

Choice EXOTICA ORIGIN LIVE ASTUTE
SUSPENDED LOUDSPEAKER £4,995



Hang loose

Spending some time with these radical loudspeakers, **Chris Ward** finds they sound as revolutionary as they look

Every once in a while someone does something remarkable that seems bizarre and contradictory to the received wisdom, yet sometimes they stick to their guns, resist ridicule and peer pressure and eventually turn out to be right. When Dick Fosbury jumped backwards over a high jump bar at the 1968 Olympics, many in the crowd thought he was mad. But this madness won him a gold medal as well as setting a new Olympic record.

Origin Live may be better known for its highly engineered tonearms and turntables, but with the launch of its Astute speakers it's bending over backwards to declare that there may be alternative ways to reproduce high fidelity music. In the new Astute loudspeaker Origin Live has created a relatively dead barrel from a

Their combination of efficiency and kind load yield equally good results

multi-laminated tube capped with solid bamboo ply front and back. Nothing wants to resonate, and asymmetrically offset dual concentric drivers set within the front baffle ensure that standing waves have little chance of forming.

Okay, there are curved speakers, but how many are designed to hover in space? It's claimed that Origin Live conducted a blind listening test for speaker stands and the unsighted listeners signalled delight each time a roadie lifted the speakers between the competing stand designs. These speakers are hanging from elegant Heron stands (£770), but Origin Live offers a number of engineered wall and ceiling fixings if you want to lift your speakers aesthetically or above prying hands, starting at £350.

Designed to be used with a quality active subwoofer, the Astutes cover the frequency range from 85Hz to

20kHz with a pronounced roll off from 100Hz. Deeper bass duties are then picked up by your subwoofer of choice. Origin Live believes that many traditional speakers with bass drivers a few metres apart are compromised as the wavelength of twin bass frequencies must surely be interfering with each other, disrupting that bass message and smearing vital midband and treble detail above. By adding a single quality subwoofer, it suggests there is no interference.

The Astute's custom-made drivers are shrouded in some secrecy, but Origin Live claims their ultra high efficiency promises an extremely fast and dynamic sound that should project well in to any sized listening room. Taking any one of these departures from the well-beaten audio path would be challenging enough, but taking them all at once is radical and a statement of self-confidence that the end will justify the means. I for one applaud this level of disruptive innovation, but how do they perform?

Setting up the Astutes is easier than they may appear. I place the Heron stands roughly in place and lift the speakers into position. The near invisible 'Dyneema' suspension cord is said to be 15 times stronger than steel and will support up to 480kg, so no need for concern. The single set of screw binding posts are cleverly engineered, creating an extremely effective connection between cable and speaker. Carefully programming the MJ Acoustic Reference 400 Mk1 subwoofer I'm using here, I can seamlessly join the bass register with the Astute's frequency range. Furthermore, I can perfectly balance the bass energy in my listening room, saturating the space, but stopping well short of overdriving the room.

I am then able to twist the stands for a slight toe-in that seems to maximise the width of the soundstage. I also gently angle the Astutes up until the balance of treble energy seems right for my listening position. If you chose

will be able to angle the Astute speakers downwards.

Sound quality

Spinning *More Money* from Barry Reynolds' *I Scare Myself* LP on vinyl, my immediate impression of the Astute's is somewhat startling. Treble, mid and bass energy just seem more dynamic. It's as though I'm hearing my favourite music, source and amplification with a secret veil lifted. Frequency response, however, feels extremely even and without over emphasis, but it's the cleanliness of the sound and the sheer dynamism of the frequencies arriving at your ears that is so very refreshing to me. It's hard to put sound dynamics into words, but the quality and timbre created by the Astutes delivers an energy that is very potent, yet unflagging and convincingly accurate. And rather than merely reproducing laboratory standards of frequency and amplitude, the speakers dive straight into communicating your music. Given Origin Live has clearly paid so much attention to engineering and physics I was ready for a slightly clinical or constructed presentation of music, but the opposite is true. Drums really kick, fretted basslines start and stop with different finger pressures and I'm able to appreciate a rapport between backing singers and musicians that I hadn't felt before.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Origin Live Astute

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Two-way suspended
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
12.9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 340 x 350mm

FEATURES

- Dual concentric drivers
- 1x 1in compression tweeter
- 1x 8in paper midrange driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 91dB
- Quoted impedance: 8ohms

DISTRIBUTOR
Origin Live

TELEPHONE
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WEBSITE
originlive.com

Powerful binding posts ensure highly effective connections



Q&A

Mark Baker

Origin Live, managing director



CW: What insights have you brought from your turntables and tonearms to your speaker designs?

MB: Turntable and tonearm design focuses on creating efficient energy paths to dump vibrations and resonances whilst maintaining a rock-steady platform to function fully. Loudspeakers are not that different, as massive vibrations created by speaker drivers need to be dumped whilst maintaining a rock-steady grip on the drive unit. Years of experimentation with different materials and structures have yielded a wealth of ideas that we have applied to the Astute speakers and their supports.

What makes the crossover design so different?

Using very steep roll offs enables the drivers to cross over close to ideal frequencies without break up. Unusually, the mid driver has a very steep low-end roll off, which enables it to blend cleanly with subwoofers. The Astute also avoids joining mid and treble information within the critical 2kHz-5kHz band where so much musical information is conveyed and human hearing is most sensitive to phase issues.

What can you share about why your custom drivers are so dynamic?

Having been involved in driver design over the years it was natural to build a custom design. A large magnet assembly for the woofer and a horn-loaded compression driver on the tweeter yield fantastic dynamics. Other factors include a stiff cone and large diameter voice coil for minimal thermal compression.

What type of person would you say the Astutes are designed for?

Initially audiophiles, but these speakers are really designed for anyone who loves style and music. Commonly in speaker design, poor styling and visual space consumption are often issues that turn off many women in particular, before any sound is made. We have worked long and hard on aesthetics, build and sound quality to come up with the Astutes. Anyone should love them.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Dual concentric drivers
- 2 2mm Dyneema wire support
- 3 Binding posts
- 4 Heron stands
- 5 Bamboo ply baffle

Turning to James Taylor's *Machine Gun Kelly* on vinyl and the informal, live acoustic soundstage floods the room. Suspending these quality drivers projects a compelling holographic image that is tall, wide and utterly stable. I believe hanging these highly dynamic drivers also unlocks an extra presence and realism to voices, releasing them from other midband detail and deepening the stereo image front to back.

Playing Donna Summer's *I Feel Love* on CD, I start to wind the volume up. This is a classic side effect of high quality and an intuitive response to a lack of distortion. These speakers are happy to reproduce convincing dynamics at very low volume levels or party hard, and the disco anthem is soon projected into every corner of my room... and then my ground floor! The powerful dynamics within Giorgio Moroder's mesmerising synth lines loop around Donna's sultry vocals, tempting others in the house to come and enjoy the music with me. It is at this moment that I realise that the Astutes are probably tapping into some tried and trusted 'public address' philosophies where highly dynamic hanging speakers regularly bring live stage concerts to life.

Conclusion

The Astutes are a beguiling combination of engineering decisions and unique technical features that add up to a highly coherent and very musical whole. The separation of single-minded bass duties from highly dynamic mid/treble energy allows each driver to excel and floating the

speakers at any height you wish gives sonic rewards and protection from prying hands in equal measure. They look stunning to my eye and if I were a music lover with great ears, interior design flair, disposable income and discerning friends, I'm not sure I'd need to look elsewhere. They are remarkably unphased being positioned near rear walls, but appreciate a little air around them. I've driven them with both solid state and valve amplifiers, and their combination of efficiency and easy load yields equally good results.

A fiver short of £5,000 is a considerable sum, especially when you need to budget extra for the dedicated stands and a subwoofer, but you are investing in precision engineering, handcrafted assembly and a design without apparent compromise. Every visitor to your home is likely to marvel at the Astutes when they are silent, and even more so when they make dynamic music ●



HOW IT COMPARES

Unique is an over-used word, but these speakers have few direct competitors. At this price (including a subwoofer and stands) some would consider Audio Note speakers, which offer great sensitivity and good dynamics, but they prefer wall reinforcement, and while handsome to me, are probably less of a treat on the eye. Sonus faber produces some beautifully finished floorstanders that often grace designer listening rooms, but sonically the Astutes would win me over. For design, build and sound quality I'm thinking of £10k+ speakers from the likes of Tannoy, Magneplanar or Gamut, which feels like strong endorsement indeed.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



LIKE: Impressive dynamics; innovative design; elegant styling; high build quality

DISLIKE: Styling may not appeal to all

WE SAY: Eye-catching speakers with design flair that manage to convey musicality at any volume