

A Close Encounter of the Musical Kind

by Paul Szabady

I've reviewed a variety of Origin Live's products over the years and have been consistently impressed with Mark Baker's skills as an engineer and designer. Baker's designs are informed by a musical intelligence that pays close attention to the essential aspects of music making and musical communication, resulting in deeply musical, extremely effective, and eminently affordable designs.

Origin Live has built its reputation on their superb modifications of the Rega tonearms and their equally excellent DC motor upgrade for existing AC-motored turntables. Baker possesses a fertile and restless imagination, constantly improving and expanding OL's product range, and has been evolving OL's tonearm designs away from their Rega roots. The Silver marked the first appearance of a true Origin Live arm, as one distinct from a highly modified Rega arm. The new Encounter tonearm continues that odyssey.

The Encounter retains only the cueing mechanism and arm pillar/tonearm geometry from Origin's Rega-derived products. Priced at £825 GBP, approximately \$1,330 USD at today's rate of exchange, the Encounter is not as insanely cheap as the OL RB250, yet still lies in the approachable price range for dedicated vinyl lovers. Origin's flagship arm, the Illustrious, sells for £1336 GBP, or about \$2,150 USD.



Mark Baker's designs tend toward the holistic, incorporating a wide range of inter-related factors that contribute to the product's performance, rather than single-minded obsession with a single design parameter. A superficial glance at the Encounter compared to OL's £509 GBP (roughly \$820 USD) Silver tonearm, and one might assume a mere cosmetic upgrade.

Closer perusal and audition reveal a list of differences whose function is performance-based. The plastic arm base and cueing mount of the Silver (and the Rega arms) is gone; the wide-set bearings are enclosed in an encompassing yoke; the thicker, tapered arm tube is hewn from billet; the de-coupled cartridge platform is thicker and the Rega magnetic antiskate is replaced with a thread/ bob weight/pulley device. The counterweight arm stub is the time-tested OL classic design. The Encounter exudes precision and quality in appearance, though I must admit that physical appearance is the lowest of my priorities when choosing a component. If a component truly delivers the music I care not one whit if it's been whomped with the ugly stick.

Set-up of the Encounter was straight forward, aided by OL's inclusion of their threaded VTA adjuster and the standard Rega arm mount and geometry. As usual, I used the Ringmat system of shims to fine tune VTA with individual cartridges and records. Tightening of the arm pillar lock nut just so is a critical adjustment on Origin's arms: following the instructions exactly is essential to optimize the arm's performance. I've always found thread and hanging bobweight anti-skating devices enormously aggravating to use, and rue the loss of Rega's sliding, hassle-free magnetic set-up. OL claims increased accuracy of calibration with the bobweight design, but that doesn't prevent me from disliking its pendulum-like swinging of the bobweight each time the arm is manually moved. The anti-skate worked extremely well in playback, presenting no sonic anomalies. An Allen wrench is included to lock the antiskating adjustment down.

Working through my review regimen of different cartridges, phono sections, and turntables revealed a consistency of performance and a readily perceptible signature. Break-in occurred quickly in roughly a week and a half of play. Since performance out of the box was so good, the break-in process was far less than the usual tedious chore.

The most immediate perception was of an exquisite rendering of detail. This high resolution encompassed the entire bandwidth and produced instantly recognizable timbre with both small and large music ensembles. Moreover, this accuracy of timbre was without false brightness or edge, instruments sounding more natural and organic. Common to all my applications of the Encounter arm was a sense of ease and effortlessness in playback, a perception that extracting subtle details of timbre, tonality, and soundstage localization were simply a piece of cake for this arm, not even raising its pulse.



The Encounter was in complete control. In comparison, the Encounter's less expensive brother, the Silver, sounded a bit like an over-achiever, less confident in its ability and so pushing harder to make a good impression and occasionally losing control. The Encounter did not produce any superficial sonic special effects to draw attention to itself; it simply played on unobtrusively and somewhat invisibly, allowing the quality of the music to be the encounter with the listener. The Encounter truly serves the music.

Bass response was well controlled: tight, deep, with superb punch and slam and exceptional tonality and pitch. High frequency percussion and cymbal work was articulate, fast and clean. There was a slight diminishment of contrast in tonal colors ('golden bronze' sounds were a bit silvery) in some cymbal reproduction, but since this varied according to the phono section used and was least noticeable with the tube-based EAR 834P, I hesitate to assign the effect to the tonearm itself.

Origin Live's arm designs have traditionally been exemplary with rhythm, pulse, tempo and drive and the Encounter is no exception. The arm was also exceptionally transparent to phono stages and cartridges used. I used the Origin Live Standard Kit turntable for most of my auditioning, figuring that the arm was developed on an Origin table, and was rewarded with consistent and musical results with the various ancillaries used. Use of the Encounter on my Linn Sondek LP12 (with Origin Live DC motor) was somewhat

more ambiguous with certain cartridges. Compared to results of the OL RB250 on the Linn, bass and rhythmic drive had less sass and swagger with the Encounter. In particular, the Garrott Optim



FGS cartridge, normally a nonpareil dynamic and rhythmic was only 'good' on the Linn/Encounter, though still superb on the OL/Encounter set-up.

The Encounter's grace and subtlety flowered particularly with unamplified acoustic music. Its strong ability to reproduce unambiguous timbres made complex and subtle orchestration in classical music instantly accessible to perception. Vaughan Williams' Pastoral and Sixth Symphonies as performed by Adrian Boult were extremely well served by the Encounter's ability to recreate the subtlety and nuance of the scoring, communicating the complex and often contradictory emotions that inhabit the music. Acoustic jazz was also extremely well rendered. Individual artist's stylistic signatures, as well as the timbre of their instruments were, again, immediately identifiable. Notable was the arm's ability to allow its level of detail to be heard at quiet playback levels. No need to blast the volume to get the music to come alive. Strong stereophony, verging on stereoscopy, aided orientation to a very believable sonic illusion.

Mark Baker's arms have always excelled in communicating the essence of music and the Encounter hits new and quite exalted levels of accuracy, nuance, and subtlety. Every reviewer's final task when completing a review is asking whether they absolutely have to own the item reviewed. Given the honesty of Baker's product descriptions, only the knowledge that the illustrious (OL's premier \$2500 arm), exists and begs for audition keeps me from raiding the HiFi Kitty immediately. The highest of recommendations for the Encounter tonearm: a new benchmark for musical communication, natural detail and timbral truth. All at a price that, considering the quality of its performance, can only be called a bargain.

Preis: 1600EUR

Origin Live *Encounter* Tonearm

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