

Neodio • Origine CD Player

"...cuts right to the heart of the music."

by [Roy Gregory](#) | March 26, 2014

At a time when optical-disc replay has already been consigned to the dustbin of a disappointing history by the evangelical hordes of digital-file replay, an intemperate and noisy crowd that seemingly sweep all before them, producing a new, high-end CD player (let alone one with a price-tag of €35,000) might seem somewhere between the act of a madman and a provocation. Indeed, given the degree of coincidence and functional connection between file-based replay systems and the Internet, anybody rash enough to offer a high-performance digital solution based on optical replay should probably expect a tsunami of online derision. My contrary nature means that that alone might constitute reason enough for me to take this player seriously (man, I hate knee-jerk reactions based entirely on poorly considered assumptions), but more than that, its sonic performance demonstrates emphatically why rushing to judgment can lead to serious mistakes and some pretty disastrous wrong turns -- as the history of audio so readily demonstrates. Just imagine the irony of all those who sold their records for CD and had to try and buy those collections back, now having to do the same again, but this time with silver disc.



Price: €35,000.

Warranty: Two years parts and labor.

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But even without the looming shadow of file fundamentalism, the Neodio Origine would be an intriguing player. The elegant simplicity of its clean, almost featureless aesthetic is quirky and confident, stylish and classy -- and unmistakably, indeed almost prototypically, French. But it also demonstrates how aesthetics extend into technology and technology itself is just as much an expression of cultural identity as it is of art. For the Origine doesn't just come from France, it comes from Bordeaux, designed and built in a city steeped in revolution -- and wine! By now, those of you who are already convinced that I've taken leave of my senses will be nodding sagely, while those who are still on the fence are getting ready to jump. Cultural heritage? Wine? A CD player in this day and age? Well, maybe it is stretching a point, but the juxtaposition is both so apposite and so obvious it's hard to ignore -- a bit like the Neodio

Origine itself.

Perhaps I'd better explain. When I use the word *obvious* I'm not describing the sound of the player -- more its impact. The Origine doesn't sound obvious, but it is obviously special, very special indeed. As to its revolutionary roots, Neodio started life as first cousin to the equally excellent and equally impressive Lavardin amplifiers, completely separate companies but with shared technological DNA that is apparent in the easy, uncluttered and unforced way they go about making music. Whilst each brand has followed its own path and carved its own identity, that sonic character lives on and is unmistakable in the underpinnings that support and define the sound of the Origine. Here we have a musical performance that is almost perfectly balanced, structured and layered, remarkable for its presence, body and consistency. It manages to be muscular without being muscle bound, supple and expressive without any hint of strident overtones. You want to talk about length? This is a player that rewards the long-term listener, that allows a session to evolve and develop, a wine that. . . . Oops -- sorry, just for a moment I thought we were talking Margaux. That's what I mean: think Bordeaux and you think history; you think great wines, and now you should also think Neodio. If this player is the audio embodiment of the environment and culture that produced it, then it's true to type and that's no bad thing.

Buying by the label

There are products that sound just the way they look and those that signpost just what you should expect. The Origine is not amongst them. Its monolithic black exterior, polished copper belt and beautifully subtle controls are at once understated and enigmatic. But even the sheer solidity of its looks doesn't prepare you for the player's substantial 28kg (62-pound) dead weight. The immaculate plate-to-plate-constructed chassis is built from five-layer laminated material, the black anodized outer skin being bonded to further layers of aluminum and Hi-Macs, a rigid polymer composite with excellent self-damping, similar in some ways to Corian. The base of the chassis is constructed from laminated stainless steel and Hi-Macs, and the whole thing is connected together via machined aluminum junctions. The result is a mechanically rigid and electrically continuous casework (for good EMI/RFI protection) that has excellent resonant behavior and well-distributed chassis modes.

The idea is to kill internal resonance, not just sinking parasitic microphony into the chassis, but offering an onward exit path via the three hard-coupled feet with their captive ball bearings. The transport is unique to Neodio, a proprietary, CD-only development of a high-quality DVD-ROM drive, encased in its own dedicated Hi-Macs casework and connected to the chassis baseplate by a viscoelastic material. The power supply is fully encapsulated and heavily damped, while separate boards house the heavily regulated digital stage with its discrete analog clock and the SMT output stage (balanced or single ended) and again all rigidly coupled to the baseplate. Lift the hood of the Origine and you might wonder why the interior is so sparsely populated, but that's partly a function of modern PCB/SMT technology, partly a recognition of the importance of thermal stability when it comes to consistent performance.

The DAC itself is a 24-bit/192kHz-capable design, and the Origine offers users a choice of RCA S/PDIF or USB inputs as well as the Red Book feed from the CD transport. Neodio keep details of the actual silicon elements employed close to their chest, but stress the importance of both component selection and PCB implementation in the design and optimization process. They point out that literally every aspect of and element used in the Origine design has been rigorously selected by ear. The unusual adoption of an analog clock (as opposed to a quartz-locked design) was a case in point. It was found that

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asynchronous reclocking of data using their own in-house clock design eliminated both the resonant frequency of the quartz clock circuit and its susceptibility to external mechanical interference, resulting in far more natural sound. Of course, such claims are hard to verify except in terms of the final results, but in this case those are hard to argue with.

Asked about the additional inputs and the USB in particular, Neodio were pretty dismissive, seeing them as necessary rather than essential. Perhaps accepting the reality that in today's market such niceties would generally be considered essentials by listeners, they are in practice simply an adjunct to the Origine's *raison d'être*. As the company puts it, "In our opinion, once you have listened to the CD part of the Origine you will have a tendency to forget PC or Mac sources. The player gives customers the opportunity to rediscover their CD library, almost like a new 'arm and cartridge on a record player." Once again, having played with various sources for the USB input, it's hard to argue with their point of view. The music coming off of the CD transport is just so darned engaging.

The sparsely populated rear panel is a match for the plain front fascia, where half a dozen diminutive vertical buttons offer you the basic functions. Their matte-white finish and narrow width suggest a delicacy that is at odds with their definite latched action and broad spacing, a combination that makes them easy to use. The player's white LED display is hidden behind micro-perforations to the left of the disc drawer, is easy to read and easy to defeat via the appropriately elegant remote control. This shares the same solid, positive feel and aesthetic as the main chassis, and also extends the excellent ergonomics. As well as the standard functions and display defeat, it allows you to switch inputs, reverse absolute phase and repeat tracks or discs. There is also a pair of volume up and down buttons, should you possess a Neodio amplifier to go with your player. Light enough to be handled easily, it is heavy enough to prove reassuring, should your listening session be unexpectedly interrupted by an unwelcome intruder.

Drinking by the bottle

Some products take a while to hit their stride. Sometimes it takes you a while to get a handle on a new arrival. But not so the Neodio Origine. Right from the very first notes it was clear that here was a player that was doing something both very different and very good. It has an immediate sense of rightness that's hard to miss -- although identifying just what's so right and why does take a little longer.

Put a familiar recording in the Origine's tray and what should you expect to hear? I'll use the Orfeo hybrid SACD issue of Kleiber conducting the Bayerisches Staatsorchester in a live performance of Beethoven's 7th Symphony [Orfeo C700 051B] recorded on the 3rd of May, 1982 -- partly because both the music and the performance are so familiar and partly because this was the disc that first revealed the Origine's real qualities to me.

The first and most obvious feature is apparent before the music even starts. This player presents a seriously explicit and genuinely convincing sense of acoustic space. So much so that in the case of the live concert performance I'm describing here, the audience's applause envelops you, the air and space around the stage and orchestra creating a tangible atmosphere and sense of presence. I'd almost suggest that imaging freaks should drop everything instantly and form an orderly queue at their nearest Neodio dealer -- except that waiting in line is so very un-French! Within that big, stable acoustic space, individual sound sources, be they coughs or shuffles from the audience, or the notes emanating from instruments, are precisely located. That makes for some pretty spooky effects, as the natural sounds of human presence intrude on your private listening experience, but it also provides exactly the sense of clarity and natural separation to the elements in the orchestra that make live music so easy to follow and understand.

Along with that clarity and separation, the other thing you'll immediately notice is the unfettered dynamic range, the ability to express dynamic shadings and respond to even the most insistent dynamic demands. But as impressive as the full orchestral crescendos certainly are, it is the quieter passages that are more captivating -- and revealing of this player's special qualities. For all the impressive vim and vigor of the opening passage, with its beautifully layered and ramped structure, it's the instrumental interplay, the exchanges between woodwinds and strings that follow that (literally) set the tone, establishing both the pace and the pattern of what is to follow. It is Kleiber's complete control, his ability to weld the orchestra into a single whole, bent to his expressive will, a direction that simultaneously combines and frees the players, that make his performances so powerful and engaging. Playing this disc in the Origine, you'll experience the *vrai*-Kleiber; it's scintillating! The pace and tempo, the weight and balance, the precision of each layer, when to hold back and when to cut loose; the performance has a momentum, an internal, irresistible logic that doesn't just propel it forward but explains it as it goes. This is more than ebb and flow, the ability to let music pulse and breathe; this is the mark of a player that truly grasps the essence of the performance, re-creating it and releasing it for the rest of the system to thrive on.

With that natural sense of musical progression come other effects. You'll find yourself playing discs right through, rather than bobbing and weaving between favorite tracks. Just as discs that hit the tray tend to remain there for the duration, listening sessions tend to stretch out, each disc seemingly leading almost inevitably to another. The symptoms of *audiophilia nervosa* are apparently banished. Nobody talks over the music and nobody cuts tracks off halfway through.

As musically rewarding as the Origine is, it is also demanding of partnering equipment, and whilst I wouldn't describe it as unforgiving, to hear just what it's capable of you'll need a system that can respond to its strengths. That means bandwidth (especially at the bottom end) and headroom. The Neodio delivers its dynamic demands with an enthusiasm that dictates both a sure footing and steady grip. Insufficient low-frequency extension and you'll lose that incredible sense of space and presence. Too tight a hold and the system will flatten the dynamics, squeezing the life out of the performance, the verve out of the playing; too loose and the resulting messy exaggeration and overshoot will destroy the control of pace, the carefully re-created inner structure of the music.

Does that mean that the already breathtakingly expensive Origine demands partners of equivalent cost? Not necessarily. Rather, it means that it demands the right partners -- and the more affordable they are, the more carefully they'll need to be selected. I achieved fabulous results in systems ranging from the Avantgarde Trios driven by their own amps (a system that really does bring new meaning to the term *headroom*) to the Coincident Pure Reference Extremes paired with the Connoisseur 4.2/Berning Quadrature Z combination. But the system that will linger in my memory, simply because it delivered so much musical bang for the relatively modest bucks invested, teamed the Origine with the Aesthetix Janus Signature preamp and Atlas Signature Stereo power amp, driving the new Wilson Benesch Square 5 (a £9000/pair floorstander that mimics the topology and technology of the Cardinal and warrants serious consideration). Combined cost of that lot runs out at a shade more than the player itself, so it's hardly bargain basement -- but a bargain it is when you hear what it delivers.

And deliver it does. Kleiber's considerable artistic strengths, his sheer drive, energy and sense of purpose might seem tailor-made for the Neodio -- but in fact it's the other way round, the player unleashing the performance buried in the disc's pits. Shift gear and shift genre, singer/songwriter or gentle jazz, and the results are just as impressive, just as seductively engaging. The intimacy and delicacy of the husband-and-wife vocals on "The Thing You Love (Is Killing You)" (Stephen Dawson and Diane Christiansen, *Duets* [www.undertowmusic.com]) is almost achingly effective. The subliminal rhythmic connection that underpins the musical conversation between the Duke and Ray Brown (*This One's For Blanton* [Analogue Productions CAPJ 015]) makes a complex, convoluted and ultimately mesmerizing dance of a performance that more than a few systems reduce to nothing more than noise. And the fact that I've just used three stalwarts from my quiver of reviewer references is no accident either. It's how the Origine elevates the familiar that makes it so impressive. Once you recognize what the Origine brings to the party, its appreciation of the inner workings, the outer environment of a performance, it's not so much that you can't miss it, it simply becomes a natural part of proceedings, taken for granted right up to the point where you remove it from the equation.

Appreciating the finer things

So, the Neodio Origine is the latest in a new generation of products to raise the digital performance bar. Along with the Jeff Rowland Aeris, Wadax Pre 1 Mk II (review forthcoming) and the dCS Vivaldi, it has redefined my expectations from digital sources; unlike the others it does so by nailing its colors firmly and securely to the Red Book replay mast. Musically enticing as well as sonically spectacular, making sense of performance and composition, song and singer with an easy, unforced confidence, it achieves a level of convincing musical expression and integrity on a broad range of material and recordings that not too long ago I would have considered all but impossible from CD. But how does it do it? What is it about the Origine's musical presentation that invests performances with this natural,

communicative quality and grace?

There are two essential factors that contribute to the natural musical presentation. Sure, if you start to dismantle its sonic character, it does many, many things, most of them extremely well, but the whole edifice rests on two distinct facets of its performance: stability and dynamic discrimination. Neither rates very high in the "sonically sexy" listings (not like *slam* or *impact*, *transparency* or *resolution*), but both are absolutely fundamental to a presentation that is natural, intelligible and convincing, although for many readers their precise meanings (and implications) may be less than clear.

Let's start with stability -- and let's start with it as it manifests itself in the case of the Neodio. One of the things that makes the musical presentation of the Origine so immediately arresting is the absolute stability of the acoustic image it creates. That may seem like a slightly odd observation, but listen to the Neodio and not only are the soundstage boundaries completely steady, the positioning of the images on the stage fixed and repeatable, so that an instrument or voice always reappears in exactly the same place, but the air within the acoustic is stable too. Listen to most digital sources and it is remarkable how variable the extent and positioning of their images are -- and how disturbing that is for the ear and brain of the listener. In a hall, the walls don't move, nor does the band (at least not in terms of location). If you want your system to ease the suspension of disbelief, to help transport you back to that original musical event, then holding the image of that event, the elements that build it, completely still is fundamental. Images that move, that wander, that climb with changes in pitch or swarm forward with changes in level all destroy that sense of event. The Neodio doesn't just develop one of the most explicit and credible images I've heard from any digital source, it holds it absolutely rock solid. It doesn't shift with level, with the musical density or the complexity of the signal, the number of instruments in the orchestra or the number playing. Of course, that presupposes that the recording captured a coherent image and the Neodio is just as adept at revealing clumsy spot-miking or multi-track studio recordings -- although even here it seems to have that happy knack of adding shape and substance, believable human input to the proceedings rather than pulling them apart. Its ability to create a believable orchestral or operatic acoustic is exceptional, but when it comes to *Blanton*, I've never heard the height, position and angle of Ellington's piano so clearly revealed (even from the record). On the Dawson/Christiansen *Duets*, there are almost ghostly moments as she turns her head to catch a cue, perhaps to make eye contact. It's an unmistakably human subtext to the activity of performance. No system can do that unless it not only recovers the raw data but maintains its precise place in space -- and just as importantly in time.

The Origine's stability is, as I've already suggested, the keystone that supports and binds its other qualities. The absolute clarity of its presentation is a feature of all the company's products I've experienced, in turn built on tightly focused and defined images and the absence of intra-instrumental noise or grain. Put simply, the images don't bleed into the space that should exist between them, while the air in the acoustic space is properly clear of spurious signal and noise. These are products that make most other electronics sound cluttered and congested, yet unlike other ultra high-definition devices it's not at the expense of the life and vitality of the performance. That is down to the temporal integrity. Things don't just happen where they should. They happen *when* they should too.

Which brings us to that second key quality. Dynamic discrimination is the ability to accurately map the relative levels of the instruments in a band, as well as changes in those levels. In its simplest form, that means the ability to trace changes in the bow pressure or angle of a soloist, the diction and palette of a singer. These tiny details are what reveal the performer's technique -- that performer's means of expression -- and properly rendered they are what bring a recorded performance to life. They map the note-to-note construction of musical line, the creation and combination of musical phrases. It's the attribute that sets the Lyra/Connoisseur components apart from the competition, and the Neodio is superior to any other digital component I've heard in this regard. What sets the Lyras and the Neodio ahead of the alternatives is their ability to extend the insight beyond the soloist and extend it across a band or orchestra. The further they can carry it, the better and more convincing the results.

But just like stability, dynamic discrimination is a lightning rod for other more familiar aspects of performance, binding them together into a convincing whole. So it is indicative of exceptional linearity across the range. Lumps and bumps in the spectral balance, discontinuities in the projection of musical energy (too much or too little) rapidly erode the integrity and sense of the performance. Above all, the sort of excess energy that is characterized as *warmth* (especially in the midbass) or *rounding* (generally at higher frequencies) seriously undermines the immediacy and intimacy in the playing, the emotional and communicative qualities of the singing. To really excel when it comes to dynamic discrimination and musical expression, any system should be neutral -- but it absolutely must be even, top to bottom. That's definitely something that applies to the Lyras. It should come as no surprise that it applies to the Origine too. The sheer coherence of its spatial presentation is an almost ostentatious statement of intent. That clarity and transparency, the integrity of the three-dimensional presentation, would highlight the slightest blip, lump or bump. Instead it highlights just how uneven and tailored most alternative audio sources really are.

Now, tie that absolute stability, the ability to place each and every musician in space, to position their contributions in time, to the insight into their playing provided by that dynamic resolution and you can see how together they form the basis for a remarkably musical and meaningful performance. It's not just that you can "see" where the performers are positioned, or that you can hear how they're playing what they're playing -- it's how it all fits together to reconstruct the sense, not just of the individual lines but of the performance as a whole. Dynamic shadings that track an instrument's contribution rather than sitting on it; that allow it to swell just enough but no more, rather than playing safe and subtly diminishing its output; that accurately sustains a fading note, letting it hang right up to the point where the performer damps it; these are the things that re-create the tension and human agency in a recording, that make for a performance that's vivid, structured and energetic rather than dull or distant. The result is beguilingly natural, both in terms of overall perspective and progression, the way the performance develops through the piece. The transition from one instrument to another, one phrase or theme to another, seems utterly natural -- almost predictable, given 20/20 hindsight. Even the musical surprises seem to fit perfectly into the overall scheme of things. The music that comes from the Origine is full of direction and purpose, meaning and intent -- whether that purpose is founded in drive or delicacy, power or nuance. There are other source components that can communicate as directly and

forcefully as this, but very few of them are digital. If you are ever minded to wonder why someone composed this music or why this band is playing it, the Origine will leave you in no doubt.

The other standout ability possessed by the Origine is its all-embracing attitude to music. This player will do it all. Big orchestral war-horses from the likes of Shostakovich or Rachmaninov thrive on the seemingly unlimited dynamic range, its ability to remain consistent and stable under the most demanding conditions. Baroque music is beautifully served by its uncongested sense of structure, jazz just digs that sure-footed timing while voices and small ensembles are fantastically immediate and intimate.

The other "B" word

By now you will have gathered that this is a truly exceptional (albeit expensive) CD player. In some ways that is sufficient to justify its existence and your interest. It presents a compelling argument as to the continuing relevance of optical-disc replay at a time when so many members of the audio community seem willing to consign it to the technological trash heap. It is awfully hard to hear a player like this and not to be impressed.

Which raises the question, Is this the best digital front-end money can buy? To which the answer is *no*. Leaving aside the issues of format compatibility and versatility (there are those who will want to play CD, higher-resolution files than the 24-bit/192kHz USB input allows and also rip discs to an external drive) there is the simple fact that no machine can be all things to all men. There are those who will find the Neodio lacking in warmth, its images lacking in body and shape, who find its lack of additive energy or coloration disconcerting, just as there are those who take sugar in their coffee and who find the Lyra cartridges too lean for their tastes. In part that's the price you pay for the life, energy and organization this player brings to the reproduction of recorded music -- something you either value or you don't. After all, one of the fascinations of hi-fi is the way a system works to create a lens that in turn alters your perspective on the performance. Alternatively you can focus on the performance itself, its sense and understanding that sense -- the approach that has always appealed to me. If that's your stance, then the Neodio Origine might well be your poster boy. But even then there are questions of balance, issues of preference. Bordeaux produces many great wines, but there's also Burgundy.

The Origine is aptly named. It cuts right to the heart of the music, the motivation behind the score and the performance. It is undoubtedly one of the finest digital front-ends I have had the pleasure of enjoying, but it is not without a character. It lacks the absolute substance and harmonic resolution of the Wadax, and I haven't had the opportunity to spend enough time with the dCS Vivaldi (yet) to compare them directly. I worry about the long-term appearance of those white control buttons and I've gotten used to having a few more inputs and outputs. But. . . . But. . . . But. . . . I love the unimpeded, uninflected honesty and directness, the sheer clarity of the Origine's musical communication. I love its delicacy, its deft way with a musical line, its ability to combine interlocking lines, to respond to sudden, dramatic dynamic shifts. I love its dimensional coherence, although that's really just the icing on the cake of its preternatural sense of musical structure. Most of all -- I love the way it looks and the insouciant raspberry it blows in the face of market forces.

Could I live with the Neodio Origine? It's far from the perfect solution for a reviewer, but I'd have an awful lot of fun trying to get by. If you're somebody who just wants to enjoy music and remains to be convinced by the smoke and mirrors of computer audio, the Neodio will be music to your ears. If you've already welcomed file formats with open arms, this could just be the player to give you pause. Either way, the Neodio Origine does a remarkable job of replaying Red Book CDs, and with all those existing discs out there, there will be a few lucky takers for whom its price is irrelevant. ☺

Associated Equipment

Analog: VPI Classic 4 turntable with SDS; VPI JMW 12.7 and Tri-Planar Mk VII UII tonearms; Lyra Titan i, Scala, Dorian and Dorian Mono cartridges; Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement cartridge; van den Hul Condor cartridge; Allnic Puritas and Puritas Mono cartridges; Nordost Odin tonearm lead; Connoisseur 4.2PLE phono stage.

Digital: CEC TL-3N CD transport, Wadia S7i CD player, dCS Paganini and Vivaldi transports, Wadax Pre 1 digital control unit.

Preamps: Aesthetix Janus Signature, Connoisseur 4.2.

Power amps: Aesthetix Atlas Signature Stereo, Berning Quadrature Z monoblocks, Jeff Rowland Design

Group Continuum S2 integrated amp, Naim NAP 300 stereo amp, VTL MB-185 Signature Series III monoblocks.

Speakers: Avantgarde Trio, Coincident Speaker Technology Pure Reference Extreme, Wilson Benesch Square Five, Raidho C1.1, Focal Scala Utopia V2.

Interconnects and speaker cables: Complete looms of Nordost Odin, Crystal Cable Absolute Dream or Ultra from AC socket to speaker terminals. Power distribution was via Quantum QRT QB8s or Crystal Cable Power Strip Diamonds, with a mix of Quantum Qx2 and Qx4 power purifiers and Qv2 AC harmonizers.

Supports: Racks are Hutter Racktime or Quadraspire SVT Bamboo. These are used with Nordost SortKone equipment couplers throughout. Cables are elevated on Ayre myrtle-wood blocks or HECC Panda Feet.

Nordost Sort Füt units were used under the speakers.

Acoustic treatments: As well as the broadband absorption placed behind the listening seat, I employ a combination of the LeadingEdge D Panel and Flat Panel microperforated acoustic devices. These remarkably simple yet incredibly effective acoustic panels have become absolutely indispensable when it comes to hearing what the system is actually doing.

Accessories: Essential accessories include the Feickert protractor, a USB microscope and Aesthetix cartridge demagnetizer, a precision spirit level and laser, a really long tape measure and plenty of masking tape. I also make extensive use of the Furutech anti-static and demagnetizing devices and the VPI Typhoon record-cleaning machine. The Dr. Feickert PlatterSpeed app has to be the best ever case of digital aiding analog.