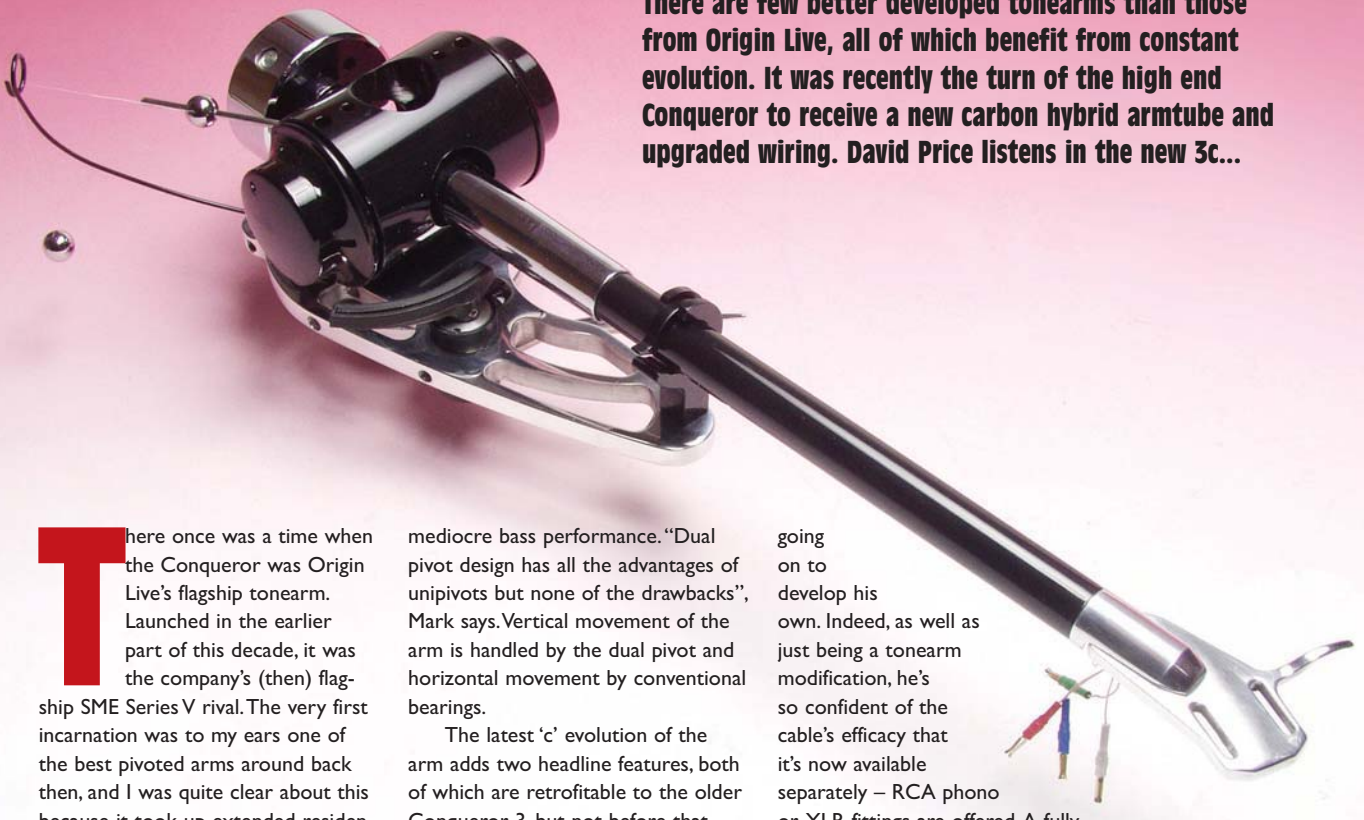


# Carbon-ated!

**There are few better developed tonearms than those from Origin Live, all of which benefit from constant evolution. It was recently the turn of the high end Conqueror to receive a new carbon hybrid armtube and upgraded wiring. David Price listens in the new 3c...**



**T**here once was a time when the Conqueror was Origin Live's flagship tonearm. Launched in the earlier part of this decade, it was the company's (then) flagship SME Series V rival. The very first incarnation was to my ears one of the best pivoted arms around back then, and I was quite clear about this because it took up extended residency on my beloved Michell Orbe turntable, which had hitherto been using an SME V and before that a Linn Ekos. Although the SME was stunning in so many ways, on the Orbe at least, it wasn't endearing. The Conqueror – a natural price rival – proved eminently more listenable, but only very slightly less able in outright terms...

Well, unlike the SME, the Origin Live has gone through a number of evolutions since then – the result being an arm that looks quite similar and is of the same vital statistics, but with virtually no parts common to that first Conqueror. The first significant point on the evolutionary path was the fitment of a new armtube to the second generation arm, in a polished "metal" finish (OL's Mark Baker is very bashful about what materials he uses, having had – he claims – a number of people copying his designs over the years). The third generation arm sported the company's 'Dual pivot' arms – and for me is where this arm you see before you starts, genetically. The unusual dual pivot bearing on the horizontal axle was designed to give many unipivot characteristics – low friction and high decoupling which give excellent definition and transparency – but to escape their

mediocre bass performance. "Dual pivot design has all the advantages of unipivots but none of the drawbacks", Mark says. Vertical movement of the arm is handled by the dual pivot and horizontal movement by conventional bearings.

The latest 'c' evolution of the arm adds two headline features, both of which are retrofitable to the older Conqueror 3, but not before that. First, the carbon hybrid armtube (a £600 mod) does a lot to damp down the liveliness of the previous tube. Although arm tube resonance is not the beginning and end of a tonearm's performance, it is nevertheless a significant contributing factor. This is why various manufacturers over the years, from SME to Technics, have experimented with everything from magnesium to titanium nitride in an effort to make a well damped but very stiff tube. Origin Live's solution is to mix a shell of carbon, which Mark Baker says has "very good" damping materials, with "metal" (which he won't specify). The latter is stiffer than carbon but rings, whereas the former is soft but self damped. Together, the two should counteract the other's weaknesses, making for a strong but quiet tube – or so the theory goes...

The other big tweak is the cable, which costs £380 to retrofit (actually to all Origin Live arms of any vintage, not just this, either by direct hard wiring or via a 5-pin DIN plug) but of course comes standard on the new Conqueror 3c. The Laminar Flow 2 external arm cable comes as a direct result of Mark Baker having experimented with umpteen different commercial cable types – and then

going on to develop his own. Indeed, as well as just being a tonearm modification, he's so confident of the cable's efficacy that it's now available separately – RCA phono or XLR fittings are offered. A fully balanced design, it uses a combination of six dielectric insulators to ensure an even response across the audible frequency range. Great care has been taken to optimise key electrical characteristics such as impedance, inductance and capacitance, says Baker. Experimentation with silver and silver plated strands was conducted but high purity copper was ultimately selected for its more natural tonal balance. To protect against RF interference the cable has a 95% nickel plated copper braid shield with an attached earth lead.

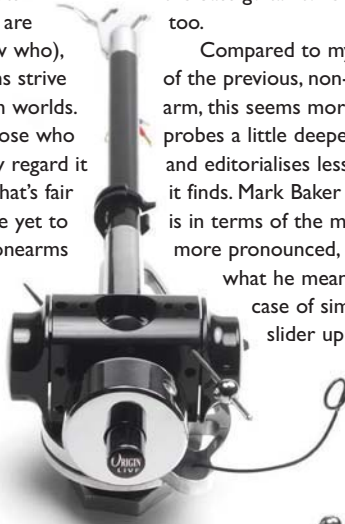
The Conqueror is a chunky and robust tonearm – reminding me in many ways of a Zeta (by its physical presence, not its design details). Never have I seen such a high standard of fit and finish on a Conqueror – it is certainly a lot less 'agricultural' looking than earlier incarnations. It maintains the traditional 'round' 24mm Rega mounting, weighs a total of 820g and has an effective mass of 14.5g – on the higher side of average. The effective length is 240mm, and the arm calls for a maximum armboard thickness of 27mm. As ever with the big Origin Lives, I found it easy to set up (the supplied instructions are now excellent), although it remains second

to the SME Series V, as does every other arm I've tried, in its sheer ease of mounting and operation.

## SOUND QUALITY

I think the secret's out by now that I am a fan of Origin Live arms. Some rivals sometimes sound more musical (certain unipivots I could mention), others are grippier (well you know who), but in my view OL arms strive to give the best of both worlds. Obviously, there are those who disagree, or who simply regard it as compromise – and that's fair enough – but I'd say I've yet to hear few 'real world' tonearms as nice as the latest Conqueror 3c.

Cue up an old copy of Human League's 'Dare', and you can hear why this arm has won many friends over the years. It imposes little of its character on the music, and in the latest carbon hybrid guise, adds - or subtracts - even less. Leading edges are sharp but not artificially edgy, whereas the notes themselves are rendered so evenly and delicately. Those full fat Korg analogue synthesizers in 'Sound of the Crowd' were dripping with harmonics, while singer Phil Oakey's deadpan voice sounding unusually 'fruity' and even slightly less out of tune than normal. Hi hats



this fact. Once again, it loved the recording's innate softness and warmth, and penetrated deep into the 'pores' of the recording. The guitar work was revealed as beautifully syncopated, the vocal harmonies wonderfully done, the percussion tight and committed and the bass guitar tuneful and soulful too.

Compared to my recollections of the previous, non-carbon tubed arm, this seems more insightful. It probes a little deeper into the record and editorialises less about what it finds. Mark Baker describes this in terms of the mid-band being more pronounced, and I know what he means, but it's not a case of simply turning the slider up – it's the quality more than the quantity that's increased.

4hero's 'Morning Child' showed a more subtle, less muddled recorded

acoustic – with a slightly brighter light shone on the midband, but it remains very smooth and actually suited some cartridges (the vdH Frog) and turntables (the GyroDec, which is slightly on the warm side anyway). Of course, I can't account for the changes; it's obviously a combination of both armtube and cable, but they're there all the same – and it pushes this arm quite a way

attack in the bass, along with a sense of complete ease – the cartridge sounding as snug as a bug in a rug.

Feed this tonearm with a well recorded slice of the black stuff and it is supreme, once again reminding me how much difference an extra £2,000 or so can make (compared to the £600 OL Silver). It's a lot of money, but it was a lot of improvement too – I found the stage depth of 'So What' to be quite remarkable. The SMEV wanted to tie everything in a neat package in a quite confined studio, whereas the Conqueror seemed happy to let the boundaries dissolve and the loudspeakers disappear, whilst remaining almost as accurate placing images within the soundstage.

Okay, so I can report faster transients, greater detail and an even better sense of the recorded acoustic, along with the Conqueror's traditional strengths of musical ease and fun, but another key attribute of this arm is its tonal accuracy. Sadly, many turntables are simply too coloured to show this, but put it on a platform like a Michell and you can hear the ringing harmonics of acoustic instruments in all their glory. Kate Bush's 'Feel It' was a case in point; her piano work captured on analogue tape at Abbey Road in the late nineteen seventies is an experience to remember via a pickup arm like the Origin Live. Always tonally highly adept, I feel the new 'c' package has made the arm better still – bringing the recording, warts and all, blinking into the sunlight. It's the stuff of vinyl legend!

## CONCLUSION

Tonearms are very personal things – like watches or even camera lenses I suppose – but for me the Origin Live Conqueror 3c is an exceptional example of the breed. It builds on a very accomplished design and takes it – probably – about as far as it can go. The result is a wonderfully easy, open and even sound that has the uncanny ability to pull you in to the music, rather than tell you how good or bad it is in microscopic detail. It's certainly a significant advance on the previous incarnations of this, which themselves were lovely devices to listen with. As such, it comes strongly recommended for those wanting the ultimate 'real world' tonearm; it's expensive but justifiably so.

### REFERENCE SYSTEM

Michell GyroDec turntable  
Sony TT-S8000 turntable  
SME Series V tonearm  
Origin Live Silver tonearm  
vdH Frog cartridge  
Ortofon MC Windfeld cartridge  
Icon Audio PS3 phono stage  
Sugden IM4 integrated amplifier  
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

“a wonderfully easy, open and even sound that has the uncanny ability to pull you in to the music...”

– of the Roland Dr. Rhythm variety you understand – were crisp and explicitly conveyed, yet not sharp or tiring as they sometimes can be funnily enough – and I was surprised by this too. It was open, clean, matter of fact, full of beans and a joy to behold – my mind was immediately taken from thoughts about pressing quality, recording techniques and the like. It just let the flavour flood out...

Moving to the altogether different America's 'Horse with No Name', and the new Origin Live arm tapped another seam of musical enjoyment. Although the 'Homecoming' album was considerably 'lower fi' than 'Dare', unlike so many tonearms I could mention – especially the SME Series V – the Conqueror didn't remind you of

ahead of the last one.

Bass is *certainly* tauter than before, although it is not quite as sumptuous (read: coloured), making the low frequency regions sound altogether more SME-like, but still it has the immense grip that the SMEV lacks, along with that last few percent of flare flapping power. New Atlantic's 'I Know' (12" Love Decade remix) showed the new Conqueror still to be generous in its low end, giving a whole extra level of commitment to this classic rave track's Roland TB303-driven bottom end. Up into the midband, and the piano pads were wonderful to behold – vast in scale and located with great precision in an otherwise fairly muddy mix. The heavy sequenced disco beats of The Ones' 'Flawless' showed dizzying

# HI-FI WORLD

**VERDICT** ●●●●●

Tangible advance on its already accomplished forebear, this is a brilliant all round pickup arm with a relaxed yet confident and enjoyable sound.

**ORIGIN LIVE CONQUEROR 3C** £2,650

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- musical ease

**AGAINST**  
- nothing