

Rega Aos MC phono stage

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Opening the box to the Rega Aos MC phono stage made me realise this was the first Rega product I'd reviewed in ages. What's more, judging by its performance, I've been missing a serious trick; this thing is damn fantastic!

Those who monitor the output of Rega more closely than I have over recent years are calling this phono stage the 'Aura-lite' or 'mini Aura' (after the brand's flagship moving coil phono stage). While this statement has a good factual basis, it's also possibly doing the Aos MC a grave disservice; rather than living in the shadow of its Reference-class full-sized brother, if you look at it in its own right, the Aos MC punches way above its weight.

The Aos MC is a full-bodied moving coil phono stage in a custom, half-width case. It features a two-stage 'all-analogue amplifier', meaning there's a complete absence of digital gubbins. While this might seem like an obvious thing to say about electronics in the analogue signal chain, lots

of amps rely on digital control circuitry and displays. This doesn't. Additionally, amplifiers often use digital architecture to compensate for changes in ambient or operating temperature. Rega uses a self-adjusting servo mechanism, which is at once conceptually old-school and innovative in application.

Returning to the two-stage architecture, the first-stage amplifier is a symmetrical, complementary Class A design using Linear Systems' ultra-low-noise FET (Field Effect Transistor) transistors, connected in parallel and configured as a compound pair. The use of FET transistors ensures that no bias current flows in the cartridge coil, thereby avoiding any disturbance to the delicate magnetic geometry of the cartridge.

The input circuit configuration also eliminates the need for coupling components between the cartridge output and the input-stage FET transistors, which would degrade the sound. The complementary ultra-low-noise FET transistors are carefully graded and matched for optimum performance. This stage drives the passive high-frequency part of the RIAA equalisation. »





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» The second stage is also symmetrical. It's a Class A, differential amplifier with a common-base driver stage; this is also used as the active amplifier in the low-frequency part of the RIAA equalisation stage.

No gubbins

The 'no digital gubbins' rule means that adjusting loading demands some fiddling around with two banks of four DIP switches on the rear panel. Rega's Aos MC input has the provision for selecting resistive input loading of 70Ω to 400Ω and capacitive loading of 1,000pF to 4,300pF. The input sensitivity can be changed by 6dB via the back panel. An automatic standby feature has also been added, which puts the unit to sleep after a period of no signal. This can be deactivated via DIP switches located on the rear panel.

Rega users need to know precisely nothing about DIP switches; the Aos MC arrives pre-configured for Rega moving coil cartridges. And that's the best way to think about the Aos MC; configured and ready to go. It's not the phono stage for people who obsess over their record replay system; it's for people who want to play music without fuss but in the best possible way. It sits quietly on a shelf, red 'Rega' logo glowing brightly enough to know it's powered up, but not so bright that it illuminates the room. Its consciously nondescript design and small footprint mean it will never dominate a system. It's just all about the sound.

I was somewhat apprehensive about its performance because I was using it in a system that is so far from the Rega ideal that I feared it would be the worst of all possible worlds. A high-mass turntable like a Kuzma or a Pear Audio Blue is anathema to what Rega stands for. But, the Aos MC didn't play politics, it just made music.

Rather jolly good

In that English understatement native speakers do so well, this phono stage is really rather jolly good. Non-native speakers might see that as damning a product with faint praise, but in fact it's showing the Aos MC is at the acme of performance in its class; it reflects the unassuming, intrinsically 'right' sound of this phono stage. There is no shouting, no brightly-lit passages, no exaggerations or emphasis. It's all about information retrieval from that groove and presenting it in a manner that is detailed and satisfying.

That lack of exaggeration or emphasis is telling, and describes a phono stage that lets the listener focus on the music and the recording as a whole, rather than zone in on individual parts of the sound to the detriment of others. That's a remarkably hard thing to do at any price point, but at this level, it makes the Aos MC an obvious benchmark product. That makes the reviewer's job a little harder, because we normally focus on the musical micromanagement of the sound ("it has wonderful coherence" or "the dynamic range is sublime"), whereas the Aos MC is all about the whole experience. The musical gestalt.



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» If this tends to push the listener toward music they are familiar with, it's more to do with detail retrieval and the overall completeness of presentation than some deliberate tailoring of the sound. It's about what you know (at first) rather than trying to force you down some musical avenue. I found myself playing Fournier's interpretations of Bach's Cello Suites [Archiv], Kraftwerk's *Trans-Europe Express* [Capitol], Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark* [Asylum], Bob Dylan's *Desire* [Columbia] and even Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* [Columbia]. Not to extract any major reviewing notes, but just because they are old favourites of mine.

The more I listened, the more I wanted to listen. Each album inspired another, some old, some new. Eventually, some regular characteristics emerged, but these took their time in coming; simply because your first impression of the Aos MC is one of enjoyment rather than analysis. That holds as much with the music as it does with the sound that music makes. Ultimately, the sound is energetic without sounding over-vibrant, it's detailed without being too brightly-lit and extremely real sounding. Oddly, the first instrument that made me think it's 'real' sounding was a synthesizer; the Berlin-school style, old-school analogue modular synth sounds of Craven Faults [Sidings, Leaf]. It sounded more 'real' and had more authority than I expected. That comes from the Aos MC's excellent bass performance; a fine depth and clarity right into the lowest octaves. This is also very well pitched, digging out the gut-punching bottom end of the record.

The same applied universally; vocals stood out from the music and were easy to understand. And not just voices - listening to Ali Farka Touré on the guitar and Tourmani Diabaté on the kora playing 'Ruby' [Ali & Tourmani, World Circuit] I felt a musical kinship with the Malian musicians. London was hot, dry and dusty and the gentle playing struck a deep chord. I switched over to my go-to phono stage at the price - the Primare R35 - and that kinship was lost.

Soundstaging, dynamics, pace... all the usual elements we call on in our reviews were extremely good, but it felt like defining the Aos MC through those lenses was missing the point. This is a more direct connection between what's on the disc and what you hear. It's that simple.

Fit and forget

No product is perfect. Rega's no-nonsense 'fit and forget' approach will find few friends among those who obsess over equalisation curves or XLR inputs and outputs. Also, while not 'hairshirt', it is about as far from 'bling!' as it gets, and those who buy products as jewellery might not like its small footprint and minimalist approach. More directly, if you are seeking a bright, fast and forward-sounding phono stage, this isn't it. Clean, detailed, whisper-quiet and extremely musically on the case, absolutely. It bops along with the music when called upon, and is more than pacey enough to keep up with the quicksilver, glitchy transients of Trentemøller or Orbital. However, if you want something that 'sounds' fast rather than 'is' fast, there are more edge-of-the-seat presentations available.

All of which establishes the Rega Aos MC as one of those products that rings all the bells. For Rega aficionados, it's the logical step for those who either can't yet reach or don't feel the need to stretch to the Aura, but want the best price/performance ratio out there. And for the rest of us... it just might be the gateway drug into a Rega-shaped world. For £1,500, it's hard to beat. +

Technical specifications

Type: moving coil phono stage

Phono inputs: RCA sockets

Analogue outputs: single ended RCA

Input impedance: 70 – 400 ohms in 4 steps

Input capacitance: 1000, 4300pF

Gain: 63.5dB, 69.3dB

Frequency response: 17.5 Hz (-3 dB) to 100 kHz (-0.2 dB)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 8 x 22 x 33cm

Weight: 2.9kg

Price: £1,500, €1,999, \$2,299

Manufacturer Rega Research

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