



A new masterpiece from Oracle Audio

Photos: Michel Bérard

MICHEL BÉRARD

With new turntables proliferating around the world, one wonders whether there is room for yet another new deck, especially in the entry-level audiophile market. Competition at this level is fierce, but the good news for the consumer is that it is driving up the overall level of quality.

Oracle Audio has been in the turntable business for forty years and it shows in this new turntable, an exceptional product in every aspect. To achieve this result required that Oracle Audio reach beyond technique and technology, relying on perseverance and the intuition gained from more than four decades of designing and building turntables. Their new turntable results from the desire to create a product built entirely here, in the Canadian factory in Sherbrooke, Quebec.

MADE HERE, FROM A TO Z

This is a major point. The vast majority of the components that make up the turntable are made by Oracle Audio. This is a daring design in all respects. First, it dares to be 100% locally made at a time when manufacturers must compete with products made in Asia or in other countries providing substantially cheaper labor. Oracle Audio offers a turntable with a level of quality and performance beyond any other turntable that I know of at this price point. All I know is that the company won their bet hands down, this is an achievement of which the team can be proud.

AN ENTIRELY NEW DESIGN – A FIRST IN 25 YEARS

Audiophiles will certainly remember Oracle's legendary Delphi turntable that revolutionized the market when introduced in 1979 and which remains a reference today. When Oracle Audio created the Paris turntable in the mid-90s, it was a clear statement that the company wanted to offer a product accessible to more music lovers. Today, with the Origin, Oracle Audio has produced a precise, musical and very contemporary design that is as easy to assemble as it is to adjust and maintain.

DESCRIPTION

The Origine's chassis comprises three superposed acrylic plates, while the platter is machined from a 23mm single solid piece of acrylic. The deck is devoid of a suspension system and sits on three adjustable Delrin feet. The centre spindle and its housing are derived from the Delphi and Paris models. Driven by a synchronous AC motor, the selection of 33 or 45 rpm is done manually by moving the drive belt to the corresponding pulley diameter, the switch-over is easy and quick. The motor assembly sits apart from the turntable, its installation requires to simply place it close to the platter at the designated location on the left of the turntable, making sure that it does not touch the plinth, to avoid transmitting vibrations.

Examining the turntable closely, we begin to understand how Oracle's engineers managed to keep the production price to a minimum, by simplifying wherever possible. This approach is inspired by the in depth experience learned over forty years. One of the major advantages of the Origine turntable is its new unipivot tonearm, which incorporates a host of principles and techniques that provide outstanding performance. The tonearm, whose main structure is made of Delrin and aluminum, is fixed on a steel stabilizing mass located below the pivot contact point. Note that the pivot contact point is set on the same plane as the stylus contact point on the record and on the same plane as the rear counterweight for added stability. On the tonearm, between the pivot and the needle, sits a moveable Delrin armtube weight, dubbed the "olive". The weight plays a dual role of allowing the variation of the effective mass of the tonearm as a function of cartridge mass, and contributing to the mitigation of resonances. Tracking force is set by a combination of counterweight adjustment and armtube weight adjustment. Internal wiring of the arm is by Cardas and is one of the few parts of the turntable that is not manufactured by Oracle Audio.

The Oracle Origine's tonearm seems to have been inspired in part by the famous Dynavector 507 arm and even more by the Abis SA 1.2, two arms also designed with a mechanism for adjusting their effective mass. The Origine turntable comes equipped with an Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge, a moving magnet design that has garnered much praise from the audiophile press and represents a perfect choice here.

Note that the deck is available in two basic colors, black and white, with a choice of twelve colors for the central acrylic inserts. And if that was not enough, two additional central inserts in one of the twelve colors can be added to the plinth. Easily customizable, the Origine is a design that catches the eye, in a discreet, or not so discreet way. Overall, the Origine has a "look" that is very well accomplished!

INSTALLATION

Setup is simplicity itself. Place the deck at the desired location, insert the platter and adjust the level of the deck using the three feet. Place the motor to the left of the platter, avoiding contact with the chassis. Loop the belt around the platter and the motor pulley corresponding to the desired speed. The tonearm and cartridge are supplied pre-adjusted. Place the arm carefully on its pivot and secure it by fixing it to its front support. The tonearm wire harness coming out of its base is terminated by a 5 pin female connector which connects to a 5 pin header located at the top of the RCA connector box at the rear of the Origine. All that remains is to connect the motor, the RCA connections to the preamplifier input and the ground wire.

LISTENING

Given that I had no phono preamp for moving magnet cartridges, Oracle Audio provided their PH-100 phono preamp for this review. The turntable was run in for a week prior to any serious listening.

Once the phono preamp was delivered, I made the necessary connections and let the components warm up for a few

hours before starting the listening sessions. I had no particular expectations. After reviewing the Paris turntable a few years ago, I was expecting that the Origine, at a fraction of the price, would deliver decent sound in an attractive package. I told myself that Oracle's engineers had created a product with a cool look at an affordable price to meet the increasingly aesthetically oriented expectations of the market.

I must add that when designer Jacques Riendeau and company president Stéphane Nadeau came to deliver and install the turntable at my house, they did not insist on the merits of the Origine. Instead, they focused on the challenges of manufacturing a turntable entirely in their factory in Quebec, Canada.

From the first notes, I could not believe my ears; I almost fell over from the surprise. Without going into details, I listened in rapid succession to a dozen of my reference albums to confirm my initial impressions. I even called Jacques Riendeau to ask him how he had come to such an astonishing result. Here's his response, summarized in a few words: "We worked hard, we used all our passion, expertise, experience and intuition." In retrospect, I understand why Jacques Riendeau had not lauded the sound qualities of the Origine. He knew that he did not need to because it would be obvious upon the first audition. I'm sure he's chuckling as he reads this!

Let's look at the details. What is striking at first is the precision, the definition of layers of sound, the absence of any parasitic resonances, and the clarity of the music, record after record. The Origine does so many things right! As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, this new masterpiece owes its exceptional qualities to forty years of experience and lessons learned. Of course, the Origine does not deliver everything a Delphi can deliver, which is good news for those who have the Delphi or other high-end turntables. On the other hand, what the Origine delivers, it delivers well. I cannot remember such a lengthy listening marathon for a review article. The Origine offers such a high-quality listening experience that it outperforms many decks retailing at twice its price.

My first vinyl record of choice for a comprehensive review is *Oregon* by Oregon. It goes from deep bass to extreme treble. From the depth and width of the sound stage, to instrumental timbre and dynamics, this album is revealing from every point of view... or rather point of listening. This album can be difficult, especially the last two tracks on side A, that can become strident and even unlistenable. The Origine deck smooths the passage; it flows and we can listen without apprehension and let ourselves get carried away by the music. I attribute this largely to the tonearm which seems totally devoid of any resonance or rattle that can make certain passages irritating. There is a solidity to the musical foundation and an absence of any form of parasitic resonances that I found totally seductive.

You may ask what difference there is between the Origine and a high-end reference turntable using a moving-coil cartridge. The shimmering of cymbals is one example, that the Origine in its current form will not reproduce with as much detail, air and space. However, its lack of resonance makes listening *easy*, which I prefer by far to a loss of de-



tail, air and space. This is a turntable that one can listen to for hours.

Back to listening. Michel Petrucciani has always been one of my favorites and here, the sound of his piano is right on, without smearing and solidly anchored. Again, the most impressive aspect is the total absence of any resonance in the piano's high notes.

I recently bought the Boston Pops Orchestra's version of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (directed by Arthur Fiedler), a Living Stereo disc recorded in 1960. It replaced my Philharmonic Orchestra of Monte Carlo version recorded in 1981. The Origine provides space travel at a friendly price. Its precision lets me clearly hear the layers of sound and navigate the twenty or thirty feet that separate the conductor in front from the percussion at the back of the stage, with an almost surgical precision. The Origine cheerfully negotiates the busiest passages and nothing falls apart.

A little surprised with these spectacular results, I wanted to confirm them by installing the Origine in an audiophile friend's system, which is more revealing than mine in terms of resolution. I knew that by changing many parameters, the methodology would not be perfect, but I wanted to be sure and see how the Origine would behave in a different high-end environment.

Surprisingly, in this new environment, the Origine lost its lustre in terms of detail, air and space, but not its precision. I could only attribute this to the phono preamplifier used. I should have brought the Paris phono preamp, but I had no time to repeat the test. Once back home, the Origine shone again, proving how much it benefits from revealing electronics.

Let us return to the distinctive qualities of the Origine and their implications. Its solidity ensures that once the record begins, one enters a three-dimensional musical space. I have never listened to so many records in my tests as with the Origine, since it offers a quality of presence that makes the listener more of a participant than a spectator.

And that's not all! Several times I heard my partner exclaim, "Wow!" spontaneously, without my asking her opinion and without her knowing if it was the Origine or my reference turntable that was playing.

Can I find any fault with the Origine? Oracle Audio has worked hard to achieve this level of sound quality at this

price point and some compromises were certainly needed, for example in the handling of the arm and its cuing mechanism. Placing the needle on the disc may at first seem a little precarious. The arm is not equipped with a fluid damped cuing device and care must be taken when handling it. Motor noise is audible, but does not affect the sound signal. Finally, some will find it strange to have to manually move the drive belt to switch from 33 to 45 rpm.

That said, there are still a few things that I would have liked to investigate, notably the Origine's performance when equipped with a high-end moving coil cartridge. I'm convinced that it would give a lot of cold sweats to many competitors. I know that the Origine is still far from having revealed all that it can deliver.

VERDICT

To conclude, if you intend to buy a turntable in this price range, do not hesitate to buy it before soaring demand pushes up the price. The Origine is a highly effective music-making machine. Oracle strikes again, big time!



Oracle Origine turntable including tonearm and cartridge:

Price: \$2,000 US

Manufacturer-distributor: Oracle Audio

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