

European Audio Team C-Major Turntable

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Take stock of your modern, electrical, possibly connected home: These days, very few devices require true, dedicated manual input, and even fewer require actual care and feeding. You may be able to control your TV with voice commands. Your thermostat detects when you're home, and seems to *want* to make you feel comfortable. Refrigerators no longer require defrosting, and feature Internet connections so that they can assist with . . . whatever odd tasks their manufacturers can dream up.

Integrated amplifiers and preamplifiers can be remotely controlled. Power amplifiers can sense the presence of a signal and turn themselves on. CD players -- which do require the manual insertion of physical discs -- are as relevant as mechanical typesetting. Files, streamed remotely from your server and, just as likely, from far away through space, are where it's at in the dazzling 21st-century home. It's as if we're living in a confusing, ever-changing science-fiction movie.

Slow down a minute. Breathe deeply, take a step back in time. Make your own candles from beeswax, churn some butter, cue up an LP. Lower the needle and listen as a stone rubs sound right off a piece of plastic. Don't you feel calmer now? More relaxed?



But before you invite a turntable into your home, be careful -- it's like adopting a pet. There's no other component like it. After you unpack your new turntable, there will be at least an hour's worth of fussing and adjusting before you can even listen to music -- and that's for a plug-and-play entry-level model. It takes a steady hand and nerves of steel to change any cartridge, let alone one without a stylus guard. One slip, and hundreds or thousands of dollars are flushed right down the drain.

But it's worth it. Along with such close familiarity with a mechanical playback device comes a deep appreciation for how such things work, and a satisfaction that will pay huge rewards. With time, your turntable will become a member of the family.

Most turntables that I receive for review don't thrust me this deep into contemplation -- more often than not, they're set up by the manufacturer or distributor. But the EAT C-Major arrived at my house tightly packed inside its box, and the process of setting it up by myself sent me deep down an analog rabbit hole.

Who they are

The C-Major includes EAT's 9" C-Note tonearm and an Ortofon Quintet Blue moving-coil cartridge (a damn decent cartridge that costs about \$500 if bought separately), for \$2495 USD. It's manufactured in Prague, in the Czech Republic, by the European Audio Team (EAT), which specializes in making turntables and jewel-like vacuum tubes (KT88, ECC88, ECC803S, 300B). They also make phono stages and cartridges.

EAT has been around since the 1990s, and began as a maker of tubes. Their first turntable was the Forte, released in 2009. The company is run by Jozefína Lichtenegger, whose name should ring a bell. Her husband, Heinz Lichtenegger, is the CEO of Pro-Ject, headquartered in Vienna but with factories in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and which may make more turntables than the rest of the high end combined. While EAT and Pro-Ject are entirely separate concerns, the next-door-neighbor thing, economies of scale, and technical expertise inherent in having a close relationship with Pro-Ject must help EAT enormously.

What it is

I've had years of experience with Pro-Ject 'tables, but it was immediately apparent that the EAT C-Major is cut from entirely different cloth. There are many ways to build turntables, and in its line EAT uses two of the more common methods: a massive platter and plinth, or a slimmer, more elegant design. But unless you knew that the two companies are linked by marriage, you'd never guess that there was any relationship between the two brands.

The C-Major is a member of the slim, elegant class, and there's much to admire in its construction. The plinth is immaculately turned-out carbon fiber laminated to MDF, a nearly ideal material for this purpose. According to EAT, the layer of carbon fiber adds another layer of stiffness.

The plinth is isolated from the main MDF chassis -- which is finished in a beautiful gloss-black lacquer -- by bumpers of thermo-plastic elastomer (TPE). When I pushed down on the main plinth, I could feel the suspension give just a little.

The C-Major's motor is mounted directly on the main chassis, so that the TPE bumpers isolate the plinth, tonearm, and platter from motor noise and vibration. My old Roksan Xerxes turntable used a similar method of damping vibrations.



Resting on three feet of well-machined aluminum, the C-Major is further isolated from exterior resonances via a layer of TPE sandwiched between two layers of aluminum.

The 9" C-Note is a stunning tonearm, with a carbon-fiber armtube, a machined-aluminum headshell, and a well-finished bearing housing. EAT describes the C-Note as a "hybrid Cardan/Unipivot design." But the C-Note's bearing didn't feel remotely like a unipivot -- there's no wobble or slop, and in use it felt like any other dual-pivot bearing.

What utterly endeared me to the C-Note arm was the rare-earth magnet embedded in its armrest. When you return the arm to the rest, at the very last instant the magnet's force attracts a piece of metal embedded in the arm, and pulls the arm the last few millimeters into the rest. The resulting very positive, locked-in feeling adds a healthy dollop of solidity and user-friendliness.

Low in profile, and all gloss black and brushed silver, the C-Major fairly screams sophistication, and while it's EAT's least expensive turntable, it's still obviously a luxury product.

How it works

No, the EAT C-Major is definitely not plug and play, but the process was fairly straightforward. Like a kid at Christmas, I removed all the parts from the box, laid them out, and began putting them together, with the considerable help of the detailed user manual. I removed the transit screws from the chassis, installed the subplatter and drive belt, and lowered the platter gently atop the subplatter. EAT includes a pair of cotton gloves so that you don't smudge up the beautifully polished platter or the glossy carbon-fiber subchassis.

The tonearm comes fully assembled. The fussy part of the assembly process was attaching the antiskating weight. The thread on which the weight is hung must be looped around the tonearm within a shallow groove recessed into the bearing housing. I found this annoyingly difficult, particularly when the knot securing the loop end came loose and I had to retie the tiny loop and knot at the end of a short, almost invisible piece of monofilament. I got it done with the help of a jeweler's loupe and a powerful flashlight.



To use the C-Major was easy as could be. The power switch is a rocker on the left, underneath the chassis. It's easy to reach, and the 'table gets up to speed without drama. The cueing arm, too, is simple to use. The big bonus, in my opinion, is the included dustcover. I'd forgotten just how pleasant a dustcover can be -- I never have to break out a Q-tip to clean out the tiny crevices around the tonearm, and I can leave a record on the platter without worrying about dust accumulating on it. How novel!

More bonuses: a *very* nicely machined record clamp, and a counterweight insert that can be used to counterbalance heavier cartridges. Most thoughtful!

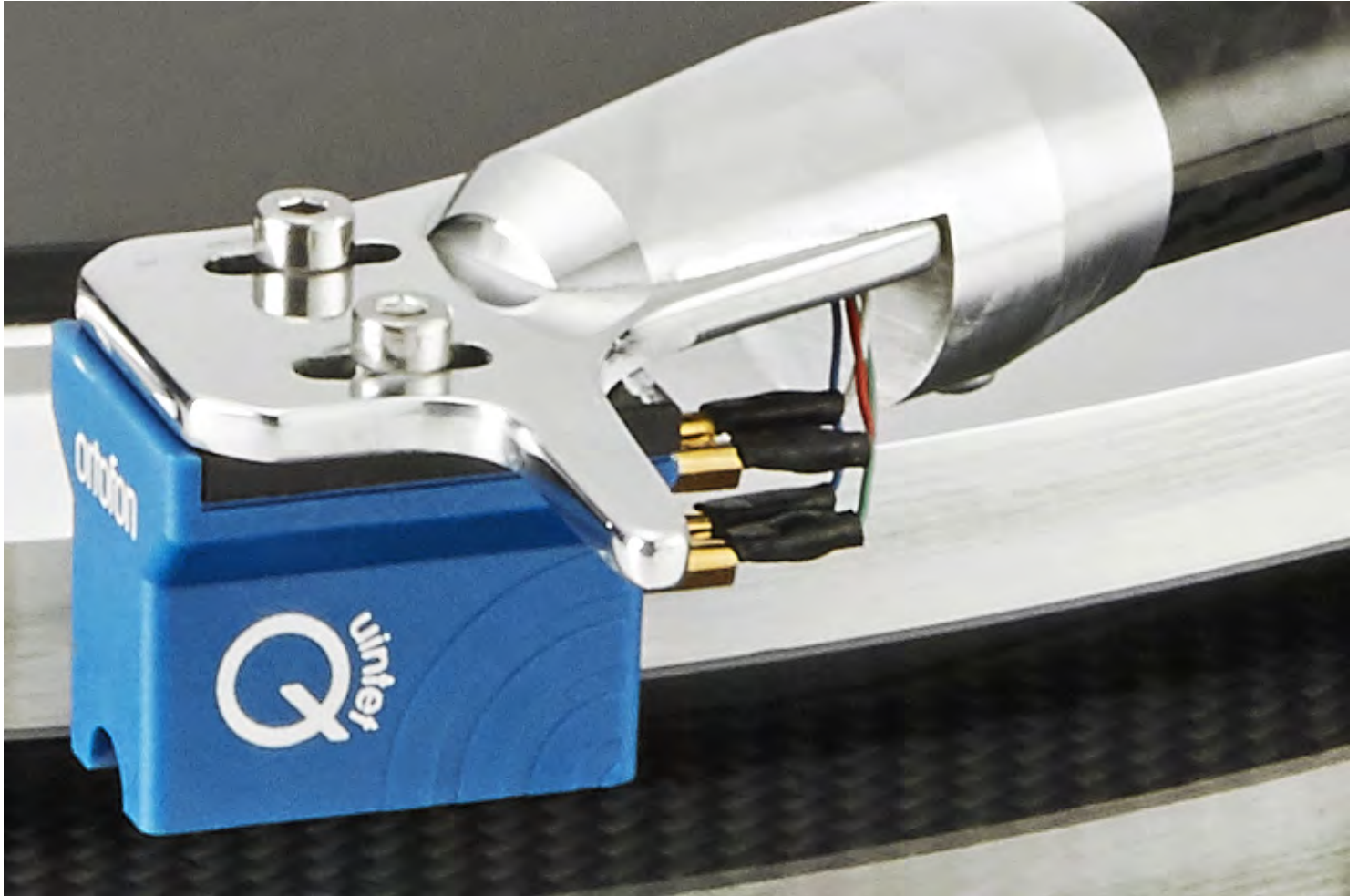
How it sounds

For the first part of the listening period, I used the supplied Ortofon Quintet Blue cartridge. Call me an elitist or a one-percenter, but at first I looked down my nose at the Blue, considering it beneath consideration, given that even the phono cable in my system is worth multiples of the Ortofon's price.

However, my first listen to this combo left me feeling somewhat sheepish. The C-Major and Quintet Blue combo sounded punchy and extremely dynamic, and with jazz and rock its sound positively swaggered.

I recently purchased the 200gm reissues of Rush's *Moving Pictures* and *Permanent Waves*. These albums were two of my musical guides through high school, and I couldn't resist their lure when I heard they'd been given the audiophile treatment. First up on the EAT was side 2 of *Moving Pictures* (Anthem B0022380-01). "The Camera Eye" begins with extremely subdued synth tones, but gradually the drums roll in, and the first kick-drum note grabbed my attention. Deep and rich, there was a powerful juiciness to the lowest fundamental frequencies. Likewise, the first snap of Neil Peart's crisp snare exploded from the speakers with a dynamic intensity I hadn't expected.

The Quintet Blue remained in the C-Note arm for a couple of weeks as I slowly got a handle on the sound of this partnership, and of the C-Major itself. A good MC cartridge (which Ortofon knows how to build) is an overachiever of the highest order, and the resultant sound is part of what makes entry-level vinyl so much fun. Compared to digital, a decent turntable with a budget cartridge presents so much innate personality that it just bubbles over with audio enthusiasm, sounding rich and warm down low, just slightly smooth on top. This sort of wonderful sound just makes me want to hug my record player.



But the C-Major is far from an entry-level 'table. The whole shebang just oozed sophistication. I couldn't help feeling it deserved a better cartridge than the admittedly over-achieving Quintet Blue.

So I stripped down to my underwear, went into a kung-fu trance, and began the harrowing process of swapping out the Ortofon Quintet Blue for my own Roksan Shiraz moving-coil cartridge (\$5000). The Shiraz is a naked cartridge, and there's nothing more nerve-racking than working with loose screws around powerful magnets and delicate wires. I felt like Bones McCoy transplanting Mr. Spock's brain.

I got through it without casualties and, hands still trembling, lowered the stylus onto a reissue of Miles Davis's *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* (Columbia/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab MFSL1-440). This has been one of my favorite albums since I first heard it, and the second the music started, I knew I'd been right: The C-Major could punch well above the Quintet Blue's class.

Guitarist John McLaughlin is an absolute monster on this album, on which his ragged-edged chords are focal points, and it didn't take more than the first two minutes of "Right Off" to get a good handle on what the C-Major brought to the table. It wasn't just the Quintet Blue that provided that dynamic snap I've just described. With my Shiraz leading the way, that crack and drive were still just as present, but also along for the ride was a huge bucket load of refinement. Drummer Billy Cobham *drives* "Right Off," and his beat is deceptive in its simplicity, and in how it doesn't change for this entire 27-minute track. The snare rolls into the bass drum, the two instruments fighting each other for the listener's attention. With the Shiraz, the C-Major gave me direct, distinct insight into each tone, clearly delineating the two drums in space. About two minutes in, Davis's trumpet enters for the first time. Up to that point, "Right Off" has been simply an extremely cool rock jam. But Davis pins it full-throttle, and changes the whole feel of the track. In *Jack Johnson*, all the action is in the mids and the highs. But when Davis comes in, guns a-blazin', he takes over, and all the other instruments recede in terror.

I've listened to *Jack Johnson* repeatedly since I bought it, so I know, deep in my DNA, how the album sounds through my Pro-Ject RPM 10.1. Through the C-Major I heard a tendency toward drive and rhythm, and a slightly deeper, bouncier, fuller low end. This was an extremely pleasing tendency. Up through the upper midrange and into the treble, the C-Major presented a noticeably more incisive picture. The trumpet's brass bell, the overtones in the highest notes, gained a bit more prominence in comparison to the Pro-Ject's nuts-on neutrality. The C-Major's imaging was superb, with the sounds and shapes and positions of instruments portrayed with crisp delineation, featuring great lateral placement and wonderful depth.

In the past I've written about the RPM 10.1's neutrality, and its value to me as a reviewing tool. Some might call the sound of the hulking RPM 10.1 a touch boring, but not me. I love how the big galoot gets out of the way -- it has endeared itself to me over the long haul.



I'm always extremely leery when a component leans even slightly toward a brighter sound, given that a sound that favors the upper mids and treble can be fatiguing in the long run. So I put the C-Major through a torture test of a whole bunch of treble-heavy records. First up was another reissue -- I've been looking for an original pressing of Talk Talk's *Laughing Stock*, but they seem to command stupid prices. So I sprang for a reissue of unknown pedigree (Polydor B0024137-01). It seems good enough -- better than the CD -- but it's just a bit brighter in tonal balance than I feel is optimal. So on to the platter it went, and up went the volume. "Ascension Day" is long stretches of peaceful murmuring interspersed with moments of frenetic thrashing. It's Mark Hollis's guitar that adds the biting edge -- coarse, distorted, and aggressive, it somehow fits into the massive gravity that radiates from this music. While the C-Major brought the guitar's upper mids forward, it was tempered by the rhythmic bounce and slight bass fullness I mentioned earlier. Despite my initial trepidation, with the C-Major I could listen to *Laughing Stock* as loud and as long as I wished without fatigue or discomfort.

It took quite a while for me to wholly grok the C-Major's sound. It did so many things right, but in ways much different from most turntables of my experience. Perhaps its most endearing characteristic, and the one that defined how the rest of the musical spectrum was portrayed, was how it handled big, nasty bass instruments -- and there's no instrument bigger or nastier than the massive bass saxophone slung by Colin Stetson. I've heard him play this thing live, and it's terrifying, in a fight-or-flight way. "Awake on Foreign Shores," from Stetson's *New History Warfare Vol.2: Judges* (Constellation 75), is a call to arms, a call to prayer, a ram's horn, a shofar. The entire track is short bursts of that insane bass sax, riddled with overtones and redolent with emotion. Via the C-Major I got more of the fundamentals right off the bottom, but at the same time the overtones, which reach up into the midrange, gained some body.

The C-Major's lower bass through midbass wasn't quite as tight and quick as that of my Pro-Ject, but that's not necessarily a negative. In the C-Major's case, the slight bass fullness neatly complemented its crisp top end. These characteristics fused together into an exceptionally engaging, endearing sound.

Listening to the Pro-Ject is like working for an insurance company. Listening to the C-Major was akin to taking an exciting holiday, the aural equivalent of climbing to Machu Picchu. And who doesn't want to climb up to Machu Picchu! Well, people who work at insurance companies, I guess. For some listeners, potentially those with all-solid-state systems (as opposed to my butter-smooth, all-tube front end), the C-Major's sound may cross the line to make an already forward-sounding system a bit too much so. But it's all about system matching. With a dead-neutral system, or one that leans toward the mellow side, I'm fairly sure the C-Major would fit in just fine.

A quick look at EAT's product line reveals a gradual downsizing over time. The company began with the massive Forte turntable, which weighed a back-busting 143 pounds; each successive model has shed mass and become more compact. Massive turntables with external motors have limited appeal. The big boys require planning right from the start -- a sturdy stand that's wider than the usual component footprint. They generally don't have dustcovers, and they dominate a room.

There's much to be said for a truly compact turntable -- one that echoes the simplicity, elegance, and user-friendliness of the Denons and Duals of yore. Combine such elegance with high-tech materials and exemplary finishing -- as EAT has in the C-Major -- and you've got a winner.

How I feel about it

You and I, of course, are audiophiles. Appearance, elegance -- bah! They're not worth the powder it takes to blow them to hell with unless the product sounds really, *really* good.

As I write this, I've just plonked down on the C-Major's platter Laurie Anderson's *Mister Heartbreak* (Warner Bros. 25077-1). "Sun's coming up like a big bald head," she intones. Adrian Belew is slashing away on the guitar, and the sun is streaming through my window, reflecting off the platter's polished edge. The C-Major's slamming out the music and I'm thoroughly enjoying it. For the moment I've dispensed with my reviewing duties, and I'm ready to put aside my computer and just *listen*. I'm in no rush to reinsert my Pro-Ject in the system, and that says much about how good the C-Major really is.

This new turntable from EAT is a wonderful component and a lovely little turntable -- and I use *little* in its most complimentary sense. Highly recommended.

. . . Jason Thorpe

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Associated Equipment

- **Analog source** -- Pro-Ject RPM 10.1 turntable, Roksan Shiraz cartridge
- **Digital source** -- Logitech Squeezebox Touch
- **Phono stage** -- AQVOX Phono 2 CI
- **Preamplifier** -- Sonic Frontiers SFL-2
- **Power amplifiers** -- Audio Research VT100, Focus Audio Liszt Sonata monoblocks
- **Speakers** -- Definitive Technology Mythos ST-L, Focus Audio FP60 BE
- **Speaker cables** -- Nordost Frey
- **Interconnects** -- Nordost Frey
- **Power cords** -- Nordost Vishnu
- **Power conditioner** -- Quantum QBase QB8 Mk.II

European Audio Team C-Major Turntable

Price: \$2495 USD; includes C-Note tonearm and Ortofon Quintet Blue moving-coil cartridge.

Warranty: Two years parts and labor.

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