arm tube resonance, around 220Hz. The Evolution, with its lightweight carbon fibre build is quite different. It is both stiff and light our accelerometer vibration measurement shows, with a pronounced main tube mode at a high 500Hz. However, the structure isn't so well damped, and the peak is both sharp and high, making the arm lively in an unusual manner further up the band. There was also a lot of high frequency ringing above 3kHz, with a strong 6kHz cluster in the headshell. The Evolution may not be the most neutral sounding of arms, possibly having a just-discernible colour, or even a 'zingy' quality, but it is likely to sound smooth and relaxed due to its 12in geometry, and also have clean, tight bass and a wide stereo image at low frequencies.

The Forte S turntable span with remarkable speed accuracy and stability. There was effectively no speed error (-0.1%) and basic unweighted wow and flutter was just 0.091% our analysis shows. The absence of flutter and higher rate wow produced a very low 0.037% IEC weighted figure. The Forte S has superb

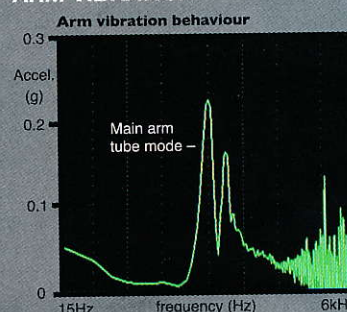
speed stability and should time very well with music.

This is an interesting combination. The arm is good - interesting if not perfect, but the turntable is superb. Overall sound quality is likely to be excellent. NK

WOW & FLUTTER



ARM VIBRATION



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- 12in arm option

AGAINST

- faces stiff competition