

TONEAudio.

ISSUE 8. 2007



Just how much turntable can you get for \$350? The Rega P1

A number of us on the TONE staff have owned a lot of Rega tables over the years, and I still have a P25 that has had all of the upgrades that we have performed in various articles here and a bone-stock P3, so when the chance to get our hands on the new P1 that all the message boards are buzzing about, I didn't need my arm twisted. And this P1 is staying in the TONE family, going on to our webmaster Eddie Kaddi, to rekindle his interest in vinyl. *(continued)*

FUN RIGHT OUT OF THE BOX

In our sister publication, TONE-Photo, we like to talk about the 5 minute test. Can you take a new digital camera out of the box, ignore the instructions and start taking acceptable pictures in five minutes or less? Due to their nature, almost all turntables flunk this test, but the P1 is really easy. Place the belt around the pulleys, put the platter on (MDF in the P1 instead of the usual glass Rega platter), the mat and make sure the counterweight is screwed all the way up towards the tonearm stub. That's it! The Ortofon cartridge is already installed.

Because I can't stand it, I need to investigate and tweek when necessary, so I got out the Shure stylus gauge and the tracking force was spot on, the speed checked out as well. This is something that has dogged Rega in the past, but this one's on the money, so no worries there either. Personally, I'd still get a stylus force gauge of some kind if you are a newcomer to the vinyl world, because you are going to want to swap that Ortofon OM-5 cartridge for something else one of these days...

THE TWELVE THOUSAND DOLLAR QUESTION

To be completely unfair to this little table, I plugged it into input three of my reference system and switched back and forth between the P1, my Avid Volvere and SME 10, now upgraded to have the SME V arm. The clamp on both of these turntables weighs as much as the P1, so I was anxious to see just what the limits of the performance envelope would be right away.

Ok, the big boys aren't going up for sale on Audiogon just yet, but this table is WAY better than I expected for the money. The big problem that has occasionally plagued lower end Rega tables in years past has been speed accuracy. The test sample had perfect speed accuracy so I think the folks at Rega have this nailed.

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The P1 also features a new, lower cost arm than the RB300 fitted to the P3, which has become an industry standard over the years.

Many other manufacturers buy it as the OEM 300 and fit it to their tables, so you know they are on to something good. The arm on the P1 features a plastic headshell at the end of the turntable instead of the one-piece aluminum integral headshell on the RB300 arm, but in the context of what this table costs, not inappropriate.

But this little table sounds damn good! The Ortofon cartridge has a bit of graininess, but threw a pretty wide soundstage. What you lose over the really high end tables is that sense of ease, finesse and resolution, but that's as it should be. The Rega P1 does a

great job at capturing the essence of LP playback and it easily trounces CD players in the 500-dollar range.

BACK TO THE REAL WORLD

So, I plugged the P1 into my vintage system, which now consists of a Conrad-Johnson PV-1, my Phase Linear 400 and a pair of ACI Sapphire XLs. Ok, it's a semi-vintage system. Deciding to relax with Larry Ferrari, I got really weird and listened to a half hour's worth of Hammond organ music before moving on. Now that I was thoroughly relaxed, I could concentrate.

Even on a much more realistic system, the P1's character came through. Still feeling a bit squirrely, I plopped in **Trini Lopez At PJ's** (Recorded live!) and drove everyone here to the brink of madness, but what I noticed again about the P1, is how well it does with the fundamentals. This table/cartridge combo does very well getting some air out of the recording, and has a very good midrange tonal character. *(continued)*



High frequencies are also pretty natural, not harsh. Again, compared to my reference tables, there is a lot more grain and haze than I'm used to, but believe it or not, this record is really good to pick out little details in the audience on the sing along portion, revealing a lot of depth and air.

Trust me, if I pulled a disc from the 13 thousand dollar Meridian 808 and put it in a 350-dollar CD player, you'd be looking for a window to jump out of.

Before everyone decided to kill me I moved along to some somewhat normal music. James Taylor's **Sweet Baby James** was my next choice and again, good music was flowing. On a modest system, if you are listening to LPs for the first time, I think you will be shocked at how much music you were missing from that entry level CD player. With a lot of good used vinyl still available, you could buy a P1 and a couple hundred albums for a grand and have a lot of fun enjoying music. And that, my friends is what it's all about...

I ran through some of my favorite Jazz and Rock LPs and the P1 never failed to put a smile on my face.

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Because the P1 does not have an RB 250 or RB300 arm, it does not have the upgrade path that the P3 possesses, but there are a few things you can do to this table to wring out a bit more music. The easiest and least expensive is to substitute the stock MDF platter for the glass platter that comes stock on a P2/P3/P25. You can find them on EBay for about 25 bucks from someone who upgraded their table. Just in case you can't find this on EBay, you can call your Rega dealer (or The Sound Organisation) and order their 'platter matter' kit for \$69.

As I just happened to have one of these lying around from my P25 upgrade project, this was a snap. This gives the music more weight, and expands the soundstage somewhat, definitely the best 25 bucks you will ever spend on a tweak!

The next thing you can do is put a better cartridge on the P1. Because of it's limited upgrade path, I wouldn't go nuts but something like a Sumiko Blue Point or a modest Grado will take you to another level of musicality. Beyond that, you really are approaching the replacement

cost of the table, so it doesn't make a lot of sense to go much further.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Rega P1 delivers a lot of music for \$350, and commits no real sins. The build quality is as good or better than other tables at this price point and only has a few minor nits to pick: It still has the turnoff thump that my P3 and P25 exhibit to some degree and the extreme lower bass is limited, however it does have a bit of a midbass bump that is not at all offensive and will probably add a little bit of musicality to the modest priced systems that it will be used in.

I nominate the Rega P1 for our first Exceptional Value Award for 2007. It's worth every penny and if it holds up like my P3 (which still runs fine after 30 years), will still be working for Eddie's grandkids as well as it does today.

If you are new to vinyl or the audio world and want to spin records on a budget, I can't imagine a better value than the P1! ●

