

1095

Great sound around a G...
By Jeff Dorgay

TEAC TN-4D-SE Turntable

Superb in every way.

\$749

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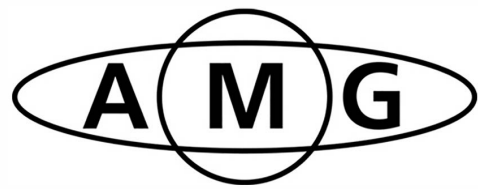
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Listening to some early Led Zeppelin records, via a pair of vintage ESS AMT-1b speakers and Sansui 717 integrated amplifier, with a TEAC 3300 reel to reel tape deck in the background, you might think it was 1977 again, and we were in my college flat. Yet something is from the here and now - the new TEAC TN-4D-SE direct drive turntable. You wouldn't know from first glance, with its S-shaped tonearm and walnut plinth. It's a beauty to be sure, and it also comes in black.

While the TD-4D-SE has a semi-retro look, it's definitely 21st century all the way. For those of you not familiar, this is the same company that has been making broadcast/studio quality reel to reel decks (Tascam) and some of the world's finest high end audio components under the Estoteric moiker. So there is a tremendous amount of manufacturing expertise behind this modestly priced turntable, featuring a Sumiko Oyster MM cartridge and built-in phono stage. You can bypass it if neccessary.

That same level of manufacturing excellence delivers a much higher performance table than you would expect for well under the 1095- dollar price point that this column demands.

DIRECT DRIVE TURNTABLE



FORTE TURBO

ABSOLUTE PRECISION AND UNMATCHED PERFORMANCE



Hand made in Germany by master machinist Julian Lorenzi, the Forte Turbo is AMG's reference-level flagship turntable. The Forte is machined from a solid aluminum billet and incorporates AMG's celebrated oil-damped bearing, decoupled spindle, 24v DC brushless motor, upgraded linear power supply, and reflex clamp.



FORTE POWER SUPPLY

12JT TURBO TONEARM

OPTIONAL ENGRAVED FINISH



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Unboxing and Setup

As the cartridge comes pre-mounted, and there's no belt to adjust, you merely unpack the table, mount the headshell and set tracking (and anti-skate) force. You'll be playing records in five minutes. Don't lose the external power supply while unpacking! The rest is a breeze.

Should you be plugging your TN-4D-SE into an amplifier or pair of powered speakers without a phono input, the onboard phono stage will come in handy. On the rear face of the TN-4D-SE, rests a small switch marked "Phono EQ – in/out." That's all you need to set – in if you do not have existing phono capability, out if you do. Then attach the supplied phono cable and ground wire.

Again, while unpacking the TN-4D-SE, the level of execution on this table is stunning for the price. There are a few similarly priced products that look like woodshop projects by comparison. The TN-4D-SE does not feel like an entry level turntable. Bonus style points for those of you of a certain age. You'll recognize the font used on the packaging is the same as TEAC reel to reel decks from back in the day. It's a nice feeling.

Performance

Discussing the virtues of direct drive versus belt drive is nearly as old as the digital versus analog question. Another feather in the cap of TEAC. Like the Panasonic Technics SL-1200s, companies with this level of virtual manufacturing can build a great direct drive motor in the context of a turntable at this price. Witness the boutique tables from Grand Prix, Brinkmann and even VPI. They all feature direct drive and have five figure price tags.



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My experience with direct drive has always been a solidity to the lower register that similarly priced belt drives lack. Comparing the TN-4D-SE to a Rega P3, a vintage Technics SL-1200, and the current SL-1200GR (about \$1,800) is telling. The TEAC performs well beyond what I'd expect from an \$800 turntable in terms of bass extension, overall detail retrieval and isolation from background noise and interference.

Judged solely on its sonic performance with the built in MM phono stage and \$79 Sumiko cartridge, the TN-4D-SE gets a solid C+, but that's only part of the story. Removing that cartridge and mounting it to the other three reveals the same sonic limitations. While we don't measure, putting a turntable on top of a REL Carbon Special subwoofer and playing bass heavy music gives a relative idea of how much isolation a turntable system can offer.

The low bass in Kruder & Dorfmeister's "Bug Powder Dust" makes it easy to see how far the volume control could be turned up before acoustic feedback takes over, and the TN-4D-SE was the clear winner here. Swapping a slightly warped disc in place and observing woofer cone motion again reveals the TEAC to dampen more than the immediate rivals on hand.

The belt drive Rega table is slightly more spacious, listening to vocal tracks, and electronica with a lot of tinkly, atmospheric bits floating about, but the TEAC still offers more top to bottom sound and more dynamics – thanks in part to the direct drive system.

Changing the game

This is only part of the story, when swapping the supplied Sumiko cartridge for the increased performance of the Sumiko Moonstone MM cartridge (\$299) further reveals the capabilities of the TN-4D-SE's tonearm. Supplied by SAEC with a knife edge pivot bearing, this table can really pull minute detail from your favorite records. Swapping the Moonstone in not only raises overall performance dramatically (and you can go all the way up to the top range Oyster cartridge by merely changing stylus assemblies at this point) it raises the sonic quality to an A+. This is exciting performance for a \$750 turntable.



Tracking through records with densely packed, layered vocals, and highly dynamic passages is the strong suit here, and this is all part of what makes vinyl come alive. As there is no adjustment for VTA with the TN-4D-SE, I stuck with the Moonstone, as this has an identical stylus tip to cartridge body top measurement, not requiring a VTA adjustment. This is where the considerably more expensive Technics takes the edge, because it allows for a wider range of cartridges to be used. This is not a completely fair comparison, but the flagship TEAC TN-5BB at \$1,799 does offer this option. Hopefully, we will be getting one of these in for a further report.

Finally, for those craving a bit more performance, the RCA outputs on the rear also allow using a better quality cable going from turntable to phono input should you be going that route. All of these things are not mentioned to suggest the TN-4D-SE is not fantastic as it is, but to underline how much more performance lurks inside this turntable.

Should you be an analog lover wanting more performance at some point, the TN-4D-SE will allow you to take your setup further, and this makes it an even better value. Even substituting the on-board phono amplifier for the recently reviewed Parasound ZPhono (\$495) makes for a formidable analog setup.

Everything you need

The TEAC TN-4D-SE delivers a fantastic way to take a step up from a strictly entry level turntable, it offers top shelf build quality, great sound, and a way to extract a bit more performance should you so desire. That's as good as it gets. We are happy to give the TN-4D-SE one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2023. Highly recommended.