



Light fantastic

It's a tough job being a mid-price turntable, but Origin Live's new Aurora Mk3 has got what it takes to impress **David Price**

This new £999 deck is the baby in Origin Live's four-strong range of turntables, which goes all the way up to the £4,770 Sovereign. Being the third-generation model, it has come a long way from the original Aurora, which appeared back in 2003, but it remains a high-quality skeletal belt-drive design hewn from black acrylic with a low-resonance platter. It doesn't have conventional sprung suspension, relying on the user placing it on a well-isolated

subtable or wall shelf. The main chassis comes prefitted with an armboard that is drilled for both Origin Live/old-type Rega single-point and modern Rega three-point fixings, so between the two it covers a great many bases. Obviously, other armboard templates are available – you just need to specify the right one to your dealer before you hand over your hard-earned cash. On to this you will have to fit the arm yourself – even if you buy an Origin Live arm it won't come prefitted, Rega-style,

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT
Origin Live Aurora Mk3

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Turntable

WEIGHT
10.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
450 x 380 x 130mm

FEATURES

- Acrylic/metal chassis
- Belt drive
- External power supply
- Acrylic platter

DISTRIBUTOR
Origin Live

TELEPHONE
02380 578877

WEBSITE
originlive.com

because of the design of the packaging. If you can get your dealer to do this all well and good, otherwise it's a little fiddly for vinyl virgins.

The rest of the deck comprises the platter and the motor. Before the former is fitted, the bearing hub has to be dropped down into the recess on the chassis – the former is said to be a new type designed for faster energy transmission and of lower friction than before. Before the bearing is left, six drops of the supplied 'special' oil have to be applied, then the dot on the spindle assembly must be lined up with the dot on the platter, presumably because the latter is balanced. The new, thicker platter is made of a visually attractive semi-translucent acrylic material, the exact constituents of which designer Mark Baker will not reveal for reasons of commercial confidentiality. On to this sits the company's excellent 'upgrade platter mat', that's a fine tweak for other decks, too.

Finally, the motor slots into the rear left chassis recess, and the belt is attached. Interestingly, this is a quite a substantial affair and not of the thin and/or thread type that is popular



with many other manufacturers. Origin Live says the belt is made from a new material, hand finished for better quality. The motor unit itself is surprisingly large, and the latest Mk3 Aurora is said to benefit from additional damping.

Inside is a new ironless DC motor claimed to have no 'cogging' effect. This attaches to the offboard power box, again which is said to be improved. Speed control is easily electronically switched between 33rpm and 45rpm (78rpm is available on request); juice comes from a low-noise regulated power supply.

Being a non-suspended design, it is always going to be more susceptible to vibrations than a sprung subchassis deck, however, the Aurora proves less prone to the outside world than, say, a Rega. Overall, I am impressed with the build quality of the latest Aurora; the plinth, platter and bearing hub are all particularly well finished and everything slots together nicely. The only caveat is that the motor on-off switch doesn't feel as swish and modern as perhaps one might like – given this is the only interface point with the turntable aside from the arm, a slightly swisher one wouldn't

go amiss. Still, in Origin Live's defence, Mark Baker would doubtless say that the money has been spent where it improves the sound most.

Although the new deck is not unrecognisable compared with the old one, Mark Baker says it isn't possible to upgrade your Mk1 or 2 Aurora to Mk3 spec, simply because so many parts have been changed. There's always the option of part-exchanging your old deck for the new one, should you wish, however – either via Origin Live direct or your supplying dealer. Finally, it's nice to know that the Aurora has a 12in tonearm mounting option (£260) should you wish to use geometrically correct pick-up arms, and also the option of running dual armboards (£323) instead of just the one. The arm fitted to the test sample is the company's £450 Onyx, which has been well reviewed in these pages.

Sound quality

Not entirely unexpectedly perhaps, the Aurora Mk3 is a fine-sounding turntable, one that very much has an Origin Live house sound – which means it balances the natural, warm and cossetting ambience of vinyl with a good deal of insight and grip. For this reason, it works nicely with a wide range of programme material, unlike some rival designs that can come 'on song' with certain types of music. For example, slip on some cool jazz from Herbie Mann, in the shape of his cover of *Summertime*, and all that's good about this deck shines through. The deck manages to scythe through the noise on my ageing LP, and dig deep into the music. The

soundstage is wide, proving this to be a spacious and enveloping performer.

The Origin Live deck lets the recording's rhythm ebb and flow naturally. Jazz is such a great test of this, achieving so much of its mesmeric effect from the way the musicians hover around the beat. Lesser turntables tend to lose this 'sixth sense' of the music's rhythm, but the Aurora does not. Instead, I can hear the beautiful phrasing of Mann's flute work, shuffling around and delicately accenting the music. It's this sort of subtlety that sorts out the vinyl spinning wheat from the chaff, and here this turntable does very well.

Another nice aspect to the Aurora is its tonality; it is just a little more

Natural, well-judged tonality allies to a very organic sense of rhythm

sumptuous and soft sounding than many rival decks – not massively so, but just enough to make it a better match for often hard-sounding budget tonearms. Together with the Alliance, it makes for an ideal partnership – *Snowflake* from Kate Bush is a stunning-sounding modern recording, contrasting Bush's icy cool voice with wonderfully rich and vibrant piano work. This deck captures the tonal balance very well and comes close to the 24/96 WAV file played through a high-end streamer, for example. It shows that the deck doesn't over egg the pudding. ▶

Set up of the arm will be difficult for vinyl virgins, so get the dealer to do it if unsure



Q&A

Mark Baker

Origin Live, designer



DP: What does the new Aurora Mk3 bring to the vinyl party?

MB: The purpose of the deck was to provide an entry-level price product with high-end performance. After making fresh discoveries over the past five years, the time came for these to be included in a new Mk3 model. These have brought particular improvements into imaging, and there's reduced colouration, a more refined presentation of low-level information and it is easier to follow separation of individual strands in the music and vocals.

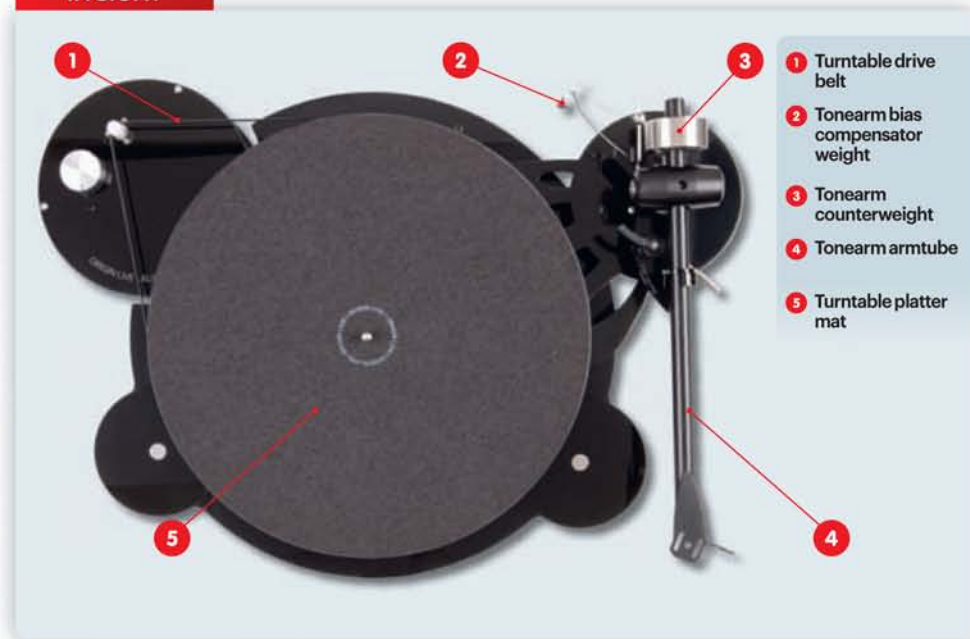
Why did you choose the materials you did for the Aurora?

The Aurora uses decoupling techniques and specific damping interfaces along with a metal subchassis to produce its fabulous tonal balance. This may sound simple, but is the culmination of over 20 years of experimentation. We tried countless different types of oil, and it became all too clear which was best. The platter mat is a similar story; it took over 18 years of testing before we discovered a material that worked on acrylic platters, and it happened to work amazingly well on glass, metal and MDF platters, too. The reason has to be down to its ability to damp vibration in vinyl records in an even handed way across the whole audio frequency band.

Why use a DC motor, when many opt for an AC synchronous type?

It sounds better, due to less vibration from a smooth DC current, rather than the violently oscillating AC current used to drive the AC motors of most decks. The belt was designed for the type of motor used; those with high levels of vibration favour maximum isolation from the platter, so round belts and very thin belts like cotton can seem better than conventional flat belts. This approach has negative side effects such as imperceptible slippage on the pulley and belt stretch, neither of which help dynamics. With DC motors, vibration is lower so you can use belts with grip and less stretch at high frequencies. The Origin Live belt takes a lot of work to make.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Turntable drive belt
- 2 Tonearm bias compensator weight
- 3 Tonearm counterweight
- 4 Tonearm armtube
- 5 Turntable platter mat

so to speak, making things coloured, but neither is it unduly bright.

This natural, well-judged tonality allies to a very organic sense of rhythm making this a deck that can take on anything. Feeling that I need to get some air moving around the room, I opt for an original seventies pressing of Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy*. *The Rain Song* has a lovely, long, slow burning build up, during which time the Aurora shows just how good its detail retrieval is; guitars have an almost tangible quality to them, while the grain of Robert Plant's voice is eerily realistic. But when the song gets into the groove and the levels go up, this deck holds on tight; it shows real composure during peaks and holds things together in terms of pitch, too – often highly modulated sections on an LP record can disturb both turntable and tonearm, but this deck shows grace under pressure.

Classical music is a pleasure, too. Normally it's not until you spend £500 or so more that turntables really sing with orchestra music, in my view, but the Aurora is fully able to eke out all the detail from the back of hall. This includes communicating an excellent sense of air and space to the recorded acoustic, which really gives a sense of being there.

Often, lesser vinyl spinners can sound just a little opaque and indistinct, but not so with my audiophile vinyl reissue of Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. The turntable catches the natural flow of the music, without thrusting detail out at the listener as if it needs to

prove a point. Given the modest price of the tonearm I am very impressed, but a quick swap to a high-end Origin Live Illustrious reveals that the deck has even more to give, with lots more detail, depth and insight. Certainly the Aurora is able to make the most of arms costing as much as the turntable itself.

Conclusion

It's very hard to think what else you could ask of this £999 turntable; its build is excellent at the price, its sonic performance is simply superb, and there's certainly nothing wrong with its looks either.

The latest Mk3 version of the Aurora is a real asset to Origin Live's product portfolio then, and offers fierce competition to rival turntable designs from the likes of Michell and Funk Firm, who will doubtless be hoping the Mk4 version of the Aurora doesn't surface for at least another five years! ●



HOW IT COMPARES

The closest rival to the Aurora is Michell's TecnoDec HR (£880), which has been around for nearly a decade now. The Michell provides a slightly cleaner and more upfront presentation, that may suit more budget systems better than the Origin Live. But there's much more depth to the Aurora – it sounds a little more relaxed, natural and fluid compared with the crisp, spry TecnoDec, and lovers of jazz in particular will appreciate this. The soundstage is also more three dimensional, opening up and enveloping the listener more.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Natural, open and three-dimensional sound; organic rhythms; fine dynamics |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Fiddlier to set up than Rega and Pro-Ject price rivals |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: Excellent value mid-price turntable with high-quality sound |
| FEATURES
★★★★★ | |

OVERALL

