

REVIEW REPRINT:

Rega ND3/ND5



This reprint is courtesy of TONE,
issue 122.

Thank you for reading.

TONE, TONEAudio, and
The Audiophile Apartment
are all © TONE Publications
www.tonepublications.com

TONE, The Concierge of High End Audio™



T O N E

1095

Great sound around a G...

Rega ND3 and ND5 MM phono cartridges

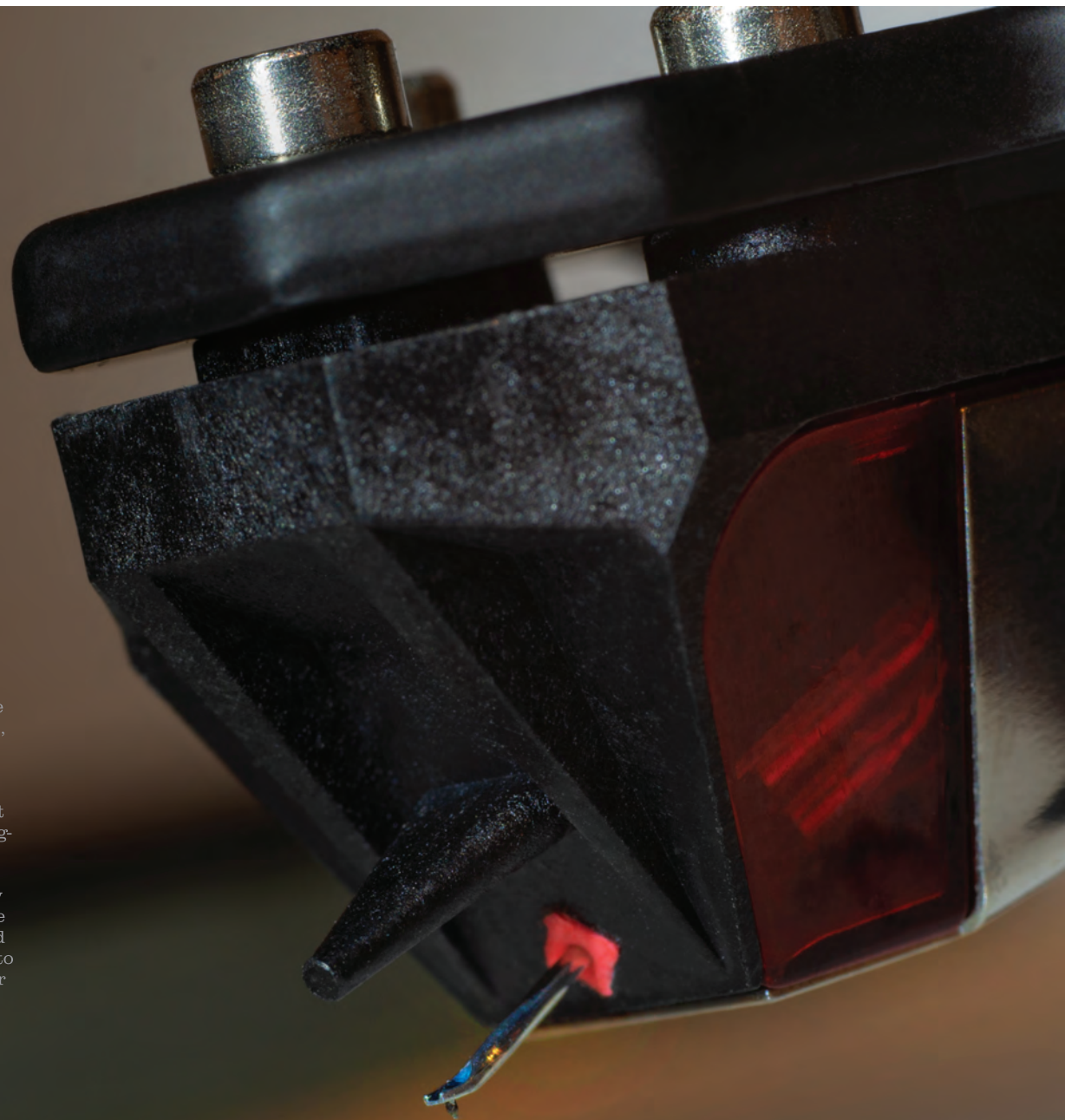
A Massive Increase in Performance

\$345 and \$675
rega.co.uk
soundorg.com

Listening to POCO's *Legend* always brings back many great memories because it was a big part of my record collection when my audiophile journey began, and Yacht Rock wasn't a thing yet. Whatever. It was the first record I played on my first Rega Planar 3 about 45-ish years ago, though. You can read my review of the current P3 here, with a nearly original Planar 3 added to the mix for comparison.

But this isn't a P3 review. It's a Rega cartridge review—a moving-magnet cartridge review. In case you aren't familiar with Rega, it is an engineering-based company that builds something and continually refines it.

In this case, Rega's made a big leap in MM cartridge design with the new ND series. By using N55 neodymium magnets (Rega says these are the strongest available) and a 1275-turn coil of 38-micron wire, as opposed to 1800 turns of thicker wire in the Exact 2, we have some insight into the performance gains in the new ND5 series. A smaller amount of thinner wire means less moving mass and sharper dynamics.



Of course, this is a terrible oversimplification of Rega's hard work. The ND cartridges raise the bar for their moving magnet cartridges much further than past generations. An improvement was expected, yet these two provide another distinct level of performance than what has come before. Rega builds its own cartridges from scratch at its facility in the UK. I've observeded its techs wind the fine wire onto the cantilever assembly and even watched Audio Element's Brian Berdan try to wind one. I did not have the fine skills needed, which gives me tremendous respect for those performing this delicate task.

Considering that Rega has only raised the price of the \$595 Exact 2 to the \$675 MSRP of the ND5 speaks to their expertise and efficiency.

By creating a new way of arranging the coils within the body and using a low 1,275 turns of extremely fine 38-micron wire, Rega manages to reduce the inductance of the generator, increasing the high-frequency output that it's capable of. They use N55 types, the strongest commercially available variety, to achieve this. These are necessary for the ND cartridges to produce a high enough output with so few turns. By comparison, the Exact, which the Nd5 replaces, had 1,700 turns in its coils and thicker wire. The other benefit of the Nd design is the additional space around the magnet at the end of the cantilever, giving it greater potential for movement.

When dealing with such small pieces and such low mass, everything affects the sound critically.



Simple Setup

One of the most unique aspects of using a Rega table with a Rega cartridge is their using three screws to mount the cartridge, while all others use two. This eliminates the guesswork and has you up and playing records nearly immediately. Like all past Rega cartridges, the ND5's optimum tracking force is 1.75 grams, easily verified by our Hummin Guru stylus force gauge. The standard Rega wall wart power supply plugs right into the back of the table, and you can also upgrade to the NEO PSU Mk.II to make switching between 33 and 45 r.p.m. a breeze.

Comparison to the Exact 2

Fortunately, an Exact 2 is still available for direct comparison. A quick call to our retired staffer, Jerold O'Brien, brings his Planar 3 (same vintage) and Exact 2 over for some side-by-side comparison listening through the Pass XP-27 phono. Whether through my main reference system or just the living room system (powered Dynaudio Focus 10s with iFI 3 phono), the difference between these two cartridges is anything but subtle.

P3
planar three

P2
planar two

Rega's US importer - Steve Daniels at The Sound Organisation, has sent a Planar 2 with the ND3. However, that is not a direct comparison, so we will also address the P2/ND3 combination as a separate review.

Both ND cartridges exceed the Exact 2's ability to extract low-level detail from the record grooves, and both have significantly more dynamic drive. Staying in that late 70s/early 80s groove, spinning a copy of Neil Larsen's *Jungle Fever* brings this all home immediately. The music may not be your jam, but it's a very light, bouncy, dynamic record that sounds a bit foggy and slow through the Exact. The Exact is undoubtedly a pleasant MM, but when you hear the ND5 in direct comparison, the additional amount of musical information revealed by the new cartridge is impossible to ignore.



The new cartridges expand the size of the sound field generated in all directions, but most importantly, there is more fine detail everywhere. And consequently, acoustic music feels more natural and correct. String quartets feel more alive, guitars pluckier, and the piano more smooth and solid. At the same time, Slayer has much more bite. What could be wrong with that?

The lower mass, combined with the increased power of the N55 magnets, gives these cartridges much more of a moving coil feel. At some point, we must get Rega's \$599 Ania for a similar comparison. Yet the simplicity of not needing a step-up device is another reason the ND cartridges are an excellent alternative to an MC cartridge.

The biggest and most exciting difference between the outgoing Exact and the incoming

ND cartridges is the smoother level of musical flow they provide and the weight in the lower registers. While some Rega critics mention a "thinness" to the sound of Rega tables and cartridges, this is not part of the sound with the Planar 3/ND5 combination at all. The firmer, more extended LF response of the ND cartridges is not only a welcome addition, but it fleshes out the entire turntable/arm/cartridge mix in a way that it feels like a much more expensive package than the \$1,595 Planar 3/ND5 combination.

I'm violating the Prime Directive here, but if it makes sense for your budget, go all the way and add that new NEO power supply too, if you're starting from scratch. You didn't get everything you wanted for Christmas anyway – did you? This is a formidable analog setup for \$2,000.

Comparison to the ND3

This part of the review is short. The ND3 cartridge is nearly half the price asked for the ND5, yet it offers about 70% of the performance on all levels. It's always tough, deciding how far to take your analog excitement.

It's easy from the reviewer side of the table to be cavalier and say, "Just spend the money," as I easily did above, yet fun purchases often have a hard stop attached to them. After spending time with both cartridges on both tables—switching them back and forth—your decision will probably center around which table you are considering or if you have a current Rega table that perhaps is due for a new cartridge.

The ND5 certainly expresses more of its ultimate ability on the P3 (and probably even more on the P6 because it resolves more information). Rega does like to do things as systems, though, so you will probably realize the best price-to-performance ratio using the ND5 with a P3 and up, with the ND3 going P3 and down the range.

Everything loved about the ND5 is here in the ND3 – the overall character is there, but there is less of it. Because of everything that makes the ND cartridges what they are, after comparing the ND3 to the Exact 2 on both the P2 and P3, I think you will still get a more engaging musical result with the ND3 at the end of your tonearm.

Don't forget, Rega also offers an ND7 at \$795, but this is not eligible for "bundle" pricing. See how I just contributed to your analysis paralysis? It's worth mentioning that I got a lump of coal for Christmas. So be it.

Again, if you are buying everything new, kudos to the Sound Org for keeping the bundle price of a P2 with ND3 to \$795. This is only twenty bucks more than this table used to cost with the Carbon MM. This has to be one of the best turntable bargains, bar none.

Should you choose any one of the combinations here, you can listen to records right now in an easy way that few if any, other manufacturers provide. Another aspect often unspoken about using a Rega cartridge with a Rega table/arm is that you need not be bothered with mass, resonant frequencies, and the other things that bother audiophiles as they get into analog.

Journey or destination

That's the question. After a 40+ year journey with analog, I'd take a Rega table with a Rega cartridge that plays records right now over a table that I have to fiddle with. (Ask Chris)

What you choose will determine where you are in your analog journey. Should you pick up one of Rega's new ND cartridges, I hope you enjoy it as much as I do. Both of these deserve our Exceptional Value Award.

