

Omega Force

Adam Smith revisits another classic analogue name with Helius Designs' new Omega tonearm...



I am not alone in being surprised by not just how many older names have resurfaced over the past few years, but by the number that have never actually been away. I suppose the most striking example of this was Dual, who relaunched the CS505-4 in this country (see *Hi-Fi World*, July 2007) with the news that supply on the continent had been uninterrupted since we last saw it in this country a good few years ago. Equally, the Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII cartridge remained quietly ticking along in the background before relaunching successfully.

To this list we can now add another manufacturer - Helius Designs. For those of us who have been followers of vinyl for longer than we care to remember, this will conjure up names like the Aureus, Scorpio and Orion. In fact, I am the proud owner of an original Aureus which arrived back only recently from Audio Origami after a rebuild and rewire. The designs of Helius arms gradually evolved from the Aureus to keep pace with the market and, according to many people I

canvassed, ended with the Cyalene.

The thing is though - it didn't! As owner and designer Geoffrey Owen describes on the Helius Designs website, "Helius continued quietly for the next few years, developing its business in laser and astronomical

optics. We serviced arms and quietly sold sufficient to keep the hi-fi business alive". However, a couple of years ago, the decision was taken that it was time to bring the arms to the fore once again and the Omega was born, combining the best features of the Orion and Cyalene and bearing more than a passing resemblance to the latter...

The resulting creation is rather impressive and the Omega comes in two basic variants. The standard, under consideration here, is finished in black with a silver counterweight and uses copper internal wiring, but a second version called the Silver-Ruby is also offered. This arm is silver with a black counterweight, but also uses single strand silver wire and 4mm diameter rubies in the bearings, for reduced friction. This version also commands a cost premium, retailing for £2,395

For both models, Helius have gone for a ten inch nominal length, feeling that this strikes the best compromise between reducing tracking error but still being manageable enough on most turntables. In addition, they will make you a bespoke Omega up to twelve inches in length if you prefer, and have plans to introduce a new budget nine inch arm if you really cannot cope with anything longer. Other made-to-order options on the Omega include a removable headshell, different mass counterweights and the promise of a new VTA system that will allow adjustment of this parameter whilst the arm is playing. Finally, a further upgrade option on both versions is cryogenically treated silver litz wire.

The Omega is described as a

medium mass arm and can operate with cartridges weighing between 7 and 23g with the standard counterweight. It is supplied in very effective packaging and with very clear and concise instructions that not only cover full setup and installation, but give good insight into the design processes. The one small stumbling block I encountered during mounting is that fitment requires a large hole of 43mm diameter, with three further fixing holes on a 54mm radius beyond this. Whilst this is not a problem as such, it does mean that the arm will not fit a standard Rega, Linn or SME cutout and the main pillar is even too wide to fit a Slatedeck Universal Arm Mount Adaptor if like me, you use one on an SME cutout. Helius will advise however, and are happy to speak with your turntable manufacturer in order to have something suitable fabricated.

Build quality and finish of the Omega is utterly fabulous. Even if the counterweight fitting and adjustments still cannot quite match the utterly perfect tactile response of an SME (mind you, nothing does, in my experience!), the Helius has that 'hewn from solid' feel that makes it a delight to handle and use.

SOUND QUALITY

It is perhaps not a surprise that the essential sonic character of this arm is pretty much in line with its appearance and build - basically, it's a seriously big and bold performer. From the first few feet of groove under the stylus, the Helius revealed that it has redoubtable bass abilities, digging deeply into LPs and pulling bass lines to the fore with highly commendable precision. Even more





"this very fine design approaches any performance with sheer gusto..."

encouragingly, this low end was not just a big blob, but detailed, tuneful and speedy. The Omega shrugged off challenging bass lines with contemptuous ease, pummeling the sofa with the likes of Robert Miles' 'Dreamland' album, but capturing every single note from Tom Pearce's double bass on the Cinematic Orchestra's 'Ma Fleur' LP.

Interestingly, it was the essential rhythm of a track that the Omega used as a building block, no matter what type of music was playing. With rock music it brought bass guitars and drums expertly to the fore, hanging vocals and backing instruments out around them, and pulled a similar trick with classical music, using the rhythm section to provide a solid foundation. As a result, the Helius added more scale and authority to Eleanor McEvoy's performance on her 'Yola' album than many other arms I have heard, even if it still could not quite match the atmospheric spaciousness offered by the likes of the Audio Origami PU7, for example.

Additionally, the Omega's midrange proved adept at teasing everything out of the material playing. A subtle bongo from the very back of Swing out Sister's live version of 'Surrender' from Jazz Cafe was easily discernible and Corrine Drewery's vocals projected strongly into the listening environment. The Omega does tend to have a quite forward balance, pushing the performance well out into the room and leaving no stone unturned, but this stays short of tipping over into stridency provided that a smooth cartridge and phono stage are chosen; I cannot help thinking that the likes of my own

AT-OC9MLII might not be such a good partner. I feel this may be down to the nature of the tube itself, which can be seen under measurement as a midrange peak, but it is best thought of as a character that needs to be worked with, rather than a problem to be wary of.

Across the top end, the Omega remains sweet and detailed at all times and has the ability to pep up a rather more reserved cartridge like our Ortofon Rondo Bronze without any unpleasant side effects. Hi-hats stepped forward out of the background to shimmer seductively and cymbals decayed with a most commensurate metallic ring.

CONCLUSION

Once again, another name reappears into the public spotlight and deserves to be welcomed back with open arms (groan). The Helius Omega is a very fine design which approaches any performance with gusto.

Given the range of options that the arm can be fitted with, its superlative build quality and finish, and plus the addition of an even

higher specification version, I feel that Helius have another success on their hands. It is good to see the name back again.

REFERENCE SYSTEM
 Pioneer PLC-590 turntable
 Ortofon Rondo Bronze & MC Windfeld cartridges
 Trichord Diablo phono stage
 Electrocompaniet PL-2 amplifier
 Spondor S8e loudspeakers



VERDICT ●●●●●
 Exquisitely made and stylish arm that sounds superb; the Omega brings a previously well known name back to the fore.

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FOR
 - bass
 - detail
 - soundstaging
 - build quality

AGAINST
 - bespoke mounting pattern

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Not only is the Helius something of a literal heavyweight, it measures rather differently to many other arms we have tested recently as a result. Most obvious is that the main resonant frequency of the main arm tube is lower than most but it is also at a relatively low magnitude and shows a good level of damping. This should bode well for a tight and rhythmical low end.

A second peak higher in frequency is rather sharper and may add some liveliness to the midrange and the higher end of the spectrum also shows a few larger peaks. These however, are quite distinct, rather than being in one huge lump and so the arm's behaviour should remain well controlled in this area. Overall the Omega is a well

behaved arm that exhibits the sort of vibration traits that might be expected as a result of its mass. It actually is not completely dissimilar in measurement terms to the SME V and so is likely to offer a similarly tight and well focused sound. AS

ARM VIBRATION

