



Power Games

Tony Bolton performs live experiments with Origin Live's Advanced and Ultra DC turntable motor kits...

Some years ago I fitted an Origin live DC Motor kit to my Linn Sondek and was sufficiently impressed that it has remained *in situ* ever since. I recently discovered that the kit has been upgraded since mine was made, and that various options were now available including a choice of motors and transformers, so I decided to investigate further.

There are now three models in Origin Live's range of DC Motor kits, the standard, retailing at £255, and the Advanced and Ultra kits under review here. They are broadly similar,

comprising of an outboard control box, a 'wall-wart' mains adapter and a DC motor which replaces the unit in the turntable.

The two kits under discussion each come with the DC 100 motor as standard, however I elected to try the DC 200 motor option (also available as a standalone purchase for £250) and the Upgrade Transformer.

This is a separate unit which replaces the 'wall-wart' and plugs straight into any Origin Live control unit.

The different control units are identifiable by the colour of the LED on the front; red for the Standard unit, green for the Advanced and blue for the Ultra, the casework of which is in black extruded aluminium instead of the silver of the other two models. Although most turntables use an AC motor, they do have certain drawbacks, the main one being the cogging effect as the coil rotates past the poles. This can have the effect of causing a slight snatch in the rotation of the platter, which the rubber belt is intended to go some way to ironing out. This in turn can jerk the stylus in the grooves, causing an effect that is often perceived as 'surface noise', and incorrectly put down to a worn record.

GETTING GOING

Fitting is relatively straightforward on a Sondek, although other turntables may require more complex attention. The first task is to place the deck somewhere where you can access the underneath easily (remembering to remove the outer platter before moving the deck, in the hopes of not upsetting the suspension). A Linn jig

is the ideal tool, but since I don't have one I improvised using one of our dining chairs with the seat squab removed! I secured the turntable to it with a couple of lumps of Blu-Tak.

Important – if you have a Valhalla power supply fitted, then leave the turntable unplugged from the mains for at least an hour before removing the baseboard. The Valhalla unit contains lethal voltages until the capacitors have fully discharged.

Once underneath, with the outer platter removed it is a simple job to detach the old motor and any power supply components. The instructions recommend removing the belt guide as well. A blanking plate, bearing the Origin Live logo is also supplied should you wish to remove the now redundant switch from the bottom left of the deck's top plate. The new motor should fit into the space occupied by the old one, with the supplied brass washers acting as spacers between the motor top plate and the underside of the Linn top plate. It is recommended that the motor is fixed with only one screw, nipped up tightly enough to hold the motor in the desired position. This is set by measuring the distance from the centre of the spindle to the centre of the motor pulley and



The new Origin Live motor fitted...

should be between 127 and 129mm.

Once installed, the instructions recommend at least four hours of running before the speed is set, since the bedding in of the electronics will cause some initial speed drift. A card strobe disc is supplied to ascertain the correct speed. Speed is selected by rotating the knob on the front of the control unit. Adjustment is made by inserting a small flat bladed screwdriver into the screw heads protruding through the back of the box, between the two sockets for mains and motor connections.

After the initial running in period, I then set to work adjusting the motor to run as quietly as possible. This is accomplished by adjusting the position of the motor in relation to the turntable top plate and also by turning the small screws that hold the top plate to the motor body. It will never be as quiet as an AC motor. Origin Live advise that this is due to the motor being ‘cogless’ and relying on a different type of brush to conventional units.

My original motor made enough noise, even after adjustment, that I encased it in bitumastic car sound deadening material and bubble wrap to dull the noise. The DC 200 motor comes with a rubberised covering fitted which reduced noise to about the same level as I had achieved on my old motor.

It is worthwhile putting the outer platter upside down on the inner one, and switching on. Reinstating the outer platter in this way loads the suspension of the deck and allows you to make a visual check that the belt is running correctly and that nothing is catching anywhere.

SOUND QUALITY

After all of this a further two to four days running in is required before the sound is at its best, and this is precisely what the new motor got! Before starting this exercise I played through a selection of records, and after waiting for all the running in process to be finished, settled down for a re-run.

For me one of the advantages of this drive method is the ability to spin the Sondek at any speed including 78rpm, so first back on the platter was a 1943 12inch pressing of Fats Waller and his Rhythm doing a particularly fine version of his composition ‘Ain’t Misbehavin’”. The record was in quite good condition, and had been cleaned, but still displayed some levels of surface noise and occasional distortions, typically due to being played with the steel needles that were in almost universal usage when it was new.

Using the Advanced kit first, I was immediately impressed with the reduction in surface noise and the improvement in separation between the instruments. There was more precision to the sound as well, and the interplay between Waller’s piano and Zutty Singleton’s drums towards the end had more impact and detail. Moving over to the Ultra control unit brought further improvements along the same lines, while adding the Upgrade Transformer had the effect of deepening and tightening the bass. There was a sufficient magnitude of difference between the Advanced model and the Ultra plus Transformer arrangement, that a casual listener could well have thought that I was playing different pressings of the same record.

Moving over to microgroove with Von Karajan conducting ‘Mars’ from Holst’s ‘Planet Suite’ demonstrated this vividly. The size of the soundstage increased quite obviously as I worked up through the different drive options, increasing both in width and depth. The brooding intensity of the piece also seemed to go up quite a few notches, with the difference between piano and fortissimo becoming more pronounced.

The next record that I tried was a bit of late nineteen sixties psychedelia from Country Joe and the Fish. The title track of their second LP, the ‘I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ To Die Rag’ is an anti-war song instrumented as an old fashioned honky-tonk ragtime number, but recorded to produce a thin and quite blaring sound. Since the record is not in first class condition the effect could be a little rough on the ears in places. The Advanced kit was a definite improvement over the old one but the real improvement came with the Ultra and the Upgrade Transformer fitted. The mush seemed to pretty much disappear and I was able to follow the lyrics quite easily against the raucous accompaniment of the band.

The last record was Morcheeba’s ‘Big Calm’. It sounded good anyway before all of these changes, but now seemed to gain new layers of depth and detail that had me replaying tracks to explore aspects of the arrangement that had been present but not as noticeable during previous playings. Vocals were better projected, and seemed to be richer in their tonal palette, with little details of phrasing and enunciation being more obviously displayed.



The new OL DC 200 motor left, with the old (sound proofed) unit on the right.

CONCLUSION

The Linn Sondek is a very good turntable but can be improved upon in various areas, and the motor unit is one of them. All of these kits are a substantial improvement in sonic performance over the original AC motor and, as I have found, have increased in their capabilities in the years since I first fitted one.

If you already use an Origin Live motor kit then I would recommend investing in the Upgrade Transformer. It is effective with any Origin Live motor and probably offers the best value for money upgrade for current users.

If you are using either a Valhalla or Lingo power supply then the effect will be quite dramatic, with a level of openness and precision to the sound that will both surprise and impress listeners. The bass benefits most obviously, with the bloom in the sound of a standard Sondek disappearing, along with a lot of perceived surface noise from your records. Bass notes also seemed to gain a level of weight, shape and speed that helped the music seem both more precisely played and more agile. The midrange and the treble acquired greater levels of detail and definition, and the whole effect has made my listening more enjoyable and involving.

If you can afford it, buy the Ultra kit and the Upgrade Transformer, if not then discuss the differing options of motor and control unit with the manufacturer to decide which offers the best value in your circumstances.

If you balk at doing the fitting yourself then dealers are available who will do it for you.

Overall then, this is an effective and substantial upgrade that rejuvenates a classic and well respected turntable – and as such comes highly recommended.



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VERDICT 
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FOR
- more expansive soundstage
- better imaging
- deeper, more tuneful bass
- reduced surface noise

AGAINST
- motor not as quiet as AC units

Origin Live Advanced DC Motor Kit	£345
Origin Live Advanced DC Motor Kit (DC 200)	£477
Origin Live Ultra DC Motor Kit	£582
Origin Live Ultra DC Motor Kit (DC200)	£715
Origin Live Upgrade Transformer	£199