

# Silver MKII Tonearm

## Stereo Times Review

**Mark Baker Revamps His Tonearm Line to Mark II Status November 2006**



The original Silver 250 tonearm was a seminal product for the English firm Origin Live. Known until then primarily for their over-achieving modifications of Rega tonearms, DC motor replacement kits for AC-motored turntables, and a line of DIY turntable kits, the Silver 250 was the first arm that could be considered a true Origin Live model. Though it used the Rega RB250 mounting platform, cuing device and anti-skate, the Silver 250 used an Origin Live arm tube, pivot bearing, rear stub, and headshell, all based on Origin Live's paradigm-shifting design philosophy. It seemed to inspire head designer Mark Baker to a torrid period of intense creativity, as it quickly led to the ascending line of Origin Live tonearms: the Encounter, Illustrious, Conqueror, and their current flagship arm the Enterprise. This last metaphor is literal; as Origin Live is located in the English city of Southampton, the home of the British Navy, the arms are named for naval vessels.

I have been fortunate to have reviewed all the Origin Live arms (a review of the new Enterprise is in the works) and own a half-dozen of them, including an original Silver 250, which, mounted on the now discontinued Standard Kit turntable, served as my primary budget test mule for analogue products for 5 years. Reviewing each new arm as it was released was a fascinating exercise: each arm seemed an ultimate peak, that is, until the next higher up arm was released, leading to ever-ascending performance. The OL Conqueror, mounted on an OL Aurora Gold turntable, now serves as my ultimate analogue reference: I find it the most musically communicative LP spinner I've ever encountered.

Mark Baker's run of inspired creativity continues unabated; in addition to the design of a complete range of turntables, and upgrades in the variety of DC-motor change-over kits, the Origin Live line of tonearms continues to evolve. The Silver 250, with the addition of a new armtube, became the Silver a few years ago, and the lessons learned in the development of the Conqueror and especially the Enterprise arm have led to a re-vamping of the Origin Live tonearm line which now enters Mark II incarnation. Mark Baker is enthusiastic about the enhanced performance of the new MK II models, claiming that each MK II model outperforms the next model up in the old line. In effect, the new Silver MKII competes not with the old Silver 250 or the Silver, but with the old \$1495 Encounter, whose MKII incarnation then competes with the old \$2395 Illustrious. The Conqueror and Enterprise are, of course, already MKII items.

The MK II version of the Silver features a new armtube, a new counterweight, new tonearm wiring and a host of other improvements that Baker is loath to reveal for justifiable reasons. The Silver MKII retains the Rega arm geometry and mounting hole requirements, which have become a default standard for most of the world's turntables. Tracking force adjustment is by a non-calibrated sliding counterweight held by a set-screw, and the arm is statically balanced, requiring absolute leveling of the turntable for correct performance. VTA adjustment is made by either Origin Live's threaded collar or by their sliding pillar/setscrew VTA adjusters. The Silver MKII retails for \$935, just \$236 more than a fully-

modified OL Rega RB250, the price of which includes a new OEM Rega arm. Mark Baker asserts that unless a purchaser already owns an RB250 to modify, the Silver MKII is a more cost-effective purchase than the \$699 Full Monty 250. Considering that the fully-modified RB250 is the biggest bargain in analogue playback, this is heady news. It's always heartening to see new products offering increased performance in price ranges that an average music lover is likely to afford.

I auditioned the Silver MKII on 3 turntables: the old OL Standard Kit, the Origin Live Aurora Gold, and a Linn Sondek LP12, which incorporates Origin Live's DC-motor conversion. I ran through a bevy of phono cartridges and phono stages with the arm. Rather than apply a tortuous burn-in regimen on the Silver MKII's tonearm wires, I just played LPs with it casually. It took about 2 weeks for the wiring to settle down and come into song.

It was immediately obvious that the wonderful and trademark Origin Live way with timing was intact with the Silver MKII. The most obvious musical manifestations of timing – rhythm, tempo, dynamic impact and drive, the entry of individual musicians at exactly the right time and that innate sense of them playing together in service of a common musical goal – are fundamental to all music. The Silver MKII is faithful to these fundamentals, leading to deep involvement with the music while listening. This is particularly true with bass and drum-driven music played by actual musicians. Without unerring depiction of rhythm, the differences between Charlie Watts, John Bonham and Keith Moon, or between Art Blakey, Joe Morello, and Elvin Jones are obscured. Similarly, listening to the bass playing of Jack Bruce, Paul McCartney, Kenny Gradney, Family Man Barrett, Ron Carter, Charles Mingus, or Jaco Pastorius depends on rhythm, pitch and dynamics being exactly right to truly appreciate their artistry. The greatest evil perpetrated on music is the utilization of the drum machine and synthesized bass, robbing music of that living pulse that manifests human temporal realities, subsuming them to the lifeless and robotic. The Silver MKII reveals the difference immediately.

Origin Live's products have always been exceptional musical communicators, faithfully extracting the expressiveness of what the instruments are playing as well as the musical techniques used in that expression. The Silver MKII allows the music to both dance and sing. Moreover, its exceptional musical communicativeness extends to all types of music, capturing both the physical exuberance of multiple drum music from polyrhythmic West Africa and the subtleties of the string quartet. Delicate and complex orchestral scoring is extremely well decoded, leading to clear comprehension of their artistic intent. This is an arm that allows one to explore the full range of the Earth's music to one's heart's content.

Comparing the new Silver MKII to the old Silver 250 revealed that the MKII is a far more neutral, refined, controlled and accurate arm. Mark Baker's contention that the MKII Silver's competition is really the old Encounter arm was borne out: the Silver MKII matches that arm's seamless organic cohesion while upping resolution and nuance. Playing a batch of reasonably priced cartridges was a revelation. The rap against cheap cartridges (particularly inexpensive moving coil designs) is that they are either of inherent limited resolution or possess little control of the upper frequencies, leading to harshness and hash. Since cheap cartridges are often played in cheap arms, this rap becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Playing the \$180 Denon DL 160, the Goldring Eroica LX, the old Sumiko Blue Point, the Audio Technica AT OC9ML, and the now ancient Talisman Boron moving coil cartridges on the Silver MKII defied their reputation for top-end problems. The Silver MKII is able to extract coherent high frequency information from these cartridges without ringing, hash, harshness, or false and artificial brightness. Never had these cartridges sounded as good as they did with the Silver MKII. Whereas I had considered them "Close but no cigar!" items before, I was forced to change my appraisal of their merits. While the new Silver was able to bring out their hidden merits, it was also able to reveal their ultimate performance limits. These results were duplicated with more ambitious moving coil designs like the Garrott Brothers-modified Ortofon SPU and the Dynavector Karat cartridges. The excellent results attained with MC cartridges of a variety of designs point to the improved abilities of the MKII to control the energy being pumped into the arm tube.

This was further borne out by using The Cartridge Man's Isolator. The \$150 Isolator serves as a filter and cartridge decoupler by placing an energy-absorbent 'sandwich' between the cartridge and the tonearm's headshell, thus saving the arm from having to deal with much of the extraneous mechanical energy generated by the stylus tracing the groove. While its effect on the Silver 250 was a wholesale night and day improvement, the effect on the Silver MKII was much more subtle, centering around the fullness and 'roundness' of each note.

Playing non-moving coil designs – the Audio Technica AT95E, Grado Signature TLZ V, the sadly discontinued Shure V-15 V xMR, and the Cartridge Man's MusicMaker III and Classic – was equally satisfying in the Silver MKII. Although the Silver only captures say 90% of what the astoundingly great MusicMaker Classic achieves in the OL Conqueror arm, it still is

the cheapest arm I'd recommend with that wonderful cartridge. Since I've previously heard many of the cartridges I used in other manufacturers' arms costing twice and three times the Silver's \$935 price, and have found them wanting in comparison, Mark Baker's new arm is a stunning achievement. Indeed the only real competition proves to be Origin Live's more expensive arms.

The Silver MKII's freedom from false resonance and zippy artificial brightness makes mating with phono stages easy: one need not fear that higher resolution and wider bandwidth will exacerbate or reveal problems. I got excellent results with my batch of phono sections, finding that the highest resolution designs produced the best results, as they should. The budget champion Acoustic Signature Tango (which includes low-output moving-coil pre-amplification) and the Graham Slee ERA V Gold and their new \$1260 Reflex (review coming) proved particularly superb matches, offering high definition, strong rhythmic and dynamic bass drive, and superb depiction of musical meaning. The new Silver is forgiving of LP flaws and foibles. If you're more interested in what's on the LP musically than in decoding the pressing code information from the inner groove hieroglyphics, you'll love this new arm. The way LP ticks and pops are replicated offers insight into the neutrality of an arm, as it does the entire LP playback system. The Silver added no high frequency emphasis to them, nor did it add any extraneous amplitude, indicating that the arm was not being thrown into resonance by groove imperfections.

I got excellent results with the three turntables I used. The OL arms have always been excellent matches with Linns, which tend to be very fussy about arm matching. While the difference between the Aurora Gold and my old DIY Origin Live Standard Kit was obvious, and while I wouldn't consider an Aurora Gold/Silver MKII to be a price-incongruent mismatch, it was with that table, running The Cartridge Man MusicMaker Classic into the ultra-revealing Sound Lab Dynastats that the limits of the Silver's resolution were made obvious. The Silver MKII couldn't match the Origin Live Conqueror arm (also in MKII incarnation, the 'MKI' being extremely short-lived) in terms of ultimate resolution, transparency, speed, timbral accuracy, sound stage and instrumental focus, and the finest nuances of musical expressiveness. The \$1750 MusicMaker Classic's exceptional ability to recreate the ambiance of the recording hall and to portray the sound of the instruments emerging from and decaying into that ambiance was incompletely rendered. Hence my judgment that the Silver could reveal only 90% of the Classic's potential. It was also obvious that the Conqueror was superior in tracking the transient envelope of notes across the entire bandwidth, the Silver sounding slower in initial response by comparison. Since the Conqueror is almost four times as expensive as the Silver MKII, and since Mark Baker's line of tonearms rationally offer a marked and obvious improvement at each step up in the line, the fact that the Silver MKII doesn't match the Conqueror is no surprise. Still, in the context of that reference system, maximizing performance without added expense would indicate that running the next up in the MKII Origin Live line - the \$1495 Encounter MKII tonearm - on the less expensive Aurora table would have yielded closer results to the reference.

By any standard, the new MKII Silver is an excellent tonearm, offering a level of performance the other manufacturers' arms cannot match at twice and three times the price. The traditional Origin Live way with rhythm, drive, dynamics, and full replication of both the obvious and subtle aspects of musical communication and expression are in full evidence. The Silver's way with moving coil cartridges is also extremely attractive, important given the popularity of this type of cartridge. Its slightly forgiving manner with LP flaws is also a boon. It is such an obvious recommendation that it seems pointless to complicate the issue.

A difficulty I find is placing it unambiguously in the overall hierarchy and context of LP playback. Some of this context concerns its \$935 price and whether the potential buyer considers this a substantial investment or a budget component, in other words, whether the purchaser considers a purchase in this price category a final destination or a step on the way. For, as excellent as the Silver MKII arm is, the models higher up in the Origin Live are even better. Obviously if one's budget limit is \$1000 for an arm, the choice is obvious: Buy the Silver MKII. But say that potential user also has \$1500 earmarked for a phono cartridge. To my mind, music would be better served by allocating more of that budget towards the arm - buying the \$1495 Encounter MKII, and purchasing a \$1000 or \$500 cartridge. Still another reasonable option would be to jump to the \$2395 Illustrious MKII and to buy a true budget cartridge like the \$180 Denon DL160. Add a turntable and/or phono stage into the budgeting equation and similar considerations enter. Obviously, all of these considerations are part of overall system building and are not unique to the Silver MKII. Whether one's system can reveal the limits of the Silver MKII and also the jumps in performance as one ascends the Origin Live tonearm hierarchy is the central question. So some care in system matching is crucial in maximizing performance for dollar. Fortunately,

Mark Baker has always been truthful and candid about the relative performance of his products, so some pre-purchase inquiry should resolve most system optimization questions.

With the new Silver and the Conqueror tonearm as indicators of the jump in performance of Origin Live's MK II incarnation, Mark Baker position in the avant-garde of current tonearm and turntable design increases even further. Indeed, he is so far ahead of the pack that he looks about to lap them. Mark Baker is still The Man - a true master of tonearm and turntable design and engineering - and his products are first choice for those looking for ultra musical LP performance. The Silver MK II offers increased neutrality and refinement to the already superb musical capabilities of the old Silver 250 and MK I Silver arms without any increase in cost. This is a benchmark arm.

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