

# HI-FI CHOICE

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## Rega P5 and P7



**Rega has plugged the gap between its budget and top-end turntables with two new vinyl spinners**

Rega is the largest British hi-fi company that has not become involved with home cinema; it makes loudspeakers that can be used in surround sound systems, but doesn't make anything specifically for that market. In an increasingly AV-orientated age that might seem to be a commercially dangerous policy, but the continued success of the company would seem to indicate otherwise. That success is interlinked with the commitment to music-orientated hardware, and the people at Rega don't see home cinema as being related to music. In a recent interview (in trade magazine The BAJ), Rega founder Roy Gandy said that "the AV market has nothing to do with producing high-quality sound or anything whatsoever to do with music".

This commitment to music has served the company well, and the fact that it is introducing two relatively expensive turntables simultaneously suggests that things are quite rosy in the analogue stereo market.

Of these two new turntables, the P5 is a replacement for the P25 we originally reviewed in 2000 (HFC 203), and despite some similarities it differs in many respects from its stylish forebear. Gone is the solid wood floating frame to be replaced with a tubular aluminium section that gives the turntable the same proportions, but changes its appearance and reduces the weight. It's perhaps less of an aesthetic success than the P25, but that's a matter of taste, and it's hardly ugly by anyone's standards. The P5 retains the 12mm glass platter (as pictured, without the supplied felt mat) and it has the same manual speed change arrangement of two pulleys on one motor spindle. Power is supplied by a plug-in lead attached to a 'wall-wart' transformer, a system that can be upgraded to include the Rega TT power supply (PSU) should you wish to take advantage of the socket fitted for the purpose.

Apart from the surround, the big change with the P5 is to the tonearm; this is the same arm that's found on the more expensive P7, so we've included its details in a separate box.

As with all Regas, both decks have an attractive and practical lid to keep out the dust. The manuals suggest you use it instead of most forms of record cleaner, leaving it down when playing records and generally looking after the vinyl rather than using a brush when it's spinning. Both turntables also appear to share the same plinth, the black bit within the aluminium frame, but the specification suggests otherwise. The P5's plinth is described as "low mass micro-fibre", while the P7 uses "medium lightweight fibre composite encased in highly ridged phenolic resin laminates". If you remove the arm from the P7, you can see that at its core it uses a variety of chipboard - not a very glamorous material, but one that has been identified by several manufacturers as being better than the more easily machined MDF in terms of sound quality. Of course, there are plenty of varieties of chip, and Rega has gone for a lightweight, high-stiffness variety.

The P7 was originally to have been called the P30; the P25 celebrating Rega's 25th anniversary and the P30 marking another five years. But somewhere down the line someone decided that a bit more consistency across the turntable range would be helpful, hence P7, which slots between P5 and P9. While these decks inhabit similar basic structures and have the same arm, one look under the felt mat reveals a major difference in the white ceramic platter. This is described as an evolution of that on the P9, and unlike that deck it has peripheral mass loading in the form of small cylinders that give a flywheel effect. This is an unusually high-tech approach for any turntable, let alone one at this sort of price, and Rega is to be commended for using it here.

The bearing and platter support are much heavier duty items than on the P5. Made using CNC cut aluminium and featuring three support points for the platter, the sub platter is driven by two round section belts. The aforementioned TT PSU is supplied as standard with the P7 and generates a 24-volt balanced supply that drives an onboard anti-vibration circuit. Speed change is electronic, but on/off switching is a pain. The power switch is at the back of the PSU to discourage turning the turntable off when changing LPs.

## **SOUND QUALITY**

The P5 came fitted with Rega's penultimate moving magnet cartridge - the Super Elys (£150), an elliptically tipped one-piece design with a low profile that ensures correct VTA (vertical tracking angle) when used in Rega arms. Phono amplification was provided initially by a Trichord Dino+ and latterly by that company's Delphini Mk2.

The P5 has a very coherent and tight sound; it keeps everything in its correct perspective and has a keen sense of timing. In fact, it's the timing that's central to this player's character. Its ability to define the leading edge of each note, whether it be alone or in contrast to other simultaneous notes, is what keeps you listening and appreciating the subtleties of the music.

Tonally, the P5 with Super Elys is a shade on the forward side - many will undoubtedly enjoy the hint of edge that it adds to proceedings, because it's subtle enough to be hard to pinpoint and euphonic enough to blend in with most musical styles. There are occasions when a hi-hat, for instance, seems a little further forward in the mix than you'd expect, but not to the extent that it's grating. The track on this occasion was HIM's Elementals, which

remained rhythmically tight and spontaneous without sounding lightweight, the various percussive instruments and bass guitar co-existing in very tidy fashion.

Indeed, the P5 does bass with considerable aplomb, delivering Jeff Buckley's *Grace* with plenty of grunt not to mention a generous dollop of energy. This isn't the most dynamic of turntables, but it's sensitive to the energy levels on the disc and quite capable of supplying bass weight, if not the full breadth of its character. It's always a lot of fun too; you can't help but be bounced by Outkast's well-meant if politically challenged *We Luv Deez Hoes*, which has an elastic energy that's contagious.

Moving over to the P7 with Rega's Exact cartridge (£275, 'Vital' tip) is a very pleasant experience. Now, the P5 is good - very good for the money. But if you double the budget there's a real treat in store with the P7. The benefit is largely in terms of relaxation and naturalness, plus a stronger sense of body and shape to the sound. The P7 is a significantly more sophisticated and refined record player; it has the same great sense of timing, but this is joined by a considerably higher level of resolution. We could hear right down through the mix on Bugge Wesseltoft's *Moving*, which revealed a strange flutter effect on the piano, presumably some form of reverb. Backgrounds are extremely quiet if the vinyl allows, which means that all the subtleties come through - and all the problems too if the album has 'issues'. Bugge's track has a steady build-up of tension that is unmissable on a player of this calibre, the rhythm gradually increasing in tempo while the energy builds up beneath it.

Keith Jarrett's *Köln Concert* revealed a lot more of its quieter elements too, with the creak of the stool and the sense of the venue being far clearer than with the P5. There was still a slight shortfall in image scale compared to more expensive designs, but that wasn't for want of detail.

Zakir Hussain's *Making Music* provided more insight into the tangibility of the P7's resolving power, the deck producing a vivid and realistic image between and in front of the speakers. The acoustic instruments here were uncannily real, and the metallic tap of his fingers on the table revealed their own distinct reverb.

While the Exact is a pretty impressive cartridge for the money, having something rather more capable in the room in the form of a van den Hul Grasshopper (£2,800) proved too great a temptation; having fitted three spacers under the RB700, it was duly bolted on. A very worthwhile exercise it was too, even if it meant that the counterweight was hanging off the end of the arm!

This moving coil added a sense of acoustic space to the P7's many skills, refining the tone of instruments and exposing more shape and colour in everything played. The sound was still a little restrained in 'grunt' terms, but there was no getting away from the big differences it revealed between LPs - the real sign of high resolution. What's more, albums that had previously seemed compressed ceased to be so - a real boon. Upgrading to Tom Evans' *The Groove* phono stage added more of the energy we crave, alongside a great sense of poise which comes in very handy when you're cranking Jeff Buckley's more excitable moments to the max!

With these ancillaries, the P7 revealed that it's a high-resolution record

player with considerable finesse and great sensitivity to the music. While its unsuspected nature means that decent isolation is pretty much essential, there are few other reasons why it shouldn't end up ruling the roost in its price range. Avid, Clearaudio and Michell had better pull their socks up if they want to compete with this.

## FEATURES

PRICE P5: £698 (inc. arm) P7: £1,298 (inc. arm) KEY FEATURES (P5) size (WxHxD): 45x13x36cm, weight: 4kg, RB700 tonearm, glass platter, passive motor equalisation, (P7) size (WxHxD): 45x13x36cm, weight: 6kg, RB700 tonearm, ceramic oxide powder platter, twin drive belts

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