



One vision

Rega's all-in-one starter system is radically different to anything else, but **Ed Selley** thinks that the result is rather brilliant

One of the most important aspects of having a successful range of products for any company is making sure that the 'first rung' – the point at which a customer might begin their relationship with you – is a compelling one. Different companies have different approaches to this, but the common theme is to try and embody what you stand for in miniature. For Rega, this is trickier than it might at first appear. The company offers complete hi-fi systems; produced in the UK, usually vinyl-fronted and from separate components. Any attempt at a first rung has to embody these values to have any relevance to the rest of the model range. The answer to this conundrum is the System One; a complete hi-fi in a box for £1,200.

The components that make up the System One are not all new. The Planar 1 (which we tested in 'Plus' configuration with on-board phono stage in HFC 434) and the io

integrated amplifier (HFC 464) have been part of the existing range of products for some time. In miniature, both of them embody Rega's design priorities as seen in the rest of the range. The Planar 1 turntable is an unsuspended, belt-driven design that adheres to Rega's ideals of low overall mass combined with high rigidity.

In order to reduce the price, some features seen on the more ornate turntables like the stiffening brace and glass platter have to fall by the wayside. The platter is instead made of phenolic resin and the plinth on its own provides the necessary stiffness. The RB110 tonearm is recognisably related to the designs on the larger models, but simplified with the antiskate fixed to work optimally with the Carbon cartridge that comes pre-fitted.

As well as reducing the cost and complexity of the turntable itself, it means that the Planar 1 is also about as simple as a turntable can be to get up and running. The belt acts on a

sub-platter and comes pre-fitted and there is a rubber washer on the arm stub that pretty closely approximates to a 2g tracking weight. It's hard to envisage any turntable making the process much easier and once you've got it set up and ready to go, the Planar 1 is painless to use.

The variant used in the System 1 is not the 'Plus' because the io has its own internal phono stage. Indeed, in miniature, the io comprises all the features that characterise Rega amplifiers. It is a class A/B-based design delivering 30W into 8ohm. Three inputs are fitted, one being the phono stage, plus a 3.5mm headphone socket. There's no minimalism at work here either; the specification includes a full remote control, which makes the io extremely easy to use. The compact chassis is all metal and mimics the same styling as the bigger amplifiers. Perhaps the most unheralded part of this is that, despite its small size, the io never feels toylike in use.

The newest member of the trio and also the most radical of the three is the Kyte standmount speaker. Where the Planar 1 and io are simplified versions of more expensive products, the Kyte is genuinely different. The reason for this is that the MDF cabinets used in other Rega speakers cannot be produced at £500. This has led Rega to construct the Kyte from the same phenolic resin that forms the Planar 1 platter. Each cabinet is a

single-piece moulding (hence the tapered sides to simplify extracting it from the mould) with a composite wooden front baffle mounting the drivers on the front. To stiffen the cabinet, a cruciform brace is fitted that has ceramic plates (made of the same ceramic as the Planar 10 platter) on the ends. As the taper would mean the speaker angles back on a flat surface, a foot (also made of phenolic) attaches to the rear to offset the angle.

The drivers in the Kyte are lifted from the RX1 (HFC 417) and comprise a 125mm doped paper mid/bass and a ZRR soft dome tweeter. Around the back you'll find a single pair of speaker terminals and a small bass port. Quoted measurements are an impedance of 6ohm and sensitivity of 89dB/W. As it's made of different materials to other Rega speakers (and everyone else's in fairness), you'd imagine that the Kyte might struggle to feel like a Rega design but in the flesh it really doesn't. There's the same sense of purposeful minimalism as the other components, which is typical of the company.

All this turns up in a single large box with the required cabling to get it up and running. You might legitimately ask: "what about digital?" but this is not Rega's primary focus and the two inputs on the io leave you space to choose the options that work for you. Getting the System One up and running is simplicity itself; if you're

reading this as a manufacturer of a streaming system, you need to be confident that your wireless setup is very good indeed before you think it might be faster.

Sound quality

Once you're up and running and listening to records, it's important to put the System One in a degree of context. A £1,300 Naim Mu-so 2nd generation (HFC 452) will go as loud as the Rega and probably matches it for bass extension too. There's no automatic on-paper advantage to the Rega being three different products, but the manner in which it performs is meaningfully different.

Listening to the re-pressed *What Does Anything Mean? Basically* by The Chameleons on the System One is a demonstration of effortless musicality. The euphoria that underpins *Perfume Garden* is absolutely stitched into the presentation. The Planar 1 might be the simplest expression of a Rega turntable going, but it still flows and times like a Rega should. John Lever's magnificent drumming is picosecond perfect and the result is so effortlessly rhythmic that it's almost impossible to sit in front of the System One as a disinterested observer. This is not a device for background music.

The relationship between the Planar 1 and io approaches symbiotic. Both products are capable of unfailingly convincing tonality in a way that stems from the absence of DSPs or other wizardry being at work at any stage. Stay within the io's surprisingly

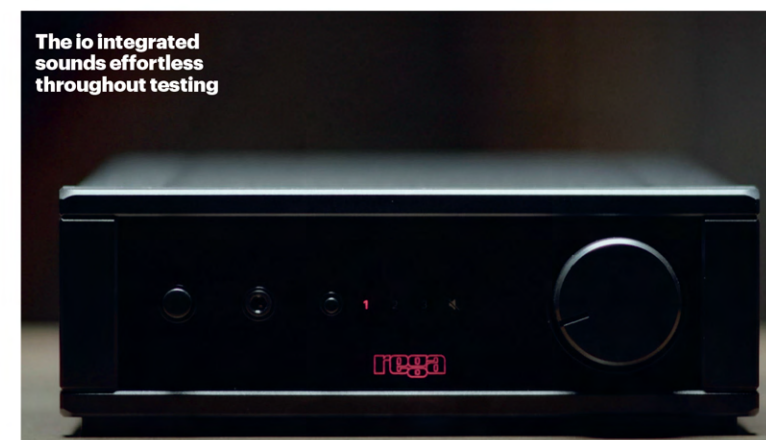
wide operating envelope and it simply sounds effortless. Even the potent and heavy hitting *Caged Bird/Imitations Of Life* by the Cinematic Orchestra convinces here. Roots Manuva is older and wiser than he was in his earlier work with the group and that's reflected in the performance. The massed instruments behind him are cohesive, but have individual character and there's no shortage of space in which they perform.

The Kytes are instrumental in this too. The simple expedient of being able to place them a meaningful distance apart from one another is part of the reason why they can

The System One is a joyous introduction to what Rega offers as a company

produce an excellent soundstage, but there's more to them than that. The integration between the two drivers is utterly seamless and it lends the speakers a tremendously enjoyable fluency and cohesion. The camp but glorious acid jazz of Corduroy's *Havoc* is an absolute riot from start to finish. The title track hammers along without hindering the (surprisingly high) production values and the Kytes prove to be impressively hard to provoke. As noted, the bass that's on offer here isn't seismic, but it's tuneful and well integrated into the overall frequency response.

Rega's System One balances affordability with real-world functionality



The io integrated sounds effortlessly throughout testing

No less important listening to the System One as a whole is that the demands it makes on the listener to allow for suspension of disbelief are extremely low. Surface noise is minimal and the Carbon cartridge seems forgiving of worn pressings too. The phono stage of the io is quiet and has plenty of gain, which ensures you're never short of volume. It would be relatively straightforward to extract more performance from the Planar 1, but what really surprises me is just how little desire I have to do that based on its out-of-the-box performance.

It has to be said, though, when it does come to plotting an upgrade path, the System One starts to make most one-box options look decidedly limited. Obviously, the Planar 1 can have its cartridge and isolation tinkered with, but the io and Kytes

are good enough that you could sell them and put the money towards a Planar 3 (HFC 405) and the other components would reflect the improvement. In fact, I'll stick my neck out and say that any component of the three could be changed for one costing up to a grand and the other

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two unchanged components would be able to benefit from the gains in performance. Where rivals offer you a taste of what they do as an opener, Rega provides you with the means of proceeding from the System One to



No other company is able to build a tip-of-the-stylus to come-of-the-driver system in-house until you get to AVID or Audio Note UK who occupy a rather different price point. Pro-Ject gets close if we let it off the speaker cable and a system of T1 Phono Turntable, Box S S2 BT integrated amp and Speaker Box Design 5 speakers will result in something similar to the System One at a lower price. However, there is no remote on the amp, fewer inputs and less power. It shows just how cleverly the System One balances affordability with real-world functionality.

its flagship components in smart, single, linear steps.

In some ways, this is simply a bonus rather than the compelling reason to buy the System One because the fundamentals of what the Rega offers are so addictive. For many owners, this is going to be their first taste of a true separates system and the bar that this trio sets in terms of working with each other to produce something meaningfully better than the sum of its already impressive parts is a very high one. In the time I use it, the Rega rekindles some of the magic of my first systems; manifestly inferior to what I have now, but special because of the leap in performance that they offered at the time.

Conclusion

Whether you approach the System One with your heart or your head, it's hard not to admire what Rega has achieved here. This is both a credible alternative to more conventional single-chassis all-in-one systems and a joyous introduction to what Rega offers as a company. It's mightily impressive both in execution and performance and I'm completely smitten by it. If you're looking for one of the purest distillations of the hi-fi experience on the market today, you've just found it ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Sparkling performance; easy to set up and use; scope for future upgrades

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No digital connections

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Brings the Rega experience to a new price in a wholly straightforward and enjoyable way

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★