

Analog Corner

Michael Fremer



Hand-wringing audiophiles' tales of equipment malfunctions regularly litter my e-mail box. "Why can't this stuff be more reliable?" It has been my experience that most gear is incredibly reliable—or that was my experience until April 2004.

It's been a bad month. The \$350,000/pair Wavac amps reviewed in this issue had obviously been drop-kicked somewhere during their trip from Japan to New Jersey. I suspect Jersey.

Then the Sil-Air compressor Franc Kuzma supplies with his Air Line tonearm (also reviewed in this issue)

spit compressor oil all over the floor every time it pressurized the storage tank and shut down. Obviously, that's not normal behavior, and the compressor is a high-quality product with a reputation of reliability. But because Kuzma neither designed nor makes the compressor, I didn't make a big deal of it.

More April woes: The transport on my Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD player spun out of control and had to be replaced. The Linn Kisto preamp-processor I'm reviewing for *Stereophile Ultimate AV* had some software issues that required it be returned for an upgrade. Then the logic board on my laptop went, and I almost lost this month's column and two equipment reviews.

That brings me to the Origin Live Resolution Modern turntable. The Origin didn't malfunction during the review period, but after I'd had the 'table for a while, the manufacturer sent me a spare DC motor because a few in a recent batch had exhibited "runaway" problems—*ie*, they wouldn't hold speed—and he wanted me to have an easy-to-replace spare in case mine went south. It didn't, until...

One day, toward the conclusion of the review period, I tried to adjust the Origin's speed by tickling the speed-control potentiometer. When Clearaudio's super-accurate 300Hz strobe system then showed that the motor was speed-



Origin Live Resolution Modern with Encounter tonearm and Lyra Helikon SL.

ing up and running away, I immediately replaced it, fired it up again, and—same problem. Turns out the battery in the Clearaudio strobe chose April to run down. Figures.

Origin Live Resolution Modern turntable and Encounter tonearm

British firm Origin Live maintains a low profile Stateside, but its extensive line of turntables and tonearms generates plenty of heat Over There (www.originlive.com). Now, having spent a few months with their midline 'table (\$2970) and third-from-the-top tonearm (\$1495), I know why.

While the instructions say they're "written for people with no previous experience of turntables" and that the Resolution Modern is "simple to set up," that's being optimistic. Even I had trouble, until I better understood certain aspects of Modern's unique design, which is the product of the brain of designer Mark Baker.

The photos in the manual are dark and the instructions are oddly ordered—especially if you do as you're told. For instance, at the end of the "Fit the Arm" section, you're told, "Once the arm is in position, fit the belt over the motor pulley and subplatter, then fit the platter." That's what I did. Under the next heading, "Fit the Sub-Platter & Platter," it says,

"With the syringe supplied, run approx 5 drops of oil into the top of the bearing housing." Guess what that requires you to do. Right.

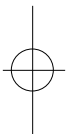
Such quibbles aside, the Resolution Modern actually was easy to set up...once I understood its unique design and gave the directions some leeway. If Origin Live really wants the 'table to be easy for a novice to set up, they need to revise the instructions.

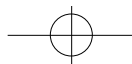
The plinthless Resolution Modern has a complex, single-spring, semi-suspended dual subchassis. A single bolt connects a pivotable, boomerang-shaped subchassis containing the single compressed-spring

support and the two nonspring contact pods. A second, oblong subchassis supports the main bearing housing on one end, the armboard on the other. The two nonspring contact pods are fitted with small rounded points that sit in small indents on the attractively sculpted base, which is finished in piano-black lacquer and sits on three damped feet. The single spring is centered between bearing and armboard, but because of a cutout and the dual-subchassis design, the spring and its adjuster mechanism are entirely isolated from the subchassis that holds the bearing and armboard. Very compact, very low-mass, and very ingenious.

Once the arm and platter assembly were in place, I leveled the 'table by adjusting the height of the single spring-suspended point. Because both the free-standing motor assembly and the main bearing assembly fit through holes in the base, the subchassis sits low in the saddle. The subplatter-and-bearing-spindle assembly is made of relatively low-mass plastic of some sort, fitted with a long, narrow bearing of hardened steel that superficially resembles the one that comes with Pro-Ject's Perspective turntable. A precision-ground flat belt drives the subplatter via a cogless DC motor fitted with a crowned pulley of nicely machined aluminum. A full-size platter of ribbed acrylic sits on small damping pads atop the subplatter. The

PHOTOS: MICHAEL FREMER





speed is electronically adjustable; I had no trouble getting the Resolution Modern to run at precisely 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ and 45rpm... once I'd replaced the battery in the Clearaudio strobe light.

Origin Live's least expensive tonearms are modifications of Rega's OEM RB250 model. But while the Encounter reminds me of a Rega, and it's possible the bearings have Rega origins, it appears to be an original design. In any case, for the time being, Origin Live and Rega tonearms are the only drop-in arm options for Origin Live 'tables.

The Encounter features a large-diameter tapered armtube, milled from a billet of aircraft aluminum alloy, that fits into a sleeve near the bearing housing. The "decoupled" headshell appears to be bolted to the tube. Wiring is one of Origin Live's original claims to fame—the Encounter has high-grade Teflon-insulated silver-plated Litz wire, and connectors of gold-plated copper-beryllium. There's nothing radical or new going on here, just attention to detail and the right combination of high-quality parts. VTA is continuously adjustable, though not during play. The antiskating system is thread-and-weight.

Overall, the Encounter's look, feel, and fit'n'finish are exceptionally high for its modest price of \$1495.

Spectacular Sound: I'm a fan of plinthless turntables, unless the damping is Herculean, as in the SME 30 or Rockport System III Sirius. Less plinth equals reduced energy storage and release, and fewer opportunities for drum-like resonances. So I had high hopes when I began listening to the plinthless Origin Live Resolution Modern and Encounter.

I was not disappointed. In fact, this \$4465 arm-'table combo is one of the finest performers I've heard at any price. It was so good that, when I mounted a low-output Lyra Helikon SL cartridge on the Encounter tonearm and compared it to the combo of Simon Yorke S7 turntable, Kuzma Air Line linear-tracking arm, and Lyra Titan cartridge, all sitting atop my Sounds of Silence Vibraplane active isolation platform, I could make a case for preferring the \$4465 spread to the +\$20,000 variety. The Origin Live combo didn't better the more expensive rig in any given parameter; instead, its synergy of attrib-



Unique Resolution subchassis (with Expressimo Mongoose tonearm) showing bearing housing and three point suspension.

utes combined to create one of the most satisfying performances I've heard from a turntable and tonearm.

The Origins combined the airy, light-on-their-feet performance of the best sprung designs with the rock-solid stability of mass-loaded designs. Sprung 'tables can sound a bit soft and ill-focused compared to mass-loaded designs, and the latter can sound too

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"literal" and hard, especially in their less expensive incarnations. The moderately priced Origin Live rig integrated the best qualities of both designs. Resolution of inner detail and the overall delicacy of the presentation were exceptional. The words that kept coming to mind were *effervescent*—fast without being edgy and hard, graceful and lush without being soft—and *dead quiet*. While the Yorke-Kuzma-Lyra setup was ultimately more powerful and solid and had a richer midrange, the Origin combo's performance

was sufficiently dynamic, detailed, and quiet to keep me happy—permanently. Music emerged from dead silence to create coherent, delicate sound.

I could happily live with this 'table-arm combo because it had no obvious weaknesses. It was especially fine rhythmically, and bass pitch and definition were excellent—perhaps a bit more lithe than my reference, if not quite as solid. When comparisons to a far more expensive front-end result in a balancing of sets of tradeoffs, that's saying something.

When I played my usual LP suspects, I was never disappointed. Nor did it hurt that the power amplifiers were the \$350,000 Wavacs, but that did nothing to change the Origin's impressive performance when compared to my reference analog setup. Particularly noteworthy was the naturalness of transient articulation: neither edgy and tight nor soft and obscured. Usually, moderately priced analog front-ends err on one side or the other. But acoustic guitars sounded natural, and cymbals had plenty of crunch and shimmer. When I played Classic Records' 45rpm edition of the Weavers' *Reunion at Carnegie Hall 1963*, I was pleasantly surprised to hear a clearly defined sense of space: the hall appeared well behind the singers, who were presented with convincing delicacy and transparency.

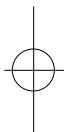
There were negatives. Despite the spring suspension—which really isn't a suspension and can't possibly have a low enough resonant frequency to provide any real isolation—the outside world can rather easily impinge on the Origin Live. Tapping on the Resolution Modern's base, or on the shelf on which it rested, produced loud drumming sounds through the speakers. If you don't have a good stand and a solid floor, proceed with caution.

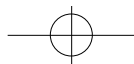
Origin Live's Resolution Modern

In Heavy Rotation

- 1) Ella Fitzgerald, *The Duke Ellington Song Book*, Verve/Speakers Corner 180gm LPs (4)
- 2) Alison Krauss & Union Station, *So Long So Wrong*, Rounder/Mobile Fidelity 180gm LPs (2)
- 3) John Fahey, +, *Revenant Company/Runt* limited-edition LP
- 4) Warren Zevon, *The Wind*, Artemis LP
- 5) Roy Orbison, *The All Time Greatest Hits*, S&P 180gm LPs (2)
- 6) Sonny Rollins, *Saxophone Colossus*, Analogue Productions 45rpm 180gm LPs (2)
- 7) Dolly Varden, *The Dumbest Magnets*, Diverse 180gm LP
- 8) Mission of Burma, *ONoffON*, Matador LPs (2)
- 9) Roy Orbison, *Crying Monument/Classic* 200gm LP (mono, stereo)
- 10) The Yardbirds, *Live! Blueswailing July '64*, Sundazed 180gm LP

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turntable and Encounter tonearm were designed by one man, who listened carefully and fastidiously, tuned and tinkered, and came up with a truly original design. Although some of that design is unorthodox, the Resolution Modern works brilliantly, is well-built, and its price is right. But regardless of price, this is one of the truly special products I've reviewed in the past 18 years.

A less expensive tonearm option

I've been waiting for the right turntable to use with **Expressimo** Audio's Mongoose tonearm (an OEM Rega RB250), rewired with Cardas 33 AWG tonearm cable, Wasatch Electrifying phono interconnect, and specially machined Wasatch phono plugs. I also used their 2X-Treme stub (the shaft on which the counterweight rides) and Heavy Weight counterweight. (For more details on the wiring and plugs, go to www.expressimoaudio.com.) The price is \$575 for the rewired arm with Heavy Weight and 2X-Treme.

The stock stub is a light piece of plastic; the 2X-Treme is a nicely machined piece of aluminum that screws into the back of the bearing housing and locks on tightly. Total cost is about a third the price of Origin Live's Encounter arm. I broke in the cables with a neat device sent me by Origin Live. Then, after listening to the reference LPs I'd used to review the Origin Live Resolution Modern, I dropped in the Mongoose, installed the Lyra Helikon SL cartridge, and listened again.

The Mongoose wasn't as good as the Encounter, but it was still a very good-sounding tonearm. Bass extension was outstanding, if not quite as tightly controlled as the Encounter's, and the overall tonal balance was somewhat darker and drier, not as easy and airy. The Mongoose's soundstaging was comparable with the Encounter's, however, and its image focus was outstanding.

Though I didn't have a stock Rega RB250 with which to compare the Mongoose, I'm sure the wiring change makes a profound difference, and I know from prior experience—see "Analog Corner," May 2003—what the counterweight contributes. If you don't have \$1495 for the Encounter, you can save \$920 by putting Expressimo Audio's Mongoose on the Resolution

Modern and be a very happy analog addict for quite some time.

Three modestly priced phono preamplifiers

If these three phono preamps, which range in price from \$549 to \$990, indicate the current state of phono-preamplifier design, then we're in the midst of a phono-preamp renaissance. It's not surprising—with the resurgence of analog technology, more engineering talent is paying attention, and more new designs are emerging. That creates competition, and challenges busy minds to excel.

Pro-Ject Tube Box Special Edition

(\$549, distributed in the US by Sumiko, www.sumikoaudio.net): The Tube Box is based on the 12AX7 tube and is capable of 60dB of gain. A DIP-switch bank on the chassis bottom lets you choose gains of 40dB for moving-magnet cartridges (47k ohms), or 60dB for moving-coils (1k ohm, 220 ohms, or 100 ohms). While those options are few, they're intelligent choices, though some

tremes. Bass was reasonably well extended but a bit soft, and the top end wasn't the last words in crystalline transparency and transient sparkle, but the mids were seductive. The soundstaging was decent, with a slightly forward projection that somewhat limited overall image depth. The stage width was somewhat compacted toward the middle, but the main attraction was more about lush midband textures than pinpoint imaging and ultratransparency. The dynamics at both ends of the scale were only so-so, with a slight loss of punch at the top end and a noticeable loss of ultra-low-level delicacy and detail. With 12AX7s available from a variety of sources and NOS (new old stock) tubes a reasonably priced option, customizing the sound should be easy. I listened only with the stock tubes.

Most of the shortcomings noted are typical of phono preamps at or around this price point, but the Tube Box Special Edition's rich, airy midband is anything but. The Pro-Ject would be a good companion for a slightly aggressive, perhaps zingy-sounding cartridge in need of some enrichment; inexpensive, etchy solid-state preamps and amps might also benefit. The Tube Box would be an excellent choice for the classical music lover on a budget.

Monolithic Sound PS-2 with HC-1B power supply:

Pony up another \$329, and for a total of \$878 you can have the PS-2 phono preamplifier (\$599) and HC-1b dual-mono power supply (\$279) from Monolithic Sound (www.monolithicsound.com). The PS-2 is an improved version of the PS-1 (\$399), which so impressed me back in the October 2000 "Analog Corner." It features upgraded internal components and higher gain options to better serve lower-output MCs. DIP switches let you select among gain settings of 42dB, 48dB, 54dB, and 60dB (the PS-1 offered only 53dB), at loadings of 47k, 10k, 1k, or 100 ohms—as well as 100, 270, or 370pF capacitance. A 16V wall-wart power supply is included, but it's well worth spending \$279 for the HC-1b dual-mono power supply, which features two 1.5A transformers.

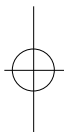
Without being able to do a direct comparison with the PS-1 and HC-1, I can't tell you exactly what sonic improvements may have been made since October 2000. However, like the earlier

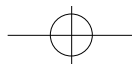


of the higher low-output MCs might be too hot for the MC settings. A subsonic filter (-18dB at 18Hz) is in-circuit at all times. The discrete dual-mono design is powered by a 16V/1A wall wart.

The Tube Box is sturdily built, attractive, and compact. Push the large On/Off button and the two dual-triode tubes glow through the front-panel windows. When the Box had warmed up for half an hour, it exhibited the lush, smooth, honey-gold tonal balance 12AX7s are known for. This sweet-sounding preamp has enough low-noise gain to deal with the Lyra Helikon SL's ultra-low output (0.22mV) without needing a step-up transformer.

The result was a relaxing, graceful sound that was easy on the ears while giving up a bit at the frequency ex-





combo, the PS-2 and HC-1b had an immediately impressive musical grip. It began with solid, tight, extended, well-developed bass and fast, detailed highs. Like the PS-1, the PS-2 sounded slightly dry overall; it didn't produce shimmering, airy, transparent highs, but it did avoid brightness and "etch"—that's a tradeoff I'll take every time. And there was sufficient gain for the very-low-output Lyra Helikon SL. I was impressed with the PS-1 and HC-1; I'm even more taken with these new models.

Like its predecessor, Monolithic Sound's PS-2 was not the ultimate in transparency and air, and it lacked the lush midrange of the less expensive Tube Box. But it produced more solid, substantial, and well-focused images, and noticeably superior bass extension and, especially, control, than the Tube Box. It were also subjectively quieter and more dynamic, with a better sense of rhythm'n'pace. Most impressive, though, was the overall coherence. Loose ends and obvious weaknesses never stuck out, which is why the Monolithic gear kept me happy for a solid week of use with far more expensive associated ancillaries. An inexpensive, fine-sounding phono preamp that's competently designed and built.

Trigon Vanguard II with Volcano II battery power supply: The Trigon Vanguard II phono preamp (\$495) and Volcano II battery power supply (\$495), built in Germany by Trigon and distributed in the US by Immedia (www.immedia-sound.com), was the most expensive of the three, at a total of \$990. It was also the best-sounding. Unfortunately, the instructions are written in impenetrable German-English that sorely needs re-translating.

The Vanguard II comes with an outboard power supply that's more than just a wall wart. Like other battery-powered phono preamps, however, it's best when listened to in that mode, which is what I did. The Vanguard's DIP-switch banks offer a seemingly infinite series of loading and gain options. Four gain switches give you 16



Monolithic Sound PS-2/ HC-1b



Trigon Vanguard II/Volcano battery supply and power



Trigon Vanguard II insides: Op-Amps can sound good!

settings, from 42dB to 66.3dB. Eight switches give you 64 choices of loading, three of capacitance.

The Volcano II battery supply, which can run two Vanguards, connects to the Vanguard II via an Ethernet-like cable (if not an actual Ethernet cable) and is powered by an outboard supply connected via a screw-secured multi-pin computer cable.

The Volcano II can run the Vanguard II for about six hours on pure battery

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power between charges. A microprocessor control lets you run on battery or mains, or on one of a variety of other LED-signaled options I won't go into here. (The instructions are almost impossible to understand, and I don't have the space anyway.) I ran the Vanguard II in pure battery mode at all times (green LED).

Compared to the other two preamps, the Trigon Vanguard II offered the deepest, most expansive sound-stage, the widest range of dynamic contrasts—especially

at the macrodynamic end of the scale—and the greatest transparency, delicacy, and extension in the highs. It sounded sweet on top and free of grain, lucid in the midrange, and solid and tight on bottom. Thanks in part to dead-silent backgrounds, the Vanguard II floated images on a three-dimensional stage as effectively as some far more expensive phono sections I've auditioned.

Overall, the Vanguard II was an outstanding performer. Its only flaw was an occasional slight raggedness on sibilants, but that's often the price to be paid when a designer attempts to provide limitless high-frequency extension and air at a moderate price. But I think the tradeoff is worthwhile in this design; that raggedness is slight, and the Vanguard's transparency and high-frequency extension are exceptionally good.

One of the tracks I relied on while listening to these phono preamps and the Origin Live 'table and arm was Classic Records' 45rpm edition of the Weavers' *Reunion at Carnegie Hall 1963*. The Trigon Vanguard II's rendering of this subtle sonic spectacular was remarkably assured. I haven't kept all the \$1000 phono preamps I've reviewed over the years, so I can't be absolutely sure, but I'm *pretty* sure this is the best one yet—and at that price there are many fine contenders. But before judging for yourself, give the Vanguard II plenty of time to break in.

Postscript

During my last-minute tweaking of this copy, the halogen bulb in my office lamp blew out and left me in the dark. It's been that kind of month. ☒