

EAT C-Sharp & Ortofon Quintet Black cartridge, reviewed by Andre Jennings, 2015/09 on

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A High-Performance Turntable for the Rest of Us



While I truly enjoy using my somewhat costly, 100-plus-pound, isolated-suspension, vacuum-hold-down, large-footprint turntable, it is only sensible to acknowledge the fact that it is not what every audiophile is looking for. There are plenty of music lovers who feel that financial outlays of this magnitude are best allocated elsewhere and who, quite possibly, don't have the space (or desire) to house a vinyl playback system of such size and weight in their homes.

The C-Sharp from the European Audio Team, the fourth turntable in the EAT lineup, may be a sensible alternative to mega-tables for many listeners. EAT is an offshoot of Pro-Ject, which is perhaps the world's largest turntable manufacturer. The three other turntables in the EAT line are the Forte, Forte S, and the E-Flat. After the success of these three previous efforts, EAT set out to make a model that had a smaller, retro-modern footprint. With a profile that EAT calls "superflat," the \$4000 C-Sharp (\$4500 when ordered with the Ortofon Quintet Black cartridge) may actually fit perfectly in many users' homes, and potentially supplies standard-setting performance for its price.

Constructed from what EAT calls “highest-density” MDF, carbon fiber, and thermoplastic-elastomer, inverted-cone-shaped, internal sandwich supports, the low-profile double chassis is what gives the C-Sharp its “superflat” silhouette. I measured a height of approximately 27.5mm (1 1/8”) for the chassis combination. At the bottom are three elastomer-damped, adjustable feet to provide clearance and to allow leveling of the ’table. Finished in a high-gloss piano-black lacquer, the lower chassis is 25.4mm high. The motor is attached to it to keep any vibrations from coupling to the platter bearing and tonearm. On the rear of the lower chassis are two connectors (one for the external speed controller and another for the tonearm cable). Seven additional recessed cutouts located on the inside of the lower chassis hold the elastomer dampers used to isolate the lower section from the upper section of the assembly.



The constrained-layer MDF and high-gloss, carbon-fiber-finished upper section of the chassis supports the platter bearing that accommodates the sub-platter. A polished anti-static belt connects the sub-platter to the motor. The sub-platter mates with the main platter to form the drive system and top surface for playing records. The main platter, made from solid aluminum, is extended in diameter for added rotational inertia and features a bonded mat (constructed from recycled vinyl to achieve optimal coupling with the record.) The upper section of the plinth also holds the tonearm assembly.

The tonearm is exclusive to, and specifically built for, the C-Sharp. This completely new design incorporates what EAT calls a traditional Cardan bearing for horizontal movement that’s been optimized for high stability, ease of use, and very low friction. Made from hardened steel with zircon tips, the Cardan bearing is lubricated with silicon-based grease that dampens tonearm resonances by more than 50 percent from baseline measurements taken without its incorporation in the assembly. Vertical movement is achieved via a pair of traditional, but very high precision, ABEC7 ball-race bearings positioned 180 degrees from each other. An additional uni-pivot damping pin serves as a final part of this hybrid bearing assembly. The uni-pivot damping pin plunges into a silicon-based gel that is said to further dampen vibrations and to provide additional support for the horizontal bearing. EAT says the headshell is made from a light, but inflexible aluminum that makes for a stable foundation for cartridge mounting. A rigid, carbon-fiber armtube connects the headshell to the tonearm bearing assembly. All key features for cartridge alignment and adjustability are available on the tonearm (VTA/SRA, VTF, azimuth, anti-skate, and a slotted headshell for overhang and offset angle).



The C-Sharp arrived in a well-designed box with a three-tiered internal section. Just above the top section were the user manual and all the set-up tools needed (except for a tracking-force gauge). The top section itself contained the counterweight, record clamp, two of the three feet, and the sub-platter. The middle section housed the assembled chassis with tonearm, including the pre-installed Ortofon Quintet Black cartridge (if ordered with the 'table). The lower section contained the platter. The motor controller was located in a side pouch that traversed all tiers.

The user manual details setup in a step-by-step fashion to allow easy installation and assembly. I had no issues with it other than Section f of Step 4, which references the use of a 1.5mm hex key to remove a locking screw. A small slotted screwdriver is actually required to remove the uni-pivot locking screw, which secures the uni-pivot cover, in order to access the azimuth adjustment. One other item in the manual worth mentioning is that EAT recommends that when using the record clamp, it should not be screwed down. The screw-down function is only to be used as a means of installing and removing the main platter during assembly and disassembly.

If the 'table is ordered with the Ortofon Quintet Black, EAT will install and set up the cartridge for a Lofgren A/Baerwald alignment. As a value-added benefit, VANA Ltd. (the U.S. distributor) offers the option of changing to Lofgren B or UNI-DIN alignment at the time of ordering at no additional charge. Using the Acoustical Systems SMARTractor cartridge-alignment system, I cycled through all three options and settled on the Lofgren A/Baerwald alignment that I find most appropriate for my taste, which spans multiple genres of music, as well as early to modern pressings.



The legendary jazz trumpeter, Clark Terry, passed away at the age of 94 the day before the C-sharp was assembled and ready to play records. I became aware of the loss of this great talent the day I set the 'table up. As a sort of tribute, I wanted the first piece of music I played to be something from Clark Terry, so I reached into my vinyl library, without looking for anything in particular, and pulled out one of his later works titled Portraits on the Chesky label. Although Terry was sixty-eight when this recording was made (on the day after his birthday, in 1989, at RCA's Studio A on 44th Street in Manhattan) his playing is delightfully youthful yet masterfully controlled. From the first track, "Pennies from Heaven" to the last, "I Don't Wanna Be Kissed," I listened nonstop—with the exception of getting up to turn the record over, of course. There was no compelling reason to adjust anything. On "Pennies from Heaven" Victor Gaskin's bass solo was crisp and tight, and on time. Bass lines were easy to follow and the rhythmic flow of all tracks was a joy to hear. I derived added pleasure from how well the C-Sharp/Quintet Black was able to keep up with drummer Lewis Nash's delicate brushwork. My favorite title on this LP is "Jive at Five"; Terry's scatting and playing is filled with so much dynamic expression that it becomes difficult to do anything but listen. With this random pick, the C-Sharp allowed me to remember one of jazz's great trumpeters.

Next, I queued up “Got My Mojo Working” from Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown’s *Standing My Ground*, an album produced in the same year (1989). I was struck by this track’s propulsive drive and slightly rounded but stronger bass. As presented by the C-Sharp/Quintet Black, Gatemouth’s guitar had less bite and dynamic expression than I’m used to hearing, but everything still possessed musical flow. Although I only intended to listen to one track, I found myself playing the whole side of the LP.



Switching to Simply Red’s *Picture Book*, the “Holding Back the Years” track produced a similar slightly rounded sound that was big on lower frequencies; as a result, the bass and drums moved closer to sharing center stage with Mick Hucknall’s vocals. At the same time, the cymbals moved back a little bit in the presentation. Playing “Red Box” yielded similar results, with the same tendency towards lower-frequency instruments moving to the forefront and higher frequencies taking a step further back.

From the Pablo record label, I listened to Joe Pass and Ella Fitzgerald’s 1983 album *Speak Love*. On the track “Comes Love,” the C-Sharp preserved Ella’s wonderful, timeless voice and dynamic expression, while Joe Pass’ Ibanez guitar had dense body and generous amounts of pleasing tone color. (As with the some of the other albums mentioned, I couldn’t resist listening to both sides of this LP.)

The C-Sharp/Quintet Black maintained the tempo and dynamic drive captured on the Klavier Records reissue of the original EMI recording of Massenet’s *Le Cid* ballet music. Once again, this turntable/cartridge combo appeared to prioritize the lower registers of instruments, while still preserving the tracing of high-frequency percussion—although at levels reduced in amplitude vis-à-vis the low end. (I’ll explain what accounts for this below.)

Given my observations about the behavior of the C-Sharp/Quintet Black, I wanted to discover which characteristics were attributable to which component. So, I first switched out the Quintet Black and installed the van den Hul Colibri cartridge. Spot-checking some of the same records mentioned above (as well as many others) revealed the C-Sharp tonearm's ability to let this cartridge showcase most of its attributes without any losses of composure on any records played. Some of the notable characteristics of this particular Colibri are its clarity, speedy transient response, liberal but well controlled high frequencies, and slightly warm but reduced bass output. With it installed in the C-Sharp, the music gained sparkle in the top registers—a trait that the Quintet Black also had, only at a much lower output level. Overall, the Colibri was more generous in its top registers, while the Quintet Black tended to fill in the bottom ones. Like chocolate or vanilla, there was nothing inherently wrong with either of these cartridges on the C-Sharp; which you'd prefer would be a matter of personal preference.

I began to muse about the Quintet Black's sound character because it tended to remind me of the "ideal" EQ curves programmed into many digital signal processing-based (DSP) room-correction systems, which tend to have a slow but steadily declining frequency response slope from the lows to the highs. In an effort to satisfy my curiosity, I checked the frequency response of the Quintet Black, and the results (regardless of SRA setting) showed something similar to the target curves of room-correction devices. This observation helped me understand why the Quintet Black successfully traced high frequencies, albeit at reduced output levels, but had more generous low-frequency output relative to some of the other cartridges that measure more linearly. I want to point out that this isn't such a bad thing given the multitude of hot- and/or thin-sounding, non-audiophile recordings in circulation. To the contrary, reducing a little upper-octave energy and ultra-detail can yield more enjoyable listening sessions in these cases. This is especially true for those who want to re-experience some not-so-well-recorded music of the past—and the present.

Isolation is always something to consider when purchasing a turntable and finding the right location for it in your listening room. While the C-Sharp has internal damping within its sandwich chassis as well as elastomer-damped feet, care should be taken with its placement. The top chassis is a bit lively when touched or tapped—enough to hear sound through the speakers. This liveliness can result in the 'table being susceptible to airborne or robust floorborne vibrations. Acoustic feedback, especially from powerful bass-heavy transients, can potentially cause turntable systems to oscillate. For my evaluation, placing the C-Sharp on a rigid corner shelf provided sufficient isolation for all but the most demanding music played back at amplitudes far beyond normal listening levels. If you tend to play very loud, you may either need to consider some additional isolation or to find a different location for the 'table. (These comments are not exclusive to the C-Sharp and should be considered with any turntable.)

The speed stability of the C-Sharp was excellent. The main reason for the head-bopping drive and remarkable timing I experienced during my evaluation was the 'table's drive system—with which I could find no fault. Well done.

The combination of the C-Sharp and Quintet Black produced appealing sound that had rhythmic drive and made nearly everything I spun fun to listen to. While not the most detailed presentation, the combo just played the music on nearly everything I threw at it. Although it lacked the ultimate resolution and complete neutrality of pricier analog front-ends, the C-Sharp/Quintet Black had a way of convincing this listener that its "sins" of omission were more than acceptable. Indeed, I found myself spending more time listening to complete albums during the review period than what I'd originally allocated.

It's worth mentioning that a buyer can acquire an Ortofon Quintet Black at what amounts to 50 percent off retail price when it is purchased as part of the C-Sharp package. And that only sweetens the deal on a combo that's sure to please with its no-nonsense performance, and musical drive that keeps on giving.