A list of famous high-end turntables would include the Caliburn, the Clearaudio Statement and of course the venerable—if rather long in the tooth—Linn Sondek—but if talk were to turn to the compiling of a list of iconic real-world turntables, that list would surely be topped by the Rega Planar 3.

Introduced in the 1970s, the Planar 3 was radical in its time and it still retains certain ‘rebel’ philosophies even after several and various revisions, which included the arrival in 1983 of the almost equally-legendary RB300 tonearm, which was the long-awaited replacement for the Acos-derived R200 and the first tonearm to be manufactured at the Rega factory.

Notable for its beautifully cast single-piece arm tube and headshell, close-tolerance bearings, rigid bearing housings and magnetic frictionless bias compensation, the RB300 has never been out of production... and should never be confused with the later RB301 which borrowed the bias housing and phono cable from the RB700, used a stainless steel counterweight and had shim-adjustable VTA.

Now that vinyl is resurgent once more we have not only a new Rega Planar 3, but also a new RB330 tonearm to go with it. The price is smack-on a sweet-spot for those returning to the black stuff—though of course that price means it is not without significant competitors.

**THE EQUIPMENT**

Rega is, of course, British, the company being located on the south coast of England across several buildings in picturesque Southend-on-Sea, where this reviewer enjoyed a full factory tour a few years back. Rega undertakes a large part of its component and product assembly in-house, and where often the same component goes into multiple turntable models, I witnessed the quality control system which allocates finished components according to their adherence to the master specification—the best going into Rega’s top turntables, and those with the widest variations going into a box marked ‘OEM’, for those other companies that piggyback on Rega’s production expertise.

The latest Planar 3 is notable for being not merely an iterative new edition of the previous P3 released some six years ago, but a total strip-down and rebuild, with only two components surviving from the previous model. Key among the new livery is that new RB330 tonearm, with its tube shape tweaked using 3D computer simulation to redistribute mass and reduce points of resonance, also incorporating lower-friction horizontal and vertical bearings, a re-designed stiffer vertical bearing housing, a new bias assembly, a new spring housing with easier-to-read numbers, and an integrated arm clip. Cables are upgraded, the RCA-terminated flying leads out to your phono stage now fitted with sturdy Neutrik connectors. As with previous Rega turntables, no earth spade connection is required; the Planar 3 earths through the arm cable’s own screening.
As for the turntable itself, it’s a lovely looker, especially with its felt mat off so you can see through the 12mm-thick green-tinged edge-polished glass platter to the redesigned sub-platter below. The surrounding plinth is no high-mass monster—that is not the Rega philosophy, which focuses on rigidity, not mass. Indeed Rega says its ideal is zero mass with infinite rigidity: ‘mass absorbs energy’, says Rega, ‘lost energy equals lost music!’

To this end the company has long favoured the use of phenolic resin, a heat-cured plastic of longstanding application for imparting rigidity. In some high-end models Rega has used it to entirely coat lightweight plinths made of a sponge-like particulate core, but here the plinth is acrylic laminate, and the phenolic resin is reserved for the attractive piece of engineering which forms a double brace between the main hub bearing and the tonearm mount, also isolating the 24-volt low-noise motor. This construction has a 3mm phenolic bottom brace and a phenolic top brace with metallised skin, the holes along its length (see pictures) again serving to reduce mass while improving rigidity.

The Planar 3 has only three feet, so it sat perfectly level on my turntable platform and I encountered no particular susceptibility to footfall or external vibration.

PERFORMANCE

While the new Planar 3 has some notable design flair, the design of product packaging has not traditionally been a priority for the engineering-led Rega, as is evident from the entirely understated brown packaging of the Planar 3. But you know what?—with a single seal broken, the box unfolds in a delightful single motion, cool and efficient, revealing the plastic-wrapped lid and a large leaflet within, very nicely designed and dominated by Rega’s preferred—and probably trademarked—shade of green.

Very little set-up is required. The drive belt was already on; I stripped off the two pieces of tape around the arm clip and stylus guard. Here in Australia, the Planar 3 is available without a cartridge, in which case it retails for $1,249, or factory-fitted with a Rega Elys 2 cartridge, in which case the package retails for $1,449. My review sample came with the Elys 2 is pre-fitted, which was perhaps just as well since it has an unusual curving outer edge, that would doubtless have foxed me had I needed to align it (a protractor card is provided, but given the Elys 2’s flared end and its curved sides, there’s nothing to get parallel). However, one benefit of ordering the factory-fitted Elys 2 is that you save about fifty bucks ordering the package, because on its own, the Elys 2 retails for $250.

So the only real set-up other than simple assembly is to push the balance weight up the arm to ‘float’ the cartridge before the ideal tracking weight, here 1.75g, is applied to both the tracking force dial and the bias adjustment slider: the latter a welcome replacement for the tiny bias weight usually strung and hung on a slender nylon loop which is hard to thread and easy to slip off. This is far easier!

Then you’re done, according to the guide, but there’s one stage omitted there—plugging it in. My habit is to plug things in last, but that proved to be a bit late in the day here, since the connection for the d.c. pin from the off-board block transformer is far underneath the very rear of the turntable which you’ve just lovingly set up, so you’ll probably need to spin it and tilt it and peer underneath with a lamp to make this and the signal connections.

Much praise for a plastic lid that covers the deck completely when in use or not, even if the hinges tended to lift up every other time I opened the lid one-handed. The upside was a notably quieter and tighter delivery with the lid down, especially as I raised levels higher... which I did fairly quickly, as the Planar 3 proved a stellar performer across a range of vinyl discs during the month I had it in residence.

Its delivery of both weight and speed lent a marvellously taut thump to kick drums, and realistic tone and scale to bass guitars. One tune that burst into life in this regard was Olivia Newton John’s Totally Hot from the LP of the same name (forgive me, for I have two copies), its rhythm section gut-kickingly solid and deep while horns punctuate the beat to left and right, leaving Olivia and harmonies clean and honey-toned centre stage. Surface noise was kept delightfully low, too, even on this $5 disc from a local record fair.

One benefit of ordering the Planar 3 with a factory-fitted Elys 2 is that you save about fifty bucks on the deal
Leading lights for now, and likely for as long as the black stuff may last...

ON TEST Rega Planar 3 Turntable

Rega now has three new Planar turntables on the market—numbers One and Two came hotfoot behind this Three, each revived and renewed to face the continued 21st-century resurgence of vinyl playback. The Planar 3’s performance, ease of use and attractive design would seem to indicate that Rega’s turntables will remain leading lights for now, and likely for as long as the black stuff may last.

Jez Ford

Readers interested in a full technical appraisal of the performance of the Rega Planar 3 Turntable fitted with the Elys 2 phono cartridge should continue on and read the LABORATORY REPORT published on the following pages.

CONTACT DETAILS
Brand: Rega
Model: Planar 3
RRP: $1,449 (inc. Elys 2 cartridge)
Warranty: Two Years
Distributor: Synergy Audio Visual
Address: 107 Northern Road
Heidelberg Heights VIC 3081
T2: (03) 9659 7474
E: info@synergyaudio.com
W: www.synergyaudio.com

+ A classic improved
+ Fast and dynamic
+ Well-balanced sound
+ Very easy set-up

- Manual speed change
- Connector location

(Continued on page 34)
LABORATORY TEST RESULTS

Newport Test Labs’ speed accuracy testing proved that the Rega Planar 3 runs at exactly the correct speed at both 33.33 and 45 rpm. Wow and flutter at 33.33rpm was measured at a very good 0.08% unweighted RMS, while at 45 rpm it improved even further, to return a result of 0.06% unweighted RMS. Newport Test Labs also measured wow separately from flutter, using the DIN standard, at 33.33 rpm. Wow was measured at 0.12% unweighted (DIN) and flutter at 0.04% unweighted (DIN).

Rumble was low with Newport Test Labs measuring it at ~61dB. Power consumption of the Planar 3 was also very low, pulling only 3.95-watts.

The frequency response of the Rega Elys 2 phono cartridge was excellent, as you can see from Graph 1, which shows both the response and the channel separation. The frequency response (black trace) extends from 20Hz to 15kHz ±3dB, after which the high-frequency response rolls off to be 6dB down at 20kHz. Channel separation (red trace) is particularly good at low frequencies, where it’s very close to the 1kHz result of 26dB. As expected, separation diminishes at high frequencies, to be 16dB at 15kHz.

The Elys 2’s distortion was also low, as shown in Figure 2, and was almost completely second and third harmonic in nature, with the second harmonic at ~56dB (0.15% THD) and the third harmonic at ~54dB (0.19% THD). There are some fourth, fifth and sixth-order harmonics visible, but they’re all more than 75dB down (0.01% THD). Newport Test Labs measured the Elys 2’s output at 8.3mV RMS. Square wave performance was excellent, as you can see from the oscillogram, with a very fast rise-time.

Overall, excellent measured performance from both the Rega Planar 3 turntable and the Rega Elys 2 cartridge.  

Steve Holding

Readers should note that the results mentioned in the report, tabulated in performance charts and/or displayed using graphs and/or photographs should be construed as applying only to the specific sample tested.
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