

Origin Live Aladdin cartridge

By Alan Sircom

Origin Live is perhaps best known as a maker of tonearms. Those who know more about the brand know it produces a good range of turntables too. What's perhaps less well known is it also has a couple of really good cartridges under its belt. The Aladdin is the cheaper of the two, by no small margin (it costs £495 to the Champion's £2,450) but that's the only part that sounds cheap.

Unlike the decks and arms however, Mark Baker of Origin Live does not make the cartridges. Instead, the cartridges are custom-made variants of Soundsmith's highly-regarded moving iron designs. In the case of the Aladdin, it's the medium-compliance version of Soundsmith's Carmen cartridge, but with a more sophisticated energy-management system, and a composite blue-flecked body reminiscent of high-end superstars like the legendary Kiseki Lapis Lazuli in place of a wooden body. An idiot's guide to the Aladdin (expressed through the Soundsmith cartridge range) would be to say it's the Carmen in the body of the Zephyr with the energy-management of the Sussurro, and for those unfamiliar with the Soundsmith range, that's like picking a good cartridge with a fine body and adding parts taken from a legendary cartridge people are willing to commit war crimes to possess. For – and I'm going to show my London roots here – less than a *monkey!*

As the name suggests, a moving iron cartridge has a static magnet and coil arrangement, but instead has a small iron attachment to the cantilever that moves within the magnetic field generated from those fixed coils. This gives the twin bonuses of relatively high output (closer to MM than MC) and very low moving mass, making the cartridge an excellent tracker. Like the Carmen it's based upon, the Aladdin features a nude elliptical stylus on an aluminium cantilever, requires a phono stage with set to 47k Ohms load resistance and 100pF load capacitance (in other words, a standard MM input). The combination of 10.27g cartridge weight and 22µm/mN compliance makes it easily compatible with most modern tonearms (it's a natural partner with O-L arms of course, but I also found it worked well with Funk's arms and a SME 309). It tracks fairly light at 1.4g and it takes somewhere between 30-100 hours for the cartridge to really bed in, so you might want to recheck that after a week's heavy playing (I found my sample was remarkably consistent at 1.4g).

No cartridge benefits from a slapdash approach to installation, but the Aladdin is particularly sensitive to azimuth adjustment; get it wrong and the soundstage falls in on itself. Get it right (and by 'get it right' I mean set it up with a test record)



and you begin to see why this could just be the best kept secret in cartridges. It still had some slight foreshortening in the soundstage depth (the percussion in an orchestra seemed to be sitting in with the French Horns) no matter how right you got it, but the end result won you over.

Given the Soundsmith connection – coupled with the fact I'm quite the fan of moving iron designs, like the Cartridge Man-modified Grados – I expected good things from this cartridge. When suitably set up, I wasn't disappointed. OK, so there's something of a common character to moving iron designs that also manifests here – they have an exceptionally smooth midrange and top end that could come across as laid-back if you've spent a lot of time with either cheaper MCs or the hyper-detailed presentation of top-end MMs. But if that is the case, pick half a dozen albums at random from your collection, play them from front to back and then re-evaluate your 'laid- ▶

► back' feelings about the Aladdin. By that time, you'll probably find this sounds more effortless and more like music than the cartridge you used before and if you went back, you'd find the resultant sound uncomfortably bright and topky and arch. And no amount of record playing would disabuse you of that.

The Aladdin draws you into the music in a seductive, forget about the audio system way. Perversely, when trying to draw parallels and comparisons with other products, I kept ending up likening this to a transducer at the other end of the system, and can't help feeling the Aladdin sounds like a really good thin-walled classic British loudspeaker design like a Spendor BC1, except with a shade more dynamic range and a shade less soundstage width and depth. It's got that same unforced natural balance, the same easy, gentle and enticing top-end, that wonderful way of teasing the melody out of any music and the way it makes most music sound really appealing without making everything euphonically wonderful.

It also didn't seem to favour one kind of music over another. I put everything from the finest Americana (Richmond Fontaine) through the shouty Pixies through to more chilled out jazz recorded live at Ronnie Scotts in the early 1960s (so live sounding, my clothes stank of Kensitas and Rothmans) and out through the D'Oyly Carte company playing *H.M.S. Pinafore* on a stunning Decca SXL. The Aladdin highlighted the differences between each disc, but it played them with equal aplomb.

In a way, when it comes to tracking, a Benz Gullwing SLR that could track a ploughed field full of landmines without misfiring has spoilt me. But, if I'm honest, I got lucky and that's a particularly good sample of a cartridge design that is itself particularly good at tracking, and one that costs around four and a bit times more than the Aladdin. The Origin Live gets exceptionally close to that cart's remarkable tracking abilities though, which is little short of amazing.

Given the caveats mentioned above, there's only one downside to this cartridge; the upgrade path gets very steep from here. You aren't going to be satisfied with a good £600 moving coil after the Aladdin. In fact, I suspect there's only going to be a handful of cartridges that improve on the Aladdin in every way, and most of them are moving iron designs. Don't be surprised that if you like the Aladdin and want something better, you might be looking at many spending many thousands. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Moving Iron cartridge design

Stylus: Nude Elliptical, 0.120mm SQ
Radius of curvature: 6x17µm
Canfilever: Aluminium alloy
Recommended tracking force: 14mN/1.4g
Effective tip mass: 0.35mg
Compliance: 22µm/mN
Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz ±2.5dB
Channel Separation (stereo only @1kHz): >26dB
50Hz-15kHz: >20dB
Channel difference: <1/6dB
Output voltage: >0.6mV/cm/sec
5cm/sec. Lat. RMS: >2.12mV
Cartridge weight: 10.27g
Load Resistance: ≥47k Ohm
Load Capacitance (internally compensated): 100pF
Price: £495

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