

Origin Live Strata turntable mat: a great all-rounder

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Origin Live Strata turntable mat

It was a fascinating conversation with Origin Live owner and designer Mark Baker at this year's North-West Audio show that convinced me that I had to get hold of a new Strata turntable mat for review. I discovered the difference a mat can make many years ago when Linn brought out a felt mat for their Sondek LP12. It was a huge improvement over the standard rubber mat.

These days I am using an Audio Note TT3 turntable. This uses an acrylic platter, whereas the Linn's was cast aluminium. Audio Note recommend using no mat and I have certainly found that using a felt mat makes the sound worse, as did all the other mats I have tried. Most Origin Live turntables use acrylic platters and over 20 years of research Baker had tried many different materials to find a mat that worked on them. These included, carbon fibre, cork, felt, PVC, polypropylene, polycarbonate, acetal, bronze, stainless steel, solid graphite, fibreglass, Kevlar, rubber, foam, cloth and leather, none of which worked on acrylic platters. He told me these materials often helped on platters made from glass and composite materials, but not on acrylic.

Then one day, explained Baker, he came across a material that "worked wonderfully" on acrylic platters and which he uses on his entry-level Upgrade mat. Over the following eight years, and thousands of prototypes, he found other materials that interacted with the Upgrade mat and improved its performance further. He also discovered that the interaction of the mat material with the record was even more crucial than its interaction with the platter.

All of his extensive research led to the triple-layer Strata mat. He found that specific materials tend to damp down only one narrow frequency band. He concluded that the only way to solve the problem was to create a multi-layer mat using different materials that are effective at dealing with resonances at different frequencies. Part of the difficulty of arriving at the final design was the fact that mat thickness needed to be a maximum of 5mm to avoid problems where users might not be able to raise their tonearms to the correct height.

Baker is keeping the composition and construction of the Strata a closely-guarded secret and despite my cajoling would not reveal the materials used for the three layers. It has a cut-out in the middle to accommodate the record label and is slightly smaller than an LP so that the mat supports the groove area properly, avoiding the outer edge of the LP, which he points out is thicker.



But why do we need a mat at all, I asked Baker? He explains that it helps to decouple the record from unwanted resonances in the platter, which are the result of the vibration of the stylus in the groove, friction in the turntable bearing, noise from the motor transmitted through the belt, and air- and structure-borne vibration from the loudspeakers. He says the record also suffers from unwanted vibrations across the whole audio band induced by the cartridge tracing the groove. The mat needs to absorb these.

Material whirl

I decided to try the mat on a variety of turntables with different platter materials. At home, I used the Strata on my Audio Note TT3/Arm Two/lo1, which has a platter made from a plastics material called Lexan, which is used for motorcycle visors among other things and in some





bulletproof laminates. Audio Note says it has low resonance properties and I have not found any mats so far that improve its sound.

I also paid a visit to my local retailer, Home Media in Maidstone, where they kindly provided a Gold Note T5 with its glass platter, a Rega Planar 10 with a ceramic platter and a Clearaudio Performance DC with its plastics (POM) platter so that I could fully assess the Strata's performance on different materials. Courtesy of the guys at Soundcraft in Ashford, I was also able to try it on a Linn Sondek LP12 with its metal platter.

I was extremely keen to hear what the Strata could do on the TT3's Lexan platter, playing through the Audio Meishu Tonmeister amp and Russell K Red 120Se speakers. Spinning up Stephen Fearing's *Secret of Climbing* album, on Red Lights in the Rain I felt that the Strata mat made his voice cleaner, smoother, less sibilant and more human, while still preserving its power and nuances. Guitar too was more open with more subtle note shape detail and a better sense of body in the lower registers. An impressive start.

On No One Emotion from George Benson's *20/20* album, I felt the various layers of the instrumental mix were better separated with the Strata mat and Benson's vocals were cleaner. The driving synth bass line was also excellent, with the Strata mat bringing greater tightness and movement. It was a similar story on the track Human Nature from Miles Davis's *You're Under Arrest* LP. The bass line seemed tighter and snappier, percussion and drums were sharper and better defined, while Davis's trumpet was clean, expressive and nicely voiced.

On the Planar 10's ceramic platter, I noted similar improvements, with Linda Ronstadt's vocals on Lo Siento Mi Vida from her *Hasten Down the Wind* album sounding cleaner, better focused and powerful without harshness or shouting. The guitars on the intro were also better defined with a better insight into how notes were shaped and played. Bass lines generally were tighter, more tuneful and weightier than with the standard felt mat.

On the Gold Note T5 with its glass platter, the Strata cleaned up vocals and separated out the different strands of the music. It was rhythmically snappier and sharper and bass lines again were tighter and more tuneful. Percussion and drums had more oomph and on balance the overall sound was much improved.

It was much the same with the Clearaudio Performance DC. The Strata seemed to clean up the slight splashiness I noted on cymbals and snare, while vocals were more natural and less forward. On Luther Vandross's I Gave it Up When I Fell in Love from his *Give Me the Reason* album, this dynamic track really moved well with the Strata mat, which conveyed the impetus and dynamics of the track better than with no mat. Luther's voice was also more natural and cleaner.

Finally, it was a very similar story when I tried the Strata on a Linn Sondek LP12 turntable (cast aluminium alloy platter) with Arko arm and Kendo cartridge. Playing Hey Nineteen from Steely Dan's *Gaucha* album, the sound was cleaner and less forward than with the standard felt

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mat, vocals were clearer, synths were better voiced and less aggressive and the bass line was tighter and drove the track along better. On the title track of guitarist Larry Carlton's *Sleepwalk* album, I felt I could hear more note shape and detail on his guitar with the Strata, while the Fender Rhodes piano had more top end sparkle, but without the slightly bright edge of the standard mat. All in all, the Strata worked well on the LP12, making the sound cleaner, less forward, better balanced, more tuneful and more layered.



Versatile

What I think impressed me most about the Origin Live Strata turntable mat was how consistently it performed across a wide variety of different turntables with different platter materials, irrespective of the price of the turntable and whether its platter was made from some sort of plastic, metal alloy, glass or ceramic.

I tried it on many turntables and every time it noticeably cleaned up the sound, removing any aggressive or forward edge, allowing the inner detail on guitar, percussion, saxophone or vocals to shine through. It provided an insight into the various layers of the music and its tight, tuneful and fast-moving bass always imbued the music with great rhythmic integrity and drive. The thickness of the mat did not cause any problems on any of the turntables I tried it on. In the worst case, a slight tweak to the arm height would be all that might be necessary.

My experience suggests that Mark Baker at Origin Live has indeed succeeded in his long quest to produce a mat that works on any kind of platter. At a relatively modest asking price of £295, and with a money-back guarantee from Origin Live, I recommend it most enthusiastically.