

## EQUIPMENT REPORT

# Rega P1

Art Dudley RECORD PLAYER



cutline

**DESCRIPTION** Two-speed, belt-driven turntable with synchronous AC motor, MDF platter, pivoted tonearm with aluminum-alloy armtube, moving-magnet phono cartridge with replaceable stylus. Wow and flutter: unspecified. Rumble: unspecified.

Tonearm spindle to pivot distance: 222.8mm. Tonearm effective length: 240mm. Downforce: noncalibrated counterweight. Antiskating: calibrated sliding magnet.

**DIMENSIONS** 17.5" (450mm) W by ca 4.5" (115mm) H (with dustcover) by 15" (385mm) D. Weight: not specified.

**FINISH** Gray semigloss.

**SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT**

**REVIEWED** 00235.

**PRICE** \$350. Approximate number of dealers: 125.

**MANUFACTURER** Rega Research Ltd., 119 Park Street, Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex, England SS0 7PD, UK.

Web: [www.rega.co.uk](http://www.rega.co.uk). US distributor: The Sound Organisation, 159 Leslie Street, Dallas, TX 75207. Tel: (972) 234-0182. Fax: (972) 234-0249. Web: [www.soundorg.com](http://www.soundorg.com).

**F**or a word that first appeared in print only 35 years ago, *prequel* has a lot of impact—if only in a commercial sense. The television series *Smallville* has become a staple of American broadcasting. Film producers gambled millions on the chance that audiences would want to know what happened when Batman *began*. And while moviegoers have turned their backs on the apparently awful *Hannibal Rising*, the book of the same name is doing brisk business indeed.

Our antediluvian interest isn't limited to superheroes and scary creeps: After enjoying the Rega Planar 2 record player for 32 years, and the Rega Planar 3 for almost as long, someone in the audio world finally got around to asking: *What about the Planar 1?*

Thus the stage was set for Rega to fill in the missing first chapter, and their new P1 record player has now reached our shores. Intended as a bargain among bargains, the Rega P1 is an old formula brought to life with new parts—including a brand-new tonearm, the Rega RB100.

### Description

Like most Rega record players—and especially like the very first one, the Planar 3—the P1 has a purposeful, unfussy appearance: a simple-looking, lightweight wooden plinth covered in dark, semigloss laminate. The underlying design is less simple, however—something that Rega's many imitators have missed over the years—and is the direct result of designer Roy Gandy's abiding belief that a mas-

sive plinth is massively good for one thing only: the storing of unwanted resonant energy (which *always* gets rereleased, and which doesn't wait for you to flip the record over before doing so). That plinth sits on three of the same multi-tiered rubber pods that have supported Rega Planar turntables since time out of mind: Each of the three feet supports an area of different mass compared with the other two, and is thus "tuned" to a slightly different frequency.

The Rega P1 also uses the same sort of molded subplatter, with the same sort of interference-fit bearing spindle, as Planars gone by, and to which is fitted the same round-cross-section drive belt. The outside diameter of the P1's bearing well is only 7/16" compared with the 11/16" of the P3, yet their bores are the same, as are their captured thrust balls and reddish gear oil. The Dutch-sourced AC motor is a bit less refined than the one used in the P2 and P3, and topped with a similarly less select pulley; the only drive circuitry to speak of is the usual three-part "phasing" network, to get the platter turning in the proper direction.

That's all well and good. But in order to sell the P1 for \$350—a significant savings<sup>1</sup> compared with the already affordable P2 (\$525)—Rega had to economize in two other, more major ways. The first of those is the aforementioned RB100 tonearm, which is outwardly similar to the very successful RB300 family of arms, despite its simpler construction: The one-piece armtube casting has given way to a simple alloy tube with a bonded aluminum headshell, and the spring-actuated downforce of the more expensive tonearms—actually an adjustable spring whose *upward* pressure is relieved as downforce is increased—has been replaced with a simple adjustable counterweight. Damped cueing and magnetic antiskating remain, as does the arm's basic effective length of 240mm.

The second major scale-back is even more drastic: For the P1, Rega has forgone their famous glass platter in favor of one machined from MDF. That's right: Put away the Windex and get out the Pledge. The fiberboard platter is 11/16" thick, and is machined in an effort to concentrate a bit more mass

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toward the periphery than toward the center—although I can't imagine it makes much of a difference, given MDF's low mass. The platter is sprayed black and topped with a somewhat coarser version of the standard Rega felt mat.

### Setup

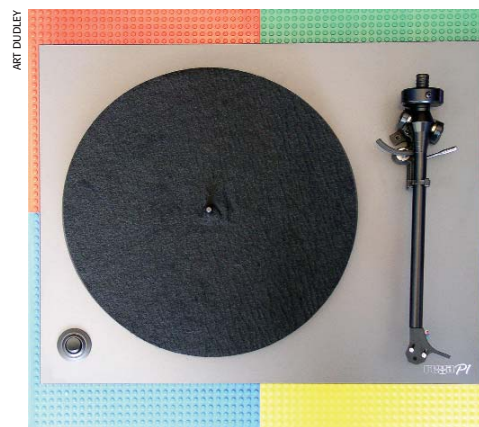
In an effort to make the P1 record player even more attractive to the first-time buyer, Rega bundles it with an Ortofon OMB 5E, a moving-magnet phono cartridge of presumably humble cost. (The OMB 5E, an OEM-only model offered with record players from a number of different manufacturers, can't be purchased separately.) In fact, Rega hasn't just *bundled* the cartridge—they've installed it, and aligned it to perfection.<sup>2</sup>

There's even more to it than that—or less, depending on your point of view: In mapping out their new RB100 tonearm, Rega designed its counterweight so that the user could scoot it all the way forward, to the limit of its travel, to achieve a tracking force of approximately 1.75gm when used with a cartridge weighing 4.8gm—which just happens to be the mass of the humble Ortofon.

The implication, while less than staggering, is at least mildly impressive: To get the P1 up and running, all you have to do is remove it from its box, plug it in, snap the hinged dustcover in place, put the platter and mat on the subplatter, place the counterweight on the tonearm, rotate the counterweight toward the bearing until it can move no farther, slide the antiskating control toward the notch labeled "2," and play records. You don't need a horoscope or a microscope.

I tried mounting other cartridges in the P1—noting, in the process, that the Ortofon was a little too tall for an unshimmed Rega tonearm—and had especially good luck with both a Rega Elys moving-magnet and a Goldring

<sup>2</sup> The cartridge on my sample was indeed set up perfectly, but in accordance with Rega's own alignment scheme: a double-null geometry that differs from others in that its innermost null point is closer to the lead-out groove. Prospective buyers should also note that the RB100 has shorter cartridge-alignment slots than other Rega tonearms, and does not allow quite enough overhang to achieve perfect Baerwald alignment with many cartridges.



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Elite moving-coil. Even without numerical calibrations on the counterweight, downforce was easy to set: A half-turn of the weight corresponded with a 1gm change in force (confirmed with my Technics electronic pressure gauge). Counter to my experience with other Rega arms, the RB100's antiskating force seemed a bit on the high side for a given downforce-correlated setting.

The RB100's bearings appeared free of egregious friction—although the high residual antiskating force made this a little more difficult than usual to check—and while the MDF platter wasn't entirely free from runout error, it was shockingly good for a product in this price range. On four-figure turntables, I've seen platters made of both alloy and acrylic that weren't nearly as true. Platter speed was spot-on at 45rpm, but over 1% high at 33.3rpm, which most users would consider audible.

### Performance

The Rega P1 surprised me by being the rare turntable whose performance changed noticeably during the break-in period. It was a decently musical player right from the start, but its sound became a bit cleaner after the first week, with an audible decrease in flutter. Perhaps the bearing, or even the drive motor itself, required running in?

Whatever the reason, it took a little while for the Rega to sound like itself—which I would describe as unsurprisingly pacy, and not at all bright or crisp. Listeners whose analog experience runs deeper, and whose tastes are arguably more sophisticated, might consider the P1 a bit dark sounding; I imagine that its

<sup>1</sup> By my calculation, the P1 is 33.33% less expensive than the P2. Surely that is not a coincidence.

target audience will think of it less as dark and more as *forgiving*.

As in: forgiving of crappy-sounding records, among whose number my copy of the Flying Burrito Brothers' *The Gilded Palace of Sin* (A&M SP 4175) must surely count. It's a worn-out copy of an indifferent pressing of a foolishly equalized recording—but on the Rega P1 it sounded downright tolerable. Fact is, I was able to enjoy it with this player somewhat more than with other, more expensive rigs I've had in-house.

As for most other LPs I tried, the Rega P1 didn't just do an adequate job with musical basics—it nailed them. On Neil Young's "When God Made Me," from *Prairie Wind* (Reprise/Classical 49593-1), the choir in the final verse makes its entrance on the *off* beat—and the Rega captured the tension in those moments to fine, dramatic effect. On the Peter Maag recording of Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture* (Decca/Speakers Corner SXL 2246/45), although the P1 didn't have the same clarity in the bass registers as the more expensive Rega P3, the P1 did a comparably fine job of putting across the tension in the playing, and the piece's momentum and flow overall.

And while the aforementioned more expensive Rega player was better at communicating the differences between, say, a Fender and a Rickenbacker electric bass, the P1 was almost as good at letting Klaus Voorman's great, simple bass line in "Remember," from John Lennon's *Plastic Ono Band* (Apple SW 3372), sound deep and tuneful and appropriately insistent.

Surprisingly, the Rega P1 was also very good with spatial information, especially when used with the Goldring MC cartridge—which didn't outclass or outperform the inexpensive RB100 in any way that I could hear. That Neil Young record came across with fine depth and, for lack of a better word, *specificity*; so did that clear and slightly forward recording of Schubert's String Quintet in C, D.956, by the Bulgarian Quartet plus Roland Pidoux (Musical Heritage Society 4118)—the instruments sounded big, present, and remarkably solid.

What did the significantly more expensive Rega P9 (\$4195 with arm)—or the Linn LP12 (\$2400 without arm), for that matter—have over

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the P1? Apart from very slightly deeper bass and richer, more realistic colors and textures, the move to a more sophisticated turntable netted an even more natural, organic sense of flow—or, looked at from the other direction, a less mechanical sound. Consequently, listening to a record and appreciating it *as music* was easier with the better players, although the P1 was acceptably good enough in that regard. And in case "acceptably good" sounds like faint praise, keep in mind that a few more expensive contemporary turntables that I've heard, and more than a few CD players, don't even get *that* far.

Sonically, as opposed to musically, the only consistent flaw I heard in the P1's performance was a lingering trace of pitch instability, as heard in sustained piano chords and the like. On records such as a fine reissue of Clifford Curzon's *A Liszt Recital* (Decca/Speakers Corner SXL 6076), and even during some of the many long *legato* phrases in the *Adagio* of Mahler's Symphony 3, with Jascha Horenstein and the London Symphony Orchestra (Nonesuch HB-73023), the P1 sounded less clear, less *certain* than the best, and not quite as easy to relax with. But the shortcom-

ing was small, and heard only in comparison with better gear: It didn't intrude on my average record-listening experience.

## Conclusions

Although I'd worked in a hi-fi shop for a number of years before 1980, that was the year of my initiation<sup>3</sup> into perfectionist audio. That was when I bought—from an honest-to-goodness audio salon—a Rega Planar 2 record player. Then as now, the seriousness of a record player was gauged by its lack of frills, and the Planar 2 was nothing if not serious. In making it, Rega disconcerted themselves with gimmicks, and pared their product down to what was needed to make recorded music sound convincing and real.

As they have here—with one key difference: The Rega P1 marks the first time in my experience that a designer, some of whose work ranks with the very best you can buy, has created an audio component this affordable. And by *affordable* I don't mean *relatively* affordable, as with our favorite entry-level Koetsu, entry-level Wilsons, and even entry-level Linns. I mean *affordable* as in *cheap*, as in *sane*, as in *reachable by anyone with a job*.

The all-English-made Rega P1 also marks the first time in recent memory that a high-tech company hasn't resorted to outsourcing in order to bring to market a high-quality, *very-high-value* product. Kudos to Roy Gandy for his ingenuity in doing so, and for keeping Rega's work among Rega's people.

Consider: A brand-new SME Model 30 record player costs approximately \$35,000 when equipped with its companion Series V tonearm. I've never had one in my system, but I suppose that the 30 is at least pretty good, and that buying one would be an effective way of making yourself happy. Then again, you could use the same amount of money to buy a hundred or so Rega P1s and give them to a hundred or so friends whose music-buying habits could benefit from the motivational equivalent of a good, swift kick in the ass. That would probably bring lots of happiness into the world as well. Very strongly recommended. ■

## ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

**ANALOG SOURCES** Linn LP12 turntable, Naim Armageddon power supply, Naim Aro tonearm; Rega P3 turntable, Rega RB300 tonearm; Rega P9 turntable, Rega RB900 tonearm; Miyabi 47, Supex 900 Super, Goldring Elite, Lyra Helikon Mono, Rega Elys cartridges; Tamura TKS-83 step-up transformers.

**DIGITAL SOURCE** Sony SCD-777ES SACD/CD player.

**PREAMPLIFICATION** Linn Linto phono preamplifier; Fi, Lamm LL2, Artemis Labs LA-1 preamplifiers.

**POWER AMPLIFIERS** Lamm ML2.1, Quad II monoblocks.

**LOUDSPEAKERS** Quad ESL.

**CABLES** Interconnect: Audio Note AN-Vx, Nordost Heimdall & Valhalla. Speaker: Nordost Heimdall, solid-core silver homemades. AC: JPS Labs The Digital (CD players); JPS Alumina, Cardas Golden Reference (other components).

**ACCESSORIES** Mana Reference Table & Reference Wall Shelf (turntable); Ayre Myrtle Blocks (various other components).  
—Art Dudley

<sup>3</sup> This initiation didn't involve binge drinking or the use of wooden paddles on naked frosh flesh: That would come later, in 1985.