

E.A.T. E-Flat turntable



One of the big problems in 21st Century audio is a lack of long-term memory. A good product may have a life-cycle stretching a decade or more, but just a few short months after it's launched, it's all-but forgotten. In fact, there are modern classics that deserve continued coverage long after that first flush of reviews have subsided.

One such modern classic is the EAT E-Flat turntable, so named because of that extremely clever flat tonearm. This is a 10-inch woven Kevlar unipivot design, which is effectively extremely flat (naturally), very light, and exceptionally rigid, with a Sorbothane-damped adjustable counterweight, and an outrigger type anti-skate mechanism. Most modern cartridges will be accommodated with ease on this arm, but in the unlikely event you want to use the E-Flat with something truly old, weird, and (potentially) wonderful, there are even lighter or heavier arms available for 'outlier' compliances. Of course, having no arm-tube to speak of means there's nowhere to house the arm leads from cartridge to pivot, so they are held in place with industrial-strength sticky tape.

The E-Flat is not simply a great arm on an OK deck; the rest of the package is up to the task, too. The twin-motor design is elegantly positioned in the platter recess, and this recess helps to make a high-mass platter take on a low-profile look. In fact, the style is reminiscent of one of the better direct drive designs from the 1980s. The platter itself is deliberately oversized at 13", critically damped and has a 'mat' made out of recycled vinyl albums. EAT adds a big shiny record clamp. The polished black plinth is wooden (no ringing, but not so obviously wooden as to make it look like an old fruit box) and the judicious use of Sorbothane in the deck and the adjustable feet help to keep it and the outside world that bit more separated. A two-speed, soft-button controller sits beneath the cartridge itself.



The turntable is incredibly easy to set up, even if it does arrive as basically a kit of parts. Jozefina Lichtenegger of European Audio Team is married to Heinz Lichtenegger of Pro-Ject Audio Systems and the two share a common goal of demystifying the set-up process. The instruction manual – although a little ‘international’ in translation at times – is thorough. However, it glosses over one of the joys of a unipivot; that you can mount the cartridge on the arm before you mount the arm to the arm-base. Yes, you need to align the cartridge, but it speeds the process along rapidly. You could also own several arms for different cartridges.

Be warned however, the ‘kit of parts’ is fairly formidable in terms of it arriving in a big wooden box. A fairly big change that happened after those early reviews was the big wooden box is now filled with plastic inserts instead of sheets of styrofoam, so the original criticism of the turntable coming with its own snowstorm is now completely unfounded. But the ‘big wooden box’ part remains.



I tried the turntable with two outstanding cartridges; the Benz Micro Gullwing SLR and the new Miyajima Labs Kansui (a fine stereo moving coil from a brand better known for its monophonic cartridges), both plugged into RCM Audio's THERIAA dual mono phono stage, and also used with the Allnic AUT-2000 Step-Up Transformer in place (using THERIAA in MM mode). This was fed into a Townshend Audio Allegri into a pair of Resolution Audio m100s and thence to a pair of Wilson Audio Duette IIs. Alternately, all the electronics were replaced with a single Devialet 250! Cabling throughout was single-ended, using either Nordost Valhalla 2 or AudioQuest new Elements-series cables. The table in this case was from HiFi Racks, but the E-Flat didn't prove too table fussy. An SME Model 20 with an SME V was on hand as a benchmark.

I confess I had to overcome some bias in my own head with the concept of a flat tonearm. Conceptually, it's never going to be as rigid as a more conventional arm tube, and that must have an effect. I keep thinking of diving boards, for some reason. However, in use the arm proved that my fears were ill-founded, as the more important factor here is the reduction in arm resonance in audible regions of the frequency response. Life is a series of trade-offs, however, and I think many will like the way the E-Flat manages them. Of course, it's possible to compare it to arms that manage to reduce the effect of an arm tube, but when you do the sums, you end up spending more on one of those arms than you will on the whole E-Flat turntable and tonearm package.



The concept burns into your head, though. It's a good idea, when you start thinking it through, and just as importantly, it's one of those tonearm designs that doesn't fall into the 'me too' design school. I'd like to say it will become the first of many, but three years on since its launch, only the E-Flat arm and the Scheu Cantus keep the flat flag flying. I hope this is due to trying to perfect the next models, rather than poor sales. But the audio world sometimes fears change, and that I had to overcome bias, might mean bias is a stumbling block in the wider audio community. I hope this isn't the case because if you skip this because of its shape, you are missing a tonearm trick!

And what that trick does is make the midrange and treble just sound free and open. In fact, it was more like someone making the sound more 'legible', which is not a part of the standard audio lexicon, but works here. On an album like Tom Waits' *Asylum Years* [*Asylum*], and tracks like 'Burma Shave', Waits was slightly less growly and more jazz singer than in later works, but there is still a lot of lyricism that can be lost to an inarticulate tonearm, and this shows just how much lyricism can be swamped. His voice is not simply sonorous and rasping; between these two aspects there's an intensity and beauty that draws you closer to the music. Replace singer with instrument, or even orchestra and the same increased 'legibility' applies to the midband and upper regions. In some respects this is what people like in unipivot designs; it's just that the E-Flat arm gives you more of what people like in a unipivot. The fact it seems to deliver transient information with aplomb helps too; digging out a well worn copy of Rush's *2112* [*Anthem*] highlighted this fact thanks to Neil Peart's fast-paced tour round the tom-toms, which was delivered with pace and space to spare.

The limits of a unipivot are typically the frequency extremes, especially the bass. But it's here where the whole package helps. The big, meaty platter and chassis help deliver big, meaty bass. Not swamping the sound with bass, just giving it the sort of depth and energy that makes bass-heads nod along knowingly. Rush's Geddy Lee is a paradox here; cavernous low-end from his bass guitar coupled to that squeaky high-pitched wail, and the two are in dynamic balance here. Even the swirling, sweeping chilled out vibe of The Orb's 'Little Fluffy Clouds' [*The Orb's Adventures Beyond the Ultraworld*, *Big Life*] was presented in a bouncy, yet powerfully underpinned manner, which can be extremely difficult to get right.

I can't help but like what the E-Flat does to LPs. There is something inherently unforced and natural about the sound from the arm, and it sounds positively 'right'. Couple that to a precise, pitch-stable turntable that is built to last, and prodigious amounts of deep, potent bass, and it's not hard to see why we should hold to that 'modern classic' statement. EAT made a good thing here, and one that presages well for the future, because that flat arm is a perfect candidate for 3D printing. Three years on from its launch, this is still one of the best turntables at the price, and still comes highly recommended.

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