



Brief Encounter

Created by popular demand, the 9.5" Origin Live Encounter 3c tonearm has now been extended. Paul Rigby reviews the new 12" version.

Just half a mile from the Origin Live offices, the legendary Spitfire fighter plane was created by designer, RJ Mitchell. Born out of his Southampton-based office, the precursors to the WW2 legend, his S.5, S.6 and S.6B race-winning planes successfully took part in the Schneider Trophy and contested the world air speed record.

That competitive streak also resides in the head of Origin Live boss, Mark Baker, "I sail in high performance, Olympic Class Tornado, 20ft Catamaran boats at Weston, off Southampton. Unfortunately, the Tornado national champion resides there too. It's a tough life so there's a continual battle to see who comes

second. We regularly enter the national and world championships. The latter features 150 boats for the Dart 18 class, which we also sail. Don't ask me where I came though! I'm not professional, just an amateur."

But you know what they say about audiophiles and our general geeky nature, we can't stop tweaking, can we? "I'm heavily into tuning," said Baker, "because I have sailed competitively for so long. For example, there's about fifty different factors to make a boat go faster; never mind the tactics on the course. Every bit of extra stiffness is very important. This tuning psyche is in my DNA. Take the carbon fibre boat masts. They vary greatly, there is a lot of technology that goes into a construction of a

good mast."

As Baker will tell you, there is carbon fibre and there is carbon fibre. To say that a mast or an Encounter 3c tonearm uses carbon fibre, means absolutely nothing.

Aluminium can outperform a badly designed carbon fibre tonearm. It's the way that carbon fibre is applied that makes the difference. "It's a bit like the differences between balsa and ebony," said Baker, "yet both are wood."

Hence, when you look at the new 12" Encounter 3c tonearm from Origin Live and you hear that it's made from carbon fibre, don't assume that it's the stuff they use to make fishing rods or golf clubs, "Researching the right carbon fibre

material has cost us a lot of time and money. Most people would gasp at spending £2,000 to do a simple tonearm test to investigate one property of carbon fibre. That's how much it costs to do a single test and we have gone on from there to do many more."

Such tests have taken place on the new Encounter 3c. Normally produced to a 9.5" specification, the company has now issued a 12" because of the large amount of requests, "...from Garrard owners, in particular," said Baker. "That turntable is big enough to take them. We were also interested to see if a 12" version was truly better. There is a difference of opinion."

The Encounter is in its fourth generation now. Based on the dual-pivot design, the carbon tube also includes ebony within it, "We used carbon fibre and ebony together because, as good as carbon fibre is

for details on the lower cost arms, "That's the cheap route," said Baker. "This is why the Rega RB300 sounds bright because it rings loudly. It has stainless steel almost throughout. Stainless steel is cheap and there is no finishing. The rear stub of the Encounter, in contrast, the thing the counter-weight sits upon, costs about ten times the price of a stainless steel model, for example. There are three types of stainless steel alone and one is a lot better than the other two. In our lower ranged arms we use that particular one. We have to because of costs. The trick is to get an even frequency response throughout the range using different materials."

The 12" version of the Encounter 3c might be longer but there is no threat of extra loading, which is minimal, "The arm supports could take a 100 times the strain. It's massively over engineered," said Baker.

"the 12in provided more bass extension that in no way swamped the soundstage but just pushed the arm's awareness into a new, lower frequency range"

at self damping, it still rings. Ebony is the best material for the price to enhance the damping."

And dual pivot? It's like a straight forward uni-pivot but, instead of having one point into a cup you have two. It pivots like the SME-based knife-edge bearing, "The advantage over the 'knife' is that the contact area is massively reduced," said Baker. "That second 'point' moves in the vertical plane only, the horizontal point is handled by conventional bearings. The advantage is that you have very low friction and tremendous decoupling taking place. The bearing points are tungsten and the cups are made from hardened metal. We started with jewelled bearings but they tend to shatter."

Origin Live use different metal alloys for the yoke depending on the grade of arm, "It's not just the material costs but the machining costs of certain alloys. The Encounter is the low-end of the dual pivot range. It uses a lighter yoke," said Baker.

Unlike some of its competitors, Origin Live doesn't use stainless steel on an extensive basis, just



ESL-57 (One Thing modded) speakers completed the reference chain.

Spinning Chet Baker's 'Chet Bakers Sings' well recorded jazz LP, some arms take Baker's almost choirboy-like delivery and focus on the high registers only. Of course, the Encounter 3c 12in addressed this area too but in a rather different manner. It wasn't until I heard the 3c 12in that I realised that much of the competition can add an element of upper mid bloom which the 3c 12in removed completely. What resulted was a sharper, cleaner transcription that was also faster because of it. Other arms can also sometimes smear notes that stretch the vocal delivery. This far more focused rendition provided a clarity that also emphasised the silences in between the notes. The 3c 12in was also notable because it supported the lower frequencies within Baker's voice. This strengthened bass balance and added little-heard texture to his delivery, emphasising his emotive presentation.

The incisive detail offered by

SOUND QUALITY

I installed the 12" Encounter 3c onto an Origin Live Calypso turntable (£1,500) complete with a Dynavector 10x5 cartridge (£329). The VTL IT-85 valve integrated amp plus Quad



THE UPGRADE TRANSFORMER £195 £180 WHEN BOUGHT WITH A TURNTABLE!

Replacing the included wall-wart power supply for the Calypso turntable, used for the Encounter 3c arm review, the Upgrade Transformer from Origin Live spans 145x65x215mm, weighs 500g and features a specially selected, vibration-free, 225VA, 15V toroid. The Upgrade Transformer can be used with any Origin Live turntable but arrives as standard with the Sovereign turntable.

Running the Chet Baker LP through the new unit saw an immediate reduction in 'distortion'. Greater clarity then enhanced dynamics. Baker's trumpet was very clean and the piano adopted a more complex persona, principally because enhanced lucidity revealed additional information from the instrument. Also, the soundstage increased in depth while stereo images benefitted from an enhanced sense of polish and sheen.

Turning to electronica and Autechre, the new transformer was very impressive. The found sound samples sounded fully formed, like ceramic balls on a wooden surface. A delicious hard elasticity to them provided a sense of percussion while deep bass had an all encompassing aura, bringing greater prominence to lower frequencies. An affecting track, this musical sequence left me almost breathless in its sonic variety and precision, forming a meticulous assault on my senses.

the 3c 12in was quite staggering. To the extent the off-mic shuffling and movements in and around the studio played a larger part in the performance, enhanced by the broad soundstage and good instrumental separation upon it. Piano was light yet texturally complex, trumpets had an inoffensive metallic sheen while bass provided a solid grounding for the whole ensemble.

Changing to the more contemporary electronica of Autechre's 'Cichlisuite', the extended piece was quite startlingly effective in the midband with its sound samples forming a central rhythm, almost popping out of the centre of the soundstage while the synth backing sequence offered a soundscape of clean, controlled and almost romantic washes. Bass was dry in its focused control yet possessed a fullness and seemingly a warmth of its own, supporting the track as a whole – a real eyebrow raising performance.

Moving on to rock with Prog influences, and I have often been offended by the compressed overtones of Kansas' 'Monolith' LP. The Encounter 3c 12in approached this problem in a unique manner. It lessens the compressive side effects by reducing their impact. How does it do that?

Imagine you're holding a piece of string. Look closely at it and you see the string isn't a single strand but a collection of finer threads woven in unison. See how the threads group

together for strength, how they lean and rely on each other, how they bend and twist yet retain their essential strong malleability. Then move away from the string. With that information now in your head, you see the piece of string in a different way. It's no longer a lumpen 'thing', it's a collection of threads.

That's what the Encounter 3c 12in does to music. Harsh frequencies no longer directly hit my ear all at the same time, in one leaden-like chunk. Instead, a fine examination of the individual aspects of each part of the music, allowed each detailed element to be appreciated on an individual basis.

Which is all well and good but is the 12in version of the Encounter 3c any different or better, aurally, than the standard issue 9.5in? I grabbed a second Calypso/Dynavector turntable and installed a 9.5in Encounter 3c to find out.

Spinning the Kansas LP, the 9.5in arm was lighter in the bass region than the 12" which portrayed a weightier, more confident aspect

with a larger mass and presence. The 9.5in arm was lighter on its feet in the midband. The spatial aspects of its presentation were impressive, isolating the electric guitar strings and reflecting an almost ethereal and feather-light touch. The 12in strengthened secondary percussion, displaying a rich tone that more naturally integrated itself within the soundstage while handling the compression issue with ease, displaying a more mature approach. Vocal crescendos were brighter on the 9.5in but the 12in was both creamier and richer in its presentation.

Turning to Autechre's electronica, the 9.5in produced an insightful mid performance, revealing new layers within the introductory synth sequence, while the 12in had a greater low frequency shock effect when the bass first appeared, displaying a real wallop that gave the track presence. There was a starker contrast with the sound samples too.

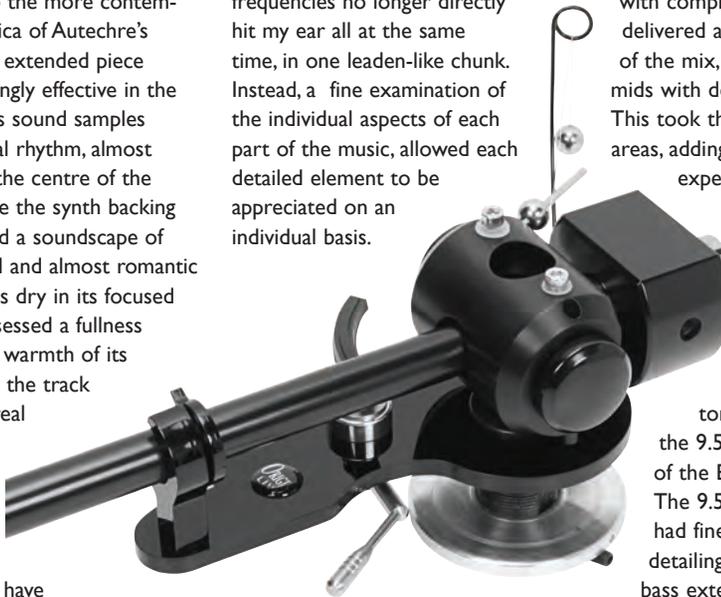
The 9.5in arm had a melodic personality, its midrange incisiveness highlighting filigree detail over the broad soundstage but the 12's richer presentation added a sense of eloquent maturity. It rounded off the samples, giving each a more realistic 'thunk'.

Listening to the jazz of Chet Baker, the 9.5in offered a tremendous midrange performance with complex layering but the 12in delivered a perceptive investigation of the mix, blending more rounded mids with deeper bass extension. This took the arrangement into new areas, adding a degree of solidity and experience.

CONCLUSION

If ever there was a case of swings and roundabouts within a hardware comparison then the tonal differences between the 9.5in and 12in versions of the Encounter 3c were it. The 9.5in had a lighter step. It had finesse and style with fine detailing. The 12in provided more bass extension that in no way swamped the soundstage but just pushed the arm's awareness into a new, lower frequency range, opening the door into a grown-up arena that sounded both adult and rounded.

Both arms produced superb quality sound yet I feel that the 12in arm, on this system, provided a better balance. It relaxed more into the mix, making sound production effortless and more natural. It was a close-run choice, though.



VERDICT

With a keen level of detail and an extended lower end, the Origin Live Encounter 3c 12in arm is a force to be reckoned with.

ORIGIN ENCOUNTER

MK.3C 12in £1,745

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www.originlive.com

FOR

- bass extension
- mature presentation
- incisive detail
- dynamic

AGAINST

- size