

hardware review

AVID Ingenium SE – a turntable to grow with

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AVID Ingenium SE turntable & arm

The AVID Ingenium SE is a belt driven, unsuspended turntable and the most affordable member of the AVID range. It represents the latest evolution of a design that has been on a longer and more varied journey than you might expect of a device designed to perform a single apparently simple function.

The origin of the Ingenium is simple enough. Everything the company does begins at the top and works down. In the case of turntables, this means that the Acutus; the original and ongoing flagship of the range came first as the best turntable that company founder Conrad Mas knew how to build. When the time came to make a more affordable turntable, the process involved changing to the absolute minimum number of parts and design elements. Then, when a more affordable version of *that* was needed, the second level becomes the point from which development begins. Over time, the Acutus sired a family of turntables with the Ingenium at the bottom.

To begin with, the Ingenium was offered in a manner not dissimilar to other AVID turntables. It could be ordered with different arm cutouts which in turn accepted a host of arms (both 9 and 12 inches long) and you could even order a twin armed one. I reviewed one of these 'Twins' back in 2014 and I liked so much I bought it and still own it. The catch was that the ideals of an 'entry level turntable' and something with multiple configurations and thus a host of different versions to build are not terribly compatible with each other. Fitting an arm is not necessarily something someone new to record players wants to do either.

As a result, in 2018, AVID changed tack. The different arm mounts (and the Twin) were dispensed with and it became the Plug & Play. This was available in a single version; one arm mount, drilled for Rega arms and factory fitted with an unbranded version of the Rega RB110

and Carbon cartridge that Rega uses on the Planar 1. The result was a turntable that both did what it said on the tin and offered one of the easiest opportunities to demonstrate to people that **it is emphatically *not* just the arm and cartridge that makes a difference to how a turntable sounds.**

At the same time, AVID also created a series of upgrades that allowed the basic Plug & Play to become something more capable still. A metal platter could replace the MDF one and pair of off board power supplies could be ordered to boost performance. What AVID *couldn't* do was offer an arm or cartridge upgrade as their arms begin at £1,800 and their cartridges start at £2,500 which would put the Ingenium in a radically different space. When the company consolidated the range of turntables between Acutus and Ingenium into one model (Relveo), it also meant there was a hefty gap between the entry rung and the one above.



This means, a brisk 485 words into the review, we're ready to talk about the Ingenium SE you see here. This third phase of Ingenium existence is – fittingly – intended to do three things. The first is that it features a key hardware update over previous versions. The second is that it allows the option of adding the existing upgrades from the point of purchase. The third is that the bottleneck imparted by the Plug & Play's arm and cartridge is attended to as well. The result is more expensive than the Ingenium it replaces but makes for a more logical range with Relveo and Acutus.

The hardware change is pretty significant too. Data from the development of the Relveo has been used to create a revised motor in a considerably more inert housing. As the only point on a turntable where power is present, lower vibration and greater smoothness here is invaluable in terms of the state of the playing surface. The motor is placed in new metalwork that feels considerably more substantial than before. Tellingly, this new motor doesn't need the rubber footing that the old one had in order to be completely silent and it also benefits from a detachable power cable.

At the other end of the power cable, the Ingenium SE also benefits from the simpler of the two optional power supplies for the Plug & Play becoming a standard piece of equipment. This is a constant speed device (so speed change is via moving the belt) built around a purpose-designed mains transformer and dedicated control electronics which ensure that the motor receives a stable feed. Operationally, this is also light years ahead of the older arrangement which used a light switch style arrangement on the captive power cord.

The arm has been upgraded too. AVID has stuck with Rega for the SE but the RB110 has been replaced by an RB330 which is a considerably more capable (and upgradeable) arm. An adapter is available that would allow you to fit an AVID arm in the future as well as anything else that's 9 inches long on an 'old or new Rega' mount. The company has neatly sidestepped the cartridge issue by leaving it up to you to decide what to fit; something that makes gains in



terms of being able to ensure the performance of the Ingenium SE is exactly to your liking but does make it fractionally less convenient than rivals.

The chassis that sits between the upgraded sections continues largely as it has since the Ingenium hit the market. It is a two-piece cruciform with the longer section housing the bearing and tonearm mount, and the shorter crossbeam adding stability. The motor is not attached to the chassis; instead it sits in free space behind the main chassis member. The feet are pliant rubber and add some useful isolation from the outside world. When AVID switched to making the Ingenium with one arm mount, the end of the chassis was changed to a flat diagonal strake with a more prominent AVID 'A' and this is retained here.

AVID places huge importance on the bearing, both for reasons of noise reaching the playing surface and because the premise of all their turntables is to dissipate energy away from the surface via the bearing. To this end considerable attention has been lavished on it. It is set forward from the centre of the chassis which means that you can see the entire assembly from the front. The bearing comprises a shaft, with the actual bearing itself sat at the top.

A subplatter slides down this bearing housing and this provides a lip where the belt attaches. On top of this, the platter is then fitted and a clamp then secures the record against the cork top of the platter via a threaded spindle. The basic Ingenium SE ships with an MDF platter but an extra £400 at purchase or £500 later on secures you the 'upgrade' platter which substitutes aluminium for MDF. This platter has four drilled holes in the bottom to which bolts can be fitted that drop into matching holes on the subplatter for a better fixing.

Aesthetically, the Ingenium SE sits in a group of products defined by their almost total focus on functionality. You can reasonably argue that the diagonal strake under the arm and the embossed 'A' are technically styling but that's as far as it goes. Every single other piece of the AVID is there because it needs to be there. The result should be entirely matter of fact but the Ingenium SE achieves a kind of beauty by being so utterly free of adornment or frippery. The standard of build and finish is excellent and the revised packaging is logical and easy to extract the parts from.

Sound quality

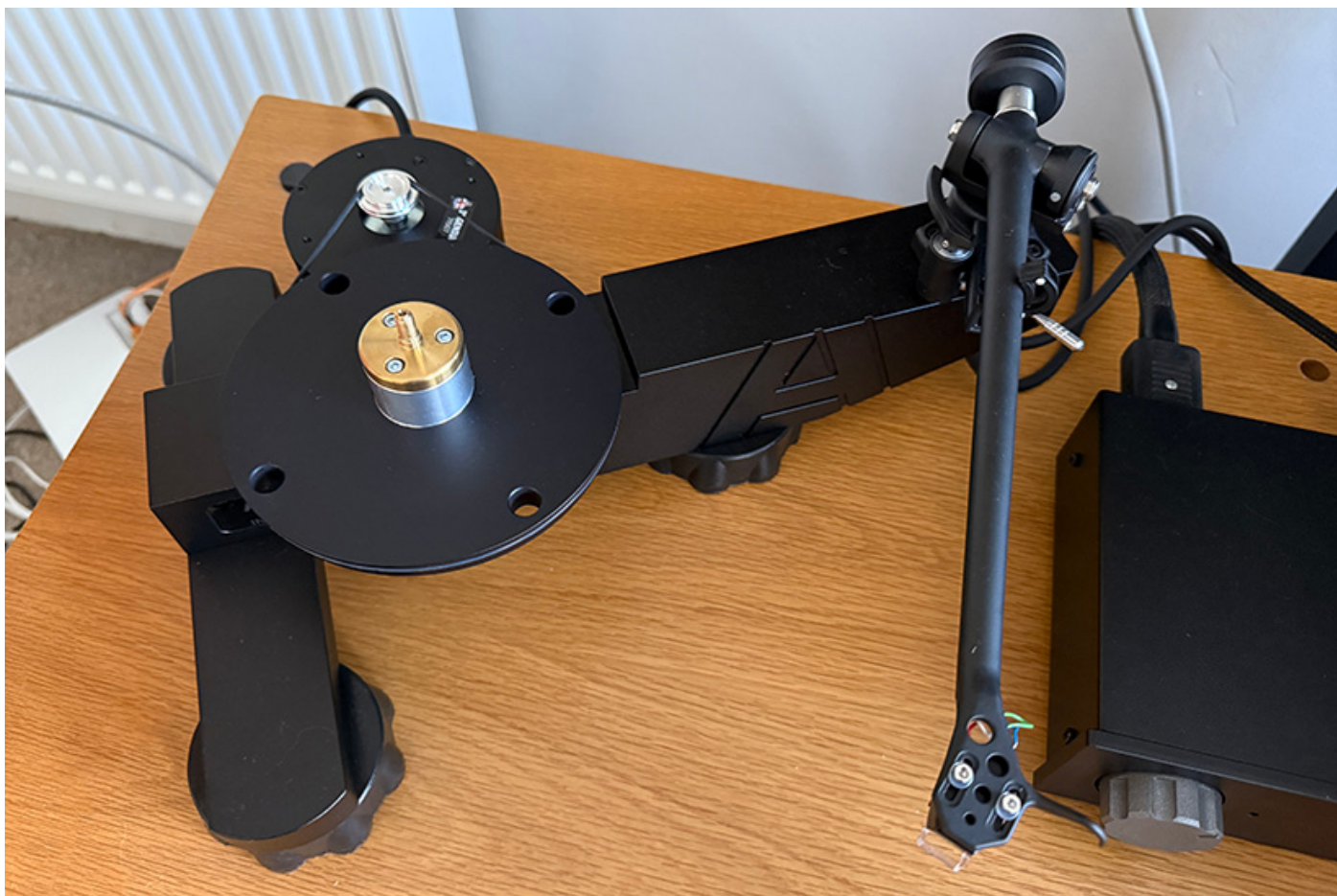
I kicked off testing the Ingenium SE with the standard MDF platter and with a Gold Note Vasari Gold moving magnet cartridge on the arm. I'm a big fan of the Vasari family of cartridges and know they work well on the end of the RB330 (it goes without saying that Rega own designs will as well). Having lived with my Ingenium for as long as I have, some aspects of the performance were immediately familiar... but some parts were rather more different than I was expecting.

Even before you get the stylus into a groove, there are differences. The MDF platter is much lighter than the metal unit but even allowing for this, the new motor starts with an almost direct drive level of urgency. Stop watching the Ingenium rotate and actually start listening to it and this extra motor heft finds its way into the performance too. Boards of Canada's *Inferno*

AVID Ingenium SE

retains the traditional 'noises you feel as well as hear' presentation that the duo are known for and the Ingenium delivers superb low end extension. The depth and definition on offer, even with the MDF platter are very nearly as good as the 'Rega side' of my Twin with its metal platter.

There's something else too. Listening to Manchester Orchestra's *The Million Masks of God* allows the Ingenium SE to demonstrate an urgency and flow that helps turn the listening experience from 'presentation' to 'performance.' It's never overt and it doesn't detract from this



being one of the most revealing turntables I know anywhere near the price but it means that the unsettling, restless energy of *Angel of Death* is better conveyed.

This fundamentally neutral delivery also means that the Ingenium is a tremendous foil for reflecting differences in phono cartridges; indeed it's what the resident one has been doing with considerable efficiency for over a decade. Switch the Gold Note for a Goldring Eroica HX high output moving coil and the greater bite and slightly more forward presentation of the Goldring ensures that Goldfrapp's *Silver Eye* keeps its slightly ballistic edge intact while still being impressively refined. Attach £1,400 of Vertere Dark Sabre to the RB330 and, notwithstanding that the counterweight has about half a millimetre more travel before it falls off the back of the arm stub, the astonishing lack of congestion that the Dark Sabre excels at is replicated on the Ingenium SE.

Heavy metal

Before you so much as think about going long on a cartridge though, you need the metal platter; ideally from day one. I know £400 for a platter might sound like a lot but the difference in performance is utterly profound. It was the single biggest step forward on my Ingenium and it remains the case here. What's interesting is that the improvements aren't necessarily what you might expect. Bass stays much the same but the stereo image manages to become wider and better defined at the same time and the jump in fine detail on Fink's *The City is Coming to Erase it All* is so significant that going back to the MDF platter afterwards feels pretty disappointing.

What's more, that potent new motor spins up the heavier platter with a confidence that the older motor never really mustered. Even with a single belt (older Ingenium motors with external power supplies have twin belt pulleys), I no longer felt the instinct to give it a slight flick to help it get going. It's worth pointing out that changing speeds with the metal platter is going to be best

achieved with clear access to the underside of the platter as lifting the metal platter off is not a task to be undertaken lightly. There is also the option to buy the Ingenium SE with the optional speed control PSU and metal platter but that does raise the price to £4,295.

For me, this means that the metal platter Ingenium SE with single speed PSU at £2,995 is the sweet spot of the range. If we make the inevitable comparison to Rega's offerings, it puts it £1,000 over the Planar 8 less cartridge and £1,000 under the Planar 10 in the same condition and this feels right in practise. Both Regas benefit from electronic speed control which the Ingenium SE doesn't but this will be of different importance to people depending on the makeup of their collection. Even with the RB330 to the Planar 8's RB880 arm, I feel that the AVID's sheer resolving power gives it the edge while it has to give a little ground to the Planar 10's ability to effectively disappear out of the performance altogether.

Where the AVID scores over both Planars and a great many rivals is how much stretch is left in the basic turntable. You could easily justify fitting Altus arm at £1,800 or a Rega RB3000, Michell Tecnoarm II or a member of the Audio Note or Origin Live family of arms and it will respond to their increase in capability; I suspect that an Ingenium SE with an RB3000 would give a Planar 10 (factory fitted with the same arm) a very good fight.

Conclusion

What results is the best judged phase of the Ingenium yet. The core of the Ingenium is comfortably into its second decade but it's still very hard to match near the price point. It now ships with an arm that extracts more from that core and that allows more logical access to the upgrades, including that all important metal platter. As a turntable to grow with, the Ingenium SE remains one of the best options going but now the performance out of the box is genuinely enticing too.

Pros

- Outstanding detail, clarity and neutrality
- Excellent upgrade potential with arm and cartridge choices
- Improved motor delivers greater drive and refinement
- Superb build quality and engineering
- Metal platter upgrade offers a dramatic performance boost

Cons

- Manual belt change required for speed switching
- Best performance depends on optional metal platter
- Cartridge not included
- No dust cover

