

conquering hero?

Latest and greatest in the rapidly expanding Origin Live tonearm range is the flagship Conqueror model. It soon wins David Price's respect...



I can still remember hearing my first Origin Live tonearm, a modified

Rega RB300 complete with superior end stub and better internal wiring. Having used a cooking RB300 for many years on a range of turntables – going right back to an original Rega Planar 3 in 1983, up to my much loved Linn LPI2 with Audio Technica AT-OC9 some ten years later – I was little short of gobsmacked by the changes these subtle tweaks made. The Rega RB300 was always a superb tonearm, but suddenly it seemed to be working as nature had always intended.

Somewhat bowled over by the difference the OL mods made, I was very eager to talk to the designer, Mark Baker. I was instantly struck by his incredible eye (and ear) for detail, and the forensic grip on the subject he displayed. Interestingly, Mark wasn't frightened of coming straight out and challenging the accepted wisdom about the popular arm. The RB250, he said, was a superior sounding device, because of its better armtube mounting, and it worked to its best when not tightened to the armboard with maximum force. It doesn't sound so shocking now perhaps, but this was heresy to the champions of 'maximum rigidity' who'd ruled the (flat) earth for the

past twenty years...

It was little surprise then that Mark went on to produce a whole range of arms, culminating in the Illustrious of 2003. This has almost nothing mechanically in common with the humble RB300, and took his arms to a whole new level. Interestingly, it sounded quite unlike anything I'd previously used. SME Series IVs and Vs remained brilliant in the bass, but the Illustrious was an altogether more subtle, musical and beguiling tool. And yet it was nothing like the previous SME alternatives – the Naim ARO et al – which were also beguiling, and yet also obviously less capable all rounders...

The Illustrious effectively re-established a middle position in the 'ultimate arm' market, one that the likes of Zeta and Syrinx had hitherto held. The SME V, Linn Ekos and Naim ARO were all extremely charismatic performers – brilliant, nee stunning, in their ways – yet often downright patchy in other places where they were less able. The OL, by contrast, was a consummate all rounder with a strong, grippy sound, yet it had wonderful neutrality across the midband, superb soundstaging and (importantly, for me at least) real tonal colour. By this, I don't mean it was 'coloured' in the sense that, arguably, a Hadcock is, but rather than it didn't reduce the colour of a musical performance in the way akin to turning down the colour balance of widescreen TV. The shocking thing is that many, from the SME to the Ekos, do precisely this – and its users simply never notice until they hear a true 'Technicolor' design like the OL.

The Illustrious was, I'd assumed, Mark Baker's ultimate arm, but it seems not, as the Conqueror is the new pretender to this crown. And a striking device it is. Retailing for £2,500, it's a good bit pricier too, but

the fit and finish is – as a rule – even better than the Illustrious, which itself has a lovely 'camera' quality about it. I still think that, in this respect, nothing compares to an SME V, and that this arm is also still the most visually striking piece of industrial design of the last twenty years – if ever (although Dynavector DV505 owners would obviously disagree). Yet the Conqueror comes oh-so-close – it doesn't (quite) cost a million dollars, but it sure feels it.

Starting at the bearing housing, it feels similar to the Illustrious, but adds widely spaced, bespoke Origin Live-designed ceramic bearings located in a new high inertia yoke incorporating a newly developed decoupling design. Bias compensation remains the thread and weight system – although it's a tad old hat, there's no sound degrading springs to worry about, unlike the SME Series V. The armtube is the next most

“whatever you play, it just dissolves away...”

obvious change – it's a new stainless steel finished ultra-low resonance slotted design, tapering in several times, which looks (at least) rather like a telescopic radio aerial. The company says it is, "subjected to specialised treatment for complete freedom from brashness and harshness". Wiring is an unspecified 'high grade' type, inside and out, with the addition of Silver Bullet plugs. The new headshell is rigid alloy with torsion webbing, while at the other end is OL's trademark 'structural' counterweight upgrade. Needless to say, Mark Baker claims the highest grade materials are used throughout!

SOUND QUALITY

What I loved about the Origin Live Illustrious was its easy, even nature – which is most emphatically not to say

that it was in any way soft or slow. This is the crux of the matter as far as I'm concerned, because the Illustrious was a seriously fast device with superb transients, and yet still it managed to sound utterly relaxed and smooth. Contrast this to the SME Series V, which is also as startling as a firecracker in its ability to go from 'off' to 'on' and 'off' again – more so, in truth – yet is somehow mechanical and emotionally aloof with it. What I was hoping from the Conqueror was just an ounce more speed and grip, without in any way going towards 'SME Fivesville'...

Well, this is pretty much what this new OL arm does. It builds on the resounding achievements of the Illustrious and adds small but significantly to its all-round ability. It's emphatically not like listening to a 'new' or 'better' arm, rather – when you go back to the oldster, it sounds precisely that, old and no longer quite on the pace. Yet there's one respect in which I think the Conqueror is not quite as convincing – but more of that later. First, let's hear how and why this is such an uplifting performer!

I started with a popular gauge for any tonearm, Randy Crawford's 'One Day I'll Fly Away', an excellent classic late seventies all analogue recording. The Illustrious handles this with aplomb, with a wonderfully wide and deep recorded acoustic and a delicious rendition of Randy's voice – which can sound ever so slightly edgy with the SME Series V tracking suitably 'vivid' cartridges like Ortofon's Kontrapunkt B. The Conqueror brought it to another level. There's no dramatic change, rather the whole recording seems to sound bigger, more natural and less processed. There's a slight widening of that already capacious soundstage, and an obvious deepening too – and the concomitant sense of the speakers being less obviously present. There's a smidgeon more bass control, yet it's not 'technical', but musical, in quality. There's more treble air and space, and a silkier, more natural upper mid.

Move to the clinical perfection of

Kraftwerk's 'Techno Pop' from the seminal 'Electric Café' LP, and this all thrown into sharper relief. The Conqueror simply seems more planted, less troubled by the physical undulations of the groove. There's more information (than the Illustrious) right across the frequency range – tiny inflections which you couldn't quite hear on the cheaper arm become significant elements of both the mix and the song itself. You can certainly point to that tauter, tighter and ever-so-slightly stronger bass and superior treble extension, but in truth where the new OL really shines is communicating the texture – the grain – of the voices and instruments. There's simply a subtle, but substantially greater sense of connectedness to the original recording. It's like you've pressed the focus button on your camera.

The SME Series IV (with Russ Andrews cable mod) is redoubtable, bringing an incredibly architectural feel to this track which makes the OL sound less precise, but in truth this is more of a stylistic point – there is no more detail from the SME – it's just that because it's so obviously less fluid that you tend to focus in on this strength instead. Move to the jazzy strains of Freeez's 'Caribbean Britain' and this is explicit – the OL is deliciously lilting in its presentation, almost unipivot-like, and romps through the song with an incredible combination of speed and power, yet fluidity and musicality too. And all this time, there's that exquisite, to-die-for tonality that brings this super clean early eighties analogue recording into sharp relief. It's bright and crisp without ever being in any way harsh or strained – yet you get to hear the real timbre of the voices, hi-hat cymbals, guitars and keyboards in all their full colour, widescreen splendour.

Downsides? Well, there's one interesting curiosity about the Conqueror's sound that surprises and disappoints – that of surface noise. The Illustrious was (is) stunningly quiet, so much so that even with quite a hissy cartridge like the Ortofon Kontrapunkt B, you're

SPECIFICATIONS:

Effective length: 240 mm
Overhang: 17.24 mm
Offset angle: 23 degrees
Mounting distance: platter centre to arm hole centre: 223 mm
Diameter of mounting hole: 24 - 25 mm
Size of base mounting nut: 32mm A/F (across flats)
Maximum armboard thickness: 27mm
Length of external cable: 1.2m
Capacitance: 0.002uF
Resistance: 0.002 ohms

just not aware of even relatively dirty, old, scratchy discs – it just seems to melt

through the snap, crackles and pop. The new arm does this too, but to a lesser extent. Of course, it's leagues better than almost anything else I've heard in this respect, but not up to its peerless (in this context) cheaper brother. There's just a slight increase in the noise from studio mixing desks and/or tape hiss which draws attention to itself more than I'd like. Clever matching will eliminate this, such as with a Koetsu Rosewood, but others (Ortofons, and particularly Audio Technicas) may aggravate it.

CONCLUSION

Stunning. Space prohibits me from detailing every improvement I spotted over the Illustrious, and every difference I heard against the SME Series IV, but suffice to say that this is one of the very best tonearms yet made by anybody, and more importantly, it's not voiced in a madcap, no-compromise way that prohibits it from pleasing only some of the people some of the time. Rather, the Conqueror is an immensely useable, versatile, real-world tool that works brilliantly no matter what programme material you use or which partnering equipment. The best praise of all is to say that it's a truly 'fit it and forget' design – whatever you play, it just dissolves away...

REFERENCE SYSTEM:

Michell Orbe turntable
SME Series IV tonearm
Koetsu Rosewood & Ortofon Kontrapunkt B cartridges
Trichord Delphini NC phono stage
April Music Stello DP200 preamplifier
Quad 909 power amplifier
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

VERDICT

Arguably the very best tonearm yet made – a startlingly capable all rounder with none of the vices or quirks of rival super-arms.

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