

ILLUSTRIOUS

David Price listens to what's claimed to be one of the most important new tonearms for a decade, Origin Live's Illustrious.

Any hi-fi manufacturer will tell you how great its products are. Some say it with a passion bordering on the psychotic, showing how completely blinkered they are to other companies' designs. Others say it with just the slightest hint of irony, as if to say "come on, we're not that bad really." Origin Live calls its new Illustrious, "unquestionably the best tonearm in the world by a staggering margin". This surprises me, because it hails from OL's Mark Baker, who is absolutely the last man on this planet prone to bouts of hyperbole or overstatement. If he's right, it could be one of this decade's most important products - to us analogue addicts, at least.

Mark is a very quiet man with patience, an enquiring mind and forensic attention to detail. These attributes, plus thousands of hours of listening time, enabled him to come up with a 'thesis' on what he regarded was wrong with the existing Rega design. First and foremost, he came up with the revelation that it was the cheaper RB250 and not the RB300 that was the better of the two

designs, thanks to the former's superior bearing housing and lack of sound degrading tracking weight spring. Next, he correctly identified the standard arm's slapdash counterweight mechanism as a terrible source of coloration. Finally, he came up with a better internal/external wiring combination, complete with a separate earth lead.

The result was an arm that came oh-so-close to being one of the world's best, at a ridiculously low price. For under £300 the OL modded RB250 was a giant killer in exactly the same sense that the original Rega RB300 was back in the early eighties - open, incisive, detailed, powerful, dynamic; it had it all. Now, for a pretty hefty £1570, his all-new Illustrious arm seeks to improve on this still further - hence Mark's claim that it comprehensively outclasses the best of the rest of the super-arm world.

DESIGN

Rather than doing anything too radical, Mark Baker followed an evolutionary path to achieve his avowed design aims. These include low resonance (for tonal accuracy), high rigidity in all planes (to render powerful dynamics), low friction (to aid tracking and subtle low level information retrieval), fast energy transmission (for timing and treble clarity) and medium mass (for compatibility with most modern cartridges). He stresses that he spent a "great deal" of time researching different types of metals for the armtube.

The result was a black anodised armtube profiled from a solid billet of a "certain type" of aerospace alloy, tapered and of large diameter for

optimum torsional strength. At the end is a high strength, low mass sculpted headshell machined from a solid alloy block, that's decoupled and rigidly attached to the armtube. The geometry - unsurprisingly - is as the Rega RB300, meaning it will fit straight into any Rega mounting board or hole. However, this arm also boasts full VTA adjustment, so the days of cheap and nasty (and fiddly) spacers are over.

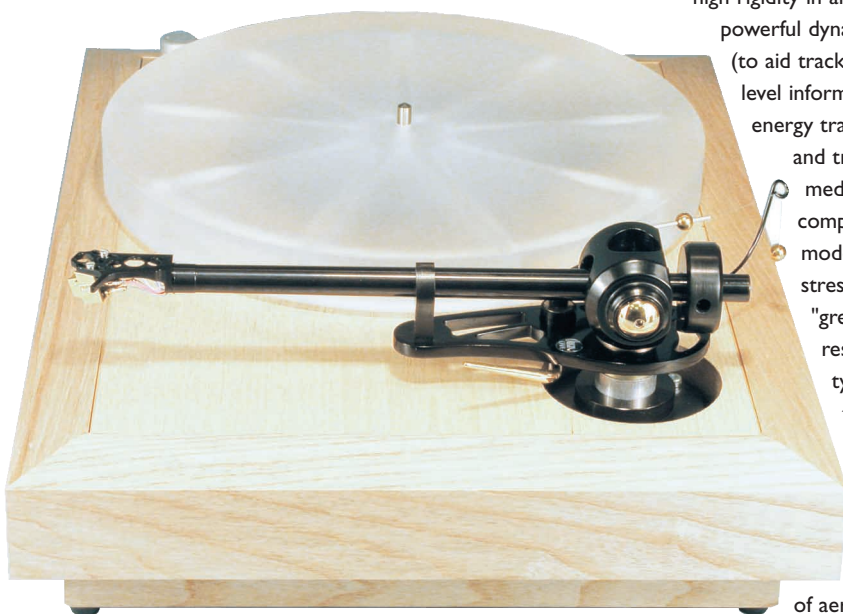
Headshell wiring is silver plated copper, insulated in robust PTFE, with gold plated copper beryllium cartridge tags. Inside the arm itself is a run of high grade Litz wire, said to be selected from hundreds tested. It terminates in high grade aluminium phono plugs, with over twice the conductivity of brass. Mark says this has a very audible effect on the sound. At the other end, the rear end stub and counterweight design is as OL's successful Rega 'structural modification'.

The bearing housing has been designed to offer high mass in the horizontal plane for cartridge stability, whilst maintaining low mass in the vertical plane for optimal tracking ability. The bearings themselves are said to be the most highly specified of the company's range, widely spaced outside the arm tube in the bespoke bearing house. The arm base is made from a "large number of specially selected materials" which OL is unwilling to divulge for obvious commercial reasons. It's interesting for its infinitely variable side bias adjustment and new VTA adjuster.

It's an impressively built device. A whole step up from the rebuilt Rega arms, it rather reminds me of the late lamented Zeta. It is not, however, finished as exquisitely as an SME IV or V. I have no reason to doubt that its internal engineering is no less exacting, yet it simply doesn't have that exquisite 'Swiss watch' feel that SME owners know and love. Slightly

REVIEW EQUIPMENT:

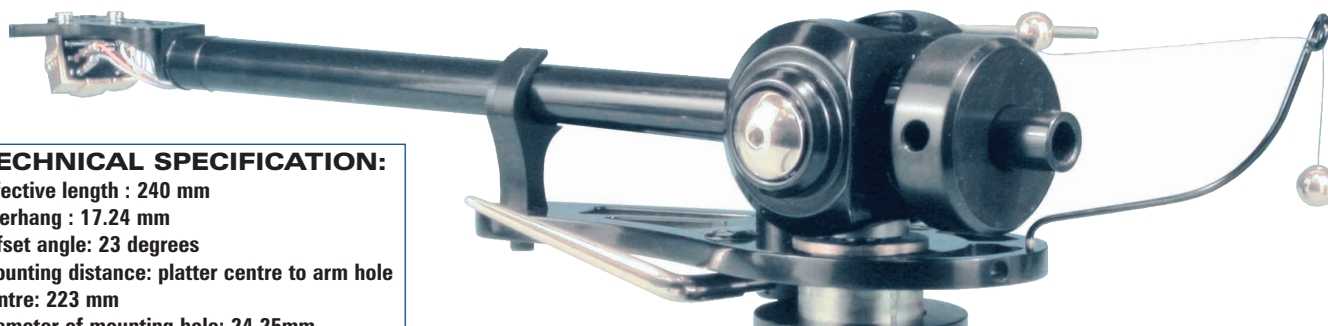
Michell Orbe turntable,
 DC motor
 Ortofon Kontrapunkt B MC
 cartridge (1.7g)
 Michell Delphini phono stage
 Musical Fidelity A308
 integrated amplifier
 Yamaha NS1000M/Atacama
 B200 loudspeakers/stands.



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION:

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: 24-25mm

disconcerting is the play in the bearing housing, but - sure enough - read the instructions and you find this is 'designed in' and nothing whatsoever to worry about. The instructions also lack SME-like clarity - a few photos wouldn't go amiss - but there's an impressive section on general tuning and tweaking of both the arm and cartridge, which is most welcome.

SOUND QUALITY

The Illustrious is an extremely big, powerful and confident performer, one which I'd describe in terms of being an amalgam of the best bits of both the Linn Ekos and SME V. It offers 99% of the former's rhythmic and dynamic fluency with 101% of the latter's tonality and detail resolution. In short then, it's pretty awesome. Grace Jones' 'My Jamaican Guy' was a revelation - the midband had an incredible 'hear-through' quality, the OL placing instruments precisely in three dimensions and yet relaying masses of tonal and textural information. It's also beautifully subtle and organic - whereas SME's Series V sucks out all the music's emotion and Linn's Ekos fetishises it to the exclusion of all else, so the Illustrious treads an oh-so-clever path that lets the song's groove pour forth whilst not impeding the amazing flow of detail. To wit, Sly and Robbie's stunning percussion work was allowed to shine in all its glory - bass, snares, cymbals, kettle drums, maracas, triangles, tambourines etc. lilted out of the mix with both precision and ease.

Moving to ACT's 'Absolutely Immune', I was again stunned at this arm's combination of clarity and musicality. Its midband is so startlingly clear that the limitations of the LP's mastering (and indeed its 44.056kHz Sony PCM-FI recorder) were obvious, and yet unlike the SME the OL didn't suffer 'analysis paralysis'. Rather, Claudia Brucken's icy voice was carried in all its Teutonic glory, right down to her smallest breathing motions. More impressively still was the way this arm hung her vocal in space so confidently, way out of the instrumental mix.

Bass was another revelation; deeper and more powerful than the Ekos, only the SME surpasses it for extension and even then, it loses much of the OL's articulation. Fast and extremely tuneful and yet disarmingly strong and muscular, this arm offers tremendous grip and dynamics. Indeed, it's so good in the latter respect that you realise how compressed rival arms are!

Moving up the frequency range, the Illustrious's treble proved damn-near unsurpassed. Just as its midband exhibited revelatory clarity and detail, so its high frequencies were beautifully open and flowing. Joan Armatrading's 'Me, Myself I' had an incredibly open, spacious and crisp hi-hat sound that made the Ekos sound fizzy and the Series V unincisive and matter-of-fact. Better still was the way the OL was supremely airy yet never once became bright or forward. Rather, from bottom to top, it sounded highly integrated, even and all of a

piece. This was even easier to discern on old, over-played discs such as my 'distressed' pressing of CSN&Y's 'Country Girl', where the OL arm threw out lots of previously unheard treble detailing that all my other arms had kept down in the 'mush' of the mix.

I could go on and on. To my ears and through my system, this is simply the best tonearm I've heard to date. It is both very transparent and extremely engaging - steadfastly refusing to forsake one characteristic for the other, it ends up doing them both together with hitherto unheard alacrity. The result is the famous 'new record collection syndrome' where you end up running through all your vinyl in a hurry, desperate to hear how every disc you own 'really' sounds. Although it's a good deal more expensive than an OL RB250, the extra expenditure is well worth it if you have the cash, and especially if you're running a decent cartridge. Indeed, it's so marked that I'd venture to suggest you'd even notice the difference if this was bolted to a Rega P3. My only gripe is the Illustrious's finish - it's extremely well made of course, but as I've said before, it simply doesn't feel like a million dollars a la SME. Not that you'll be wanting to look when there's some serious listening to be done, however.

Origin Live Illustrious £1570

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World Verdict

Brilliantly detailed yet utterly musical, this arm is set to join the ranks of the all time greats. Wholeheartedly recommended!