



Rega Io Integrated Amplifier

Wednesday, June 17, 2020 Jason Kennedy

At the Bristol Show where the notion of a 2m social distance was totally unheard of Rega showed a complete vinyl replay system with a price of just £1,000. Now that might not seem all that impressive in the general scheme of things but when you consider that it is built entirely in the UK and comes from a company with a very good reputation, the full awesomeness of the deal is more obvious. The system consists of a Planar 1 turntable, the new Io integrated amplifier and the not yet in production Kyte loudspeaker, the latter being the most radical element with its phenolic resin cabinet. But the Io at £379 is a remarkable achievement for a British company given that the previous entry level amp, Brio, is £599.

The Io is a diminutive thing, smaller than a Cyrus and yet it has all that you need to build a system around it, a 30W class A/B amplifier, MM phono stage for the turntable and two line inputs for any other sources you want to add. There is even a minijack headphone socket on the front and full remote control.



As well as being the smallest Rega amplifier it's also the first one designed by Ashton Wagner who based the Io on the Brio but had to make changes apart from the casework to bring the price down. He said that the real differences are the power supply which is closer to that in the Brio-R, more affordable op-amps and a simpler power transformer without isolated windings, plus of course the reduction in inputs. In his words: "We really wanted to focus on giving the maximum sonic punch at the price point, which informed our decisions about what to keep in and what to leave out. A lot of the cost savings came from running the amp at a lower power level, which allowed us to use a smaller, simpler case. We also put a lot of work into figuring out how to streamline the assembly process via the design of the product".

So it really is as simple and straightforward an amp as Rega can build but it doesn't cut corners when it comes to the parts that count. The front panel controls for input selection and volume are plastic as is the surround on the fascia but the box itself is solid and nicely constructed and the inputs and terminals on the back are of a decent quality. Given that most operation will be with the remote handset the limited tactility of the on amp controls is not a big issue. The remote does pretty much everything including control other components such as Rega CD players, and with only three inputs one of which is phono it's also easy to find the source you require.



Sound quality

I started off by putting the Io in a system that approximates to the budget one that Rega had in Bristol, with a P2 turntable and RX3 loudspeakers on a standard rack with basic power cables and only slightly OTT Townshend Isolda speaker cable. No isolation products were used but neither were spikes, so a real world entry level system, or as near as I could rustle up. It proved very entertaining, delivering tight solid grooves, decent power and good vocal clarity, on Yussef Kamaal's Black Focus the kick drum had plenty of impact and the snare had decent snap. Overall the Io delivers plenty of drive with control, this was made clear on the percussive electronica of Floating Points' Les Alpx where the power and dynamics of the big blips and bumps that kick it off were good and chewy, more importantly it sounded like music and not a series of synth and sample notes, which is not always the case with this track. The bass line of Funkadelic's Music for my Mother was thick and heavy, just the way they made it and the system delivered the essence of the track in full effect, its analogue origins being perfectly clear. It has a directness and detail level that is frankly surprising given the modest nature of the system, but all Rega systems tend to do this.

Sarathay Korwar's Bol from last year's More Arriving album sounds much more up to date, it's clean and the vocals project well but there's a hardness to it that is less appealing, this is partly because a lot of detail is compressed into

a small dynamic space but also because of the digital nature of that compression. The Funkadelic is no less limited but it sounds warmer and smoother. I tried a very different record in *Beggars Banquet* by the Rolling Stones, this has some heavy cultural appropriation on *Prodigal Son* where Jagger does his best aged bluesman wail to great effect over acoustic guitar and drums. Things are much more interesting on the raw *Stray Cat Blues* where the guitar playing cuts through the compression and gets to the quick. It reminds you that this band never quite matched its Brian Jones era and that whenever I start playing great records on a Rega I forget about sound quality and get distracted by the music. But this is because that's what comes first, whatever limitations or foibles the system has do not intrude on the performance on the recording.



To check out the line inputs I hooked up a Rega Saturn-R, the only CD player I have, and put on Jack DeJohnette's *In Movement* a recent ECM recording of drums, sax and bass/synth. Here the image lacked the height it can achieve with bigger (in all senses) speakers but the slow burn of the music was very powerful, and the quiet noodling from the rhythm players as easy to follow as the lead horn. It got quite beguiling on the title track thanks to excellent timing, there was a slight sense that the amp was getting to its limit at times but this is not an easy disc to reproduce well, you need a lot of power and a very clean, smooth source for best results.

I also put the lo into the 'big' system with full equipment isolation, decent power leads and serious signal cables. Here I paired it with the PMC twenty5.22i bookshelf speakers reviewed recently and, just for the fun of it, a Rega P10/Aphelion 2 turntable with Tom Evan's Groove+ SRX phono stage. And you know what, it was great. It drove the PMCs remarkably well and produced some delightful music, not least Tom Waits' *Rain Dogs* (check out the Waits documentary on iPlayer) which had me dancing around the room like a loon. It's inevitably not as revealing as the bigger amps generally found in this system but what it lacks in transparency it makes up for in timing and musical coherence. I also put on Alfred Brendel playing Haydn and the spirited style of playing was made very clear indeed, it could have been smoother perhaps but this is why you don't put budget amps with high resolution speakers, it's unbalanced but very enjoyable nonetheless.

The final pairing went the opposite way on the speaker front, I pulled out a pair of Q Acoustics 3010 budget bookshelves, one of the least expensive decent speakers you can buy. This combo proved crude but entertaining with decent bass for the box size and imaging that could have come from a rather more pricey pairing. I played a live version of Zappa's *Sharleena*, the one where Frank's son Dweezil gets to let rip. It sounded good enough to make it clear why his siblings Moon Unit and Ahmet decided to make Dweezil's life difficult after both parents had died. *Valley Girl* was exploitation, *Sharleena* is self expression live on stage with the master.

The Rega Io is a great little amplifier, it packs a punch that you don't get from the far more highly featured competition that exists on the market and delivers music that you just want to keep playing. It will be intriguing to hear how it works with the Kyte speakers when they come through but in the meantime we have a British amplifier that most music loving Brits can afford.

SPECIFICATIONS:

- Type: Integrated amplifier
- Analogue inputs: MM phono, 2 line-level
- Digital inputs: none
- Analogue outputs: tape
- Bluetooth: no
- Input impedance: line – 47kOhms, Phono – 47kOhms, 220pF
- Headphone Loads: 32 – 300 Ohms
- Power Output: 30W into 8 Ohms
- Dimensions (HxWxD): 68 x 180 x 290mm
- Weight: 2.9kg
- Warranty: lifetime

PRICE: [\$849]