

hardware review

Rega Replay steals budget turntable crown

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Rega Replay turntable, arm & cartridge

I have to admit to doing a double take when I saw the Rega Replay's price when it was launched last week. Quite how anyone can make a complete turntable, arm and cartridge in the UK for £259 is a mystery, nobody else comes anywhere near and even Pro-ject's most affordable offering is £10 more. Given that the Replay features most of the components found on the Planar 1 at £329 it looks like a stone cold bargain.

And it looks great. Although the minimal plinth emulates Rega's Planar 8, 10 and Naia, the actual inspiration was the Naia which was the forerunner of all Rega's skeletal plinth designs. It uses the minimum of material to provide a rigid foundation for the platter, motor and tonearm, unlike those models the 19mm thick Replay plinth has a laminated MDF core with melamine skins top and bottom to enhance rigidity.

Keeping the Replay plinth as small as possible limits its ability to store energy, the physics mean that vibration will be channeled through the plinth quickly rather than hanging around which tends to excite the platter and arm which in turn undermines its ability to accurately read the tiny undulations in the groove. This is a key tenet of Rega turntables and in many ways the Replay is not only remarkably affordable but also uncannily advanced. The plinth sits on three rubber isolation feet, these aren't adjustable so it should be put on a level surface for best results.

The platter the same as the P1 and is made of phenolic resin which is a hard plastic similar to that used for light switches, it has a weighted outer rim to provide a degree of momentum and thus speed stability. It is topped with a man made mat that's white on top and black beneath where it's textured to ensure it doesn't slip on the platter, a slip mat it is not. Neither does it stick to vinyl which can happen with felt mats.

Drive is provided by a 24V synchronous AC motor of the same basic type found on all Regas, this is housed in a case that incorporates the power inlet and on/off switch, which is going to be a more economical build than the P1's switch under the platter. A wall wart power supply provides the desired voltage. The bearing is as per the P1 which is itself good quality item that's designed to minimise energy transfer into the platter.



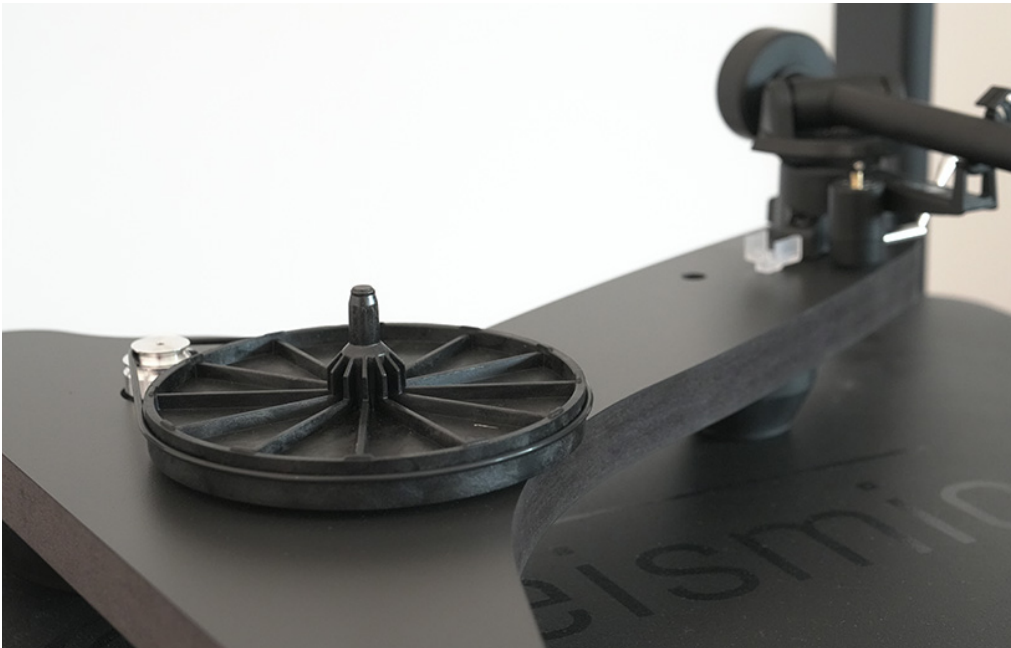
The motor uses a round belt to drive a subplatter that supports the platter itself, an approach that differs from many budget turntables that are driven from the platter's periphery with a much longer belt. Rega makes the case that inconsistencies in the motor are more likely to be transferred into the platter and thus the vinyl with a peripheral belt. It's worth noting that the Linn LP12 and other high end turntables also provide drive via a subplatter. Like early LP12s you need to move the belt to the larger pulley to change from 33rpm to 45rpm.

The tonearm is an RB110 which is the simplest that Rega makes but it's a good quality model with an aluminium arm beam for high rigidity and proprietary bearings. It has pre-set bias to suit the brand's moving magnet cartridges and there's an end stop on the counterweight stub which makes set up very easy indeed. Some consider the lack of bias adjustment to be a weakness but it allows Rega to offer build quality that none can match at the price and doesn't appear to affect performance. The cartridge is a Carbon MM type which is factory fitted, all the user needs to do is remove the stylus protector and use the lovely arm lift to lower it onto the groove. I also like the finger lift which makes it easy to find precisely the point on the record you want.

One area where Rega have been able to make a saving is in the dust cover which is no longer a full lid but a removable cover that locates on the spindle and a hole next to the arm. Given that all turntables sound better with the lid removed this is actually a benefit in disguise because you have to take it off to use the turntable.

Setup

The Replay was designed to be easy to get started, simply remove it from the packaging, take the card shim out from under the subplatter, put the platter and mat on then slide the counterweight up to its stop on the stub and remove the stylus guard. Plug the power adapter into the wall and the turntable and switch it on. It's worth noting for the complete beginner that



an amplifier with a phono input or a separate phono stage is required to amplify the tiny signal produced by a turntable to be turned into music. Rega offer the entry level lo amplifier (£440) and Kyte speakers (£399) to complete the package but almost any amp with a phono input and literally any speakers will do the job.

Sound quality

In an attempt to calibrate expectations I compared the Replay with my son's Planar 1. Given that the main difference is the shape of the plinth and the type of mat (the P1 has a wool felt mat) I didn't expect there to be a big difference, but there was one. It could have been that the P1 has been in use for some time and therefore the stylus is fully run-in but it produced a more refined and better timed result especially in the treble. Interestingly the word on the street is that in the context of a full Rega system the Replay delivers a better result than the P1, and the more I listened to it the the better it sounded, so there is probably something in this.

Using an Aria phono stage allowed the Replay to deliver strong timing, imaging and bandwidth in a coherent fashion that makes it easy to listen to and enjoy, it reveals the quality of recordings and musicianship in an even handed manner that means you can easily get caught up with the performance. In fact with a good system you can get so caught up in the music that you're dancing around whilst looking for the next record to spin – we reviewers attempt to retain decorum at all times but if no one's around and our guard is dropped, all manner of dad dancing can occur when the source is this inspiring.

There was even a rare outing of the air guitar, this thanks to the efforts of Jeff Beck in his early days. He was always good but *Truth*, the blues album he made with Rod Stewart and others, captures him in full flight. The recording is distinctly compressed but that doesn't limit its visceral power on the Replay and I enjoyed it so much that I had to find a more up to date bit of heaviness to follow. This took the form of Poison (feat. Maxim) by the Prodigy, which is also pretty intense in a hard hitting, acid fuelled way, here the Replay extracted impressively muscular bass and a cymbal sound that is more piercing that I recall, that was a truly a visceral experience.

I tried a few more challenging pieces to see if I could trip up this remarkably well balanced



Rega Replay

record player, this included Mari Samuelsen's solo violin which while it lacked the refinement that high end turntables with MC cartridges bring to the party displayed much of her fluency and the timbre of the instrument well. The only piece that proved a bit much was a jazz guitar track with a lot going on, I suspect that if your tastes lean towards such vibes you would need to upgrade to a better cartridge such as the Nd3.



One album I put on to warm up the needle really caught me out on the second track. I bought Sarah Siskind's *Covered* for the title track and Times Square and in the times I had tried the second side nothing had really stood out. On the Replay it became clear that the song Naturally is infused with the same emotional honesty as the stand outs as it really connected thanks to the Replay's inherent ability to get to the heart of the matter.

Conclusion

The real story with the Replay is not that it's the least expensive turntable made in Europe it's that it emulates the most ambitious record player that a company which leads the way in turntable design has ever made.

I have to take my hat off to Rega for making it so affordable, for giving regular folks a way into decent analogue sound that doesn't break the bank. I love the simplicity of the design and the ease of setup and use but more than everything else I love the way it can bring out the musical message in my vinyl records. Like all turntables it sounds better with decent isolation, don't put it on the sideboard next to your speakers if you want to hear what it can do, but even on a coffee table it delivers results that will tingle your spine. It's safe to say that those looking to hear what all this vinyl revival is about need look no further.

Pros

- Remarkable value: a serious turntable, arm and cartridge for £259
- Easy to setup
- Strong, coherent sound with good timing, imaging and bandwidth
- Rigid, minimal plinth designed to shed vibration quickly
- Tonally it's more even handed than many turntables
- Provides a strong emotional connection

Cons

- No bias adjustment, and the feet aren't adjustable, so it needs a level surface
- The belt must be moved by hand to change between 33 and 45rpm
- The dust cover is only a basic removable one
- Needs decent isolation and an external phono stage or an amp with a phono input



The ear is all about great music and great sound. It is written by hard bitten audio enthusiasts who strive to find the most engaging, entertaining and great value components and music of the highest calibre. This really is what living is all about.