

## FOLLOW-UP

Jim Austin, Larry Greenhill, & John Atkinson

### Rega Mira 3 integrated amplifier

I despise Harley-Davidson motorcycles. I know that some audio types love them, but not me. It's not the noise per se but the aesthetic: they're obvious, in your face, loud. A Harley is the vehicular equivalent of a loud belch or a smelly fart. With apologies to those who like them, there's something, well, incontinent about a Harley.

So what's that got to do with an affordable British integrated amplifier? Not much. What I don't like about Harleys is pretty much what I *do* like about the Mira 3, Rega's top-of-the-line integrated amplifier and the latest in a series of affordable British integrateds I've listened to in recent months. The Mira 3 (\$995) is no wimp; at 60Wpc, it's reasonably powered by the standards of budget British integrateds, but it doesn't wear its muscle, if you will, on its sleeve.<sup>1</sup>

Like the original Rega Mira that Sam Tellig reviewed back in April 2001 (Vol.24 No.4), to select a source, you gently push in and rotate the volume knob; a red LED indicates which source is selected. The Mira 3's volume control uses an electronically controlled stepped resistor network with very fine steps, a feature typically found, in my experience, only in more expensive preamps. I mostly liked the Mira 3's unique (outside of Rega, anyway) control system. First, because that resistor network has such nice, small steps, and because Rega uses a thoughtfully designed electronic control system, the usable range of the volume knob is much wider than usual. Unlike most preamps and integrateds, whose volume knobs—in my house, at least—spend most of their time between 8 o'clock and 10:30, I was able to use the full range of the little red lights on the Mira 3 that come on sequentially as you rotate the knob.

But most of the time you'll be using the remote control to adjust the volume, select sources, and mute the output. The



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Mira 3's remote isn't bad for a multipurpose unit—a bit complex but well laid out, with volume buttons that are easy to put your thumb on in the dark, and a Mute button that, even though it's at the extreme lower left, is easy to find in the dark once you know where it is.

One thing about the Mira 3 that's potentially quite useful is that it has power-amp input jacks. It's common for integrated amplifiers to have preamp outputs, but power-amp inputs are far less common, and they have two advantages. First, they allow you to insert a crossover (aka high-pass filter) between preamp and power amp so that you can properly use subwoofers such as Vandersteen's 2Wq (for which you otherwise need separate pre- and power amps). Second, it makes the upgrade path a little smoother: If you want to switch to separates, you can just buy a new preamp and save the purchase of a new power amp for later. (The power-amp sections of inexpensive integrateds often outperform their preamp sections, though I'm not sure this is true of the Mira 3.) So you can get a new preamp and use the Mira 3's power-amp section while you save up for something better—and more expensive.

I know they probably don't affect the sound, but I'm not generally a fan of Rega's metal boxes—their phono stages and turntable power supplies seem lightweight, cheap, and hollow even when they work well. The Mira 3 is in another league altogether—it feels heavy and solid and it looks good. When you pull it out of the box for the first time, you'll feel you've gotten your money's worth—and that's even before you plug it in.

What happens when you *do* plug it in is very nice. The alternative to the audio equivalent of a Harley-Davidson is not, it turns out, some wimpy scooter, but something quieter and faster, with more refined engineering. That

was the impression the Mira 3 made when I first hooked it up: potent but reserved and, above all, controlled. The Mira 3 brought to mind Winton Marsalis's trumpet on *Think of One* (CD,

Columbia 38641): a precise, rounded bolus of sound. Right out of the box, the highs seemed a bit edgy—something I noticed only with recordings that already have a bit of edge to them, such as the Schubert Piano Trios with violinist Pinchas Zukerman, cellist Lynn Harrell, and pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy (CD, Decca 455 685-2). In those first few hours the Mira 3 seemed to emphasize that edge just a little, but after a while I no longer noticed this quality. I don't know whether I adjusted or the amp did; what matters is that it rapidly ceased to bother me. After a few days, the Mira 3 and I got used to each other; after that, we very much enjoyed each other's company.

What remained, once the edge had departed, was balance and detail. In contrast to the Exposure 2010S integrated I reviewed in the February issue, which I found to be especially nice with lower-register instruments and voices—cellos and mezzo-sopranos, especially, were silky and full—the Mira 3 didn't play favorites. Jim James's high voice on *My Morning Jacket's Z* (CD, ATO) had a lovely smoothness and purity—though I was bothered enough by the excess reverb used on that recording's vocals to sell it within a week (that wasn't the Rega's fault). Gregor Piatigorsky's cello in the Dvorák and Walton cello concertos (SACD, RCA Living Stereo 82876 66375 2) was natural and lovely. No complaints.

The Mira 3 also includes a very good moving-magnet phono stage. I tried it out with my Rega P7 turntable and Rega's whole lineup of MM cartridges, from the redesigned and renamed Bias 2 through the also-redesigned (but, oddly, not renamed) Exact. I compared the Mira 3's phono stage with the MM version of Rega's standalone Fono stage, and with the far more expensive Whest PS.20. The Mira 3's built-in stage was good enough to extract pretty much all of the performance of the entry-level

<sup>1</sup> Rega Research Ltd., 119 Park Street, Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex SS0 7PD, England, UK. Tel: (44) 1702-333071. Web: [www.rega.co.uk](http://www.rega.co.uk). US distributor: The Sound Organisation, 11140 Petal Street, Suite 350, Dallas, TX 75238. Tel: (972) 234-0182. Fax: (972) 234-0249. Web: [www.soundorg.com](http://www.soundorg.com).

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Basis 2 and the midrange Elys 2 cartridges. Rega's top-line Exact is good enough, in my opinion, to deserve something better; the Whest, in particular, yielded better resolution and a bit more extension (at both extremes) with the Exact than the Mira 3's built-in stage was capable of. There's a qualitative improvement, in my view, in the step up from the Elys 2 to the Exact (more on that in a later issue); some of that quality was lost with the Mira's built-in phono stage.

I didn't try the Mira 3 with any non-Rega cartridges, but I think it's safe to say that its phono stage is good enough for MM and high-output moving-coils costing up to several hundred dollars—which is about what buyers of an amp like the Mira 3 are likely to use. Hook the Mira 3 up to a topnotch, entry-level turntable—or even a very good midrange model—and a decent pair of speakers, and you'll have a very nice setup for playing all those old records in the attic or basement. Assuming you clean the mold off 'em first, of course.

The Rega Mira 3 offers excellent sound, nice features, and outstanding

value. It would make a fine introduction to hi-fi for your big-box friends—its superior value is readily apparent—but even high-end veterans will be able to appreciate what it does. The Mira 3 is not ingratiating; it doesn't plead for affection and work hard to be loved. This is one integrated amplifier you can enjoy tonight and still respect—along with yourself—in the morning.—*Jim Austin*

### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

#### JIM AUSTIN'S ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

**ANALOG SOURCES** Rega P7 turntable, Rega RB-700 tonearm, Rega Bias 2, Elys 2, Exact (old & new versions) cartridges.

**DIGITAL SOURCES** Marantz SA-8260 SACD player, Benchmark DAC-1 D/A converter.

**PREAMPLIFICATION** Whest, Rega Fono moving-magnet phono stages.

**INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS** Arcam A75 Plus, Exposure 2010S, NAD C372.

**LOUDSPEAKERS** Vandersteen 2Ce Signature.

**CABLES** Interconnect: Chord Chameleon Silver Plus, Chord Chorus, Monster Cable M550i. Speaker: Chord Odyssey 2 & 4, Monster Cable M1.2.

**ACCESSORIES** PS Audio High-Current Ultimate Outlet; homemade, rigid hardwood equipment rack; homemade foam-and-bamboo-based vibration isolation for turntable; maple blocks of various thicknesses; M-Audio Audio-ophile FireWire interface for digital recording.

—*Jim Austin*