

Home Audio Equipment Review



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Rega Cursa 2000 Preamplifier and Maia 2000 Amplifier

by Troy McHenry

If you asked audiophiles in the US what kind of products Rega manufactures, eight out of ten would likely say turntables. The other two might say CD players, since Rega's Planet has received some very positive press. In truth, Rega manufactures a wide assortment of products ranging from speakers, amplifiers and CD players to turntables and speaker cables. Like Linn, Rega is one of the few companies that makes everything an audiophile could ask for to reproduce music.

Enter an unknown dynamic duo, the Cursa 2000 preamplifier and Maia 2000 power amplifier. Suggested retail price for each is \$950 USD, and both have the 2000 in their model designation to show that they are newly redesigned units. They both feature detachable power cords and new extruded-aluminum casework, which matches that of the new Planet 2000 CD player. Since both the Cursa 2000 and Maia 2000 were designed with the other in mind, I thought it only prudent to review the pair together. To further create cohesiveness between the two, Rega even has an RCA interconnect just for them -- aptly named the Couple.

Rega's notorious no-frills approach to high fidelity is evident in the Cursa 2000 and Maia 2000. Both look deceptively flimsy and appear to be made out of black plastic. Under closer observation, you find that the units are actually made completely out of metal and have excellent build quality and heft. Both have finned aluminum heat sinks underneath for heat dissipation. Because of this, neither unit should be placed on carpet or in any cabinet with poor ventilation.

The Cursa 2000 preamplifier is the only preamp Rega makes. It was specifically designed to operate with either the Maia 2000 stereo power amplifier or Rega's new Exon monoblocks. It's a solid-state design and features a DC protection circuit to protect any connected power amplifiers from what Rega calls "a major failure of the system." The redesigned Cursa 2000



Review Summary

Sound "Incredibly low noise floor" coupled with "deep and well defined" bass and high degrees of resolution and clarity.

Features Cursa 2000 preamp features remote control and adjustable output level; phono input card is optional; Maia 2000 amplifier can be used as a monoblock.

Use Remote control of volume is coarse; no balance or tone controls; no thumbscrew grounding post for turntables; should not be placed on top of or next to each other.

Value "Ranks up there with the best-sounding equipment at its price."

boasts high-quality Evox capacitors throughout the signal path. In addition, Rega states that, "Servo correction has been used to reduce the amount of capacitors in the signal path to a minimum. This stage can drive any load connected to the preamplifier output, for example long signal cables and as many power amplifiers as required." In reality, the user manual dictates no more than five amplifiers to be connected to the Cursa 2000 at the same time.

The Cursa 2000 includes six standard inputs, all unbalanced (RCA). A seventh input, labeled Phono, is actually a slot that can accept a card for either another line-level input or an optional moving-magnet or moving-coil phono input. The review sample had the MC input card installed. Among the other six inputs, two have accompanying tape loops. The listed output for both tape loops is the same as the listed input sensitivity for all line-level inputs: 200mV.

The front panel of the Cursa 2000 is minimalistic -- it has only one knob along with three push buttons for mute and tape-loop selection. As you would expect, turning the knob changes the volume. To alter the source selection, you push the knob in once and then turn it to select the desired source. Pushing the knob in again (or just waiting a moment) returns it to volume-control duty. It took some time to get used to this, but I grew to appreciate the utility. Rega's technical name for this feature is Mono Knob Alpha-Encoder. But if turning and pushing a single knob isn't your thing, then just sit back and use Rega's optional remote control, which can control all of the Cursa 2000's functions. Rega makes a learning remote called the Solar if you don't have an all-Rega system. However, I'd suggest buying an inexpensive no-name universal remote because all of Rega's equipment uses standard Philips IR commands.

For output to a power amplifier, the Cursa 2000 has two sets of unbalanced/RCA jacks. There are five different output levels that the two outputs can be set to, ranging from 0.25V to 1.5V. The default from the factory is 0.8V. This unique ability allows the Cursa 2000 to drive most brands of power amplifiers. For use with the Maia 2000 power amplifier, the unit should be left at its default setting. A Rega dealer should make any adjustments to the output level because doing so requires changing DIP switches inside the Cursa 2000.

The Maia 2000 is the perfect mate for the Cursa 2000 preamplifier as well as a nice upgrade for Rega's Mira integrated amplifier. As with the Cursa 2000, the Maia 2000 uses Evox capacitors throughout the signal path, and it additionally has Sanken 200-watt output transistors in the output stage. The Maia 2000 produces 85Wpc into an 8-ohm load, 130 watts into 4 ohms. The Maia 2000 can also be used as a monoblock -- 100 watts into 8 ohms and 165 watts into 4 ohms -- a nice touch for those who already own one and wish to increase the power of their system. Rega mentions in its literature that the Maia 2000 should be able to drive "the most awkward of speaker systems."

The Maia 2000 also has some protection features. Besides a power monitor for both transformers, the output stage is fully protected from DC, and there's electronic thermal protection.

System and setup

The Cursa 2000 and Maia 2000 couldn't be easier to hook up. Rega's documentation, though sparse in places, was adequate. Both manuals are about the size of index cards and consist of as many as 18 pages. Rega recommends *not* stacking either unit on top of the other or even placing them directly beside each other. For my review, I placed the Maia 2000 on a middle shelf in the middle column of my three-column Salamander Design Archetype rack and the Cursa 2000 on the top shelf on the right column. To connect loudspeakers to the Maia 2000,

just about any type of speaker cable should do. The five-way binding posts are nicely spaced apart for any users who have unusually large cables. For my review I stuck to speaker cables terminated with bananas.

During the first part of the review I used mostly Transparent Audio The Wave 200 speaker cables, and I later switched to Kimber Kable's 4VS. About 60% of my listening was done with my Arcam Alpha 7 CD player, with the remaining 40% coming from my Arcam Alpha 8 tuner, Pioneer DV-606-D DVD player, or JVC JL-A40 turntable with Grado Prestige Green cartridge. Speakers were B&W 602 Series 1s or Linn Kans on 24" Sanus Systems Foundations II speaker stands. Interconnects were AudioQuest Ruby x3 or Transparent The Link 200. For comparison, I used the preamp section of my Arcam Alpha 7r integrated amp along with an Arcam Alpha 8P power amp.

I have a few functional caveats about the Rega duo. For starters, there isn't a headphone jack to be seen. Also, the Cursa 2000 has no tone or balance controls. Granted, these add elements to the signal path, but I still have some poor recordings that need some tweaking when I play them. The remote control command to change the volume works, but it does so in huge steps. Hitting the button to increase volume once can make the system seem twice as loud. Using the front-panel knob to change the volume the same amount would require me to turn the knob almost 90 degrees.

Also, using a turntable with the Rega Cursa 2000 proved to be a challenging experience. For owners of Rega turntables, there's no issue because Rega grounds the tonearm through the negative conductor of its captive cable. For the rest of us who need a separate ground connection, there isn't a thumbscrew grounding post on either unit. Instead, Rega recommends loosening one of the screws on the back of the case with a Philips screwdriver and using that to ground your turntable. If you're not changing components all the time, this isn't really an issue.

Finally, I was told that both of my review pieces were the same units demonstrated at the CES in January, so they were delivered already broken in -- can't complain there.

Sound

Translating the sound of the Cursa 2000 and Maia 2000 into words is not an easy task. Was the noise floor lower than with my Arcam equipment? Yes. Did I experience more bass than I was used to? Yes. Was the soundstage broader? Yes. Did the Cursa 2000 and Maia 2000 sound as warm as my Arcam equipment? No.

First, the noise floor. With the volume turned up as high as it would go and with nothing playing, I heard nothing. Trying this experiment with my existing Arcam equipment creates an audible hiss. This incredibly low noise floor on the Rega Cursa 2000 and Maia 2000 is a credit to their design. When I started the music on the Rega equipment (after first turning down the volume!) the instruments seemed to start and stop with no trailing edges. When Miles Davis stopped playing his trumpet on "So What" (from *Kind of Blue* [Columbia/Legacy 64935-2]), the trumpet disappeared completely from the projected stage. When the trumpet kicked back in during parts of the song, it hit with a force and immediacy that had me scrambling for more CDs to experience this phenomenon and emotion.

Listening to Madonna's "Ray of Light" off of *Ray of Light* [Warner Bros. 9 46847-2] demonstrated just how well the Rega combo deals with fundamentals accompanied with vocals. This track is hard for a lot of systems to reproduce because it's so demanding of both the bass and treble. With the Cursa 2000 and Maia 2000, the bass was so deep and well

defined that I kept changing speakers to see if it was a fluke. With my B&W 602s at a moderate volume, I could feel the beat in my stomach. The bass wasn't the "thud, thud" that we all hear when some guy drives his pimped-out Honda down the street. The bass was full and articulate. After I exchanged the B&W 602s for my Linn Kans, the bass diminished to an acceptable level, but overall resolution increased noticeably. Madonna's voice through the Kans was clearer and offered increased refinement over that served up by the B&W 602s.

A great test for a preamp and power amp is Nina Simone's "Sinnerman" off of *The Thomas Crown Affair* soundtrack [Pangea 186 810 049 2]. The tempo of the drums and Simone's haunting voice are so fast that they create unusual demands on a system in terms of rhythm and timing. While listening to the track through the Rega combo, I actually lost what I was listening for because the soundstage broadened to such a degree that I could turn my head 90 degrees to the right and it was as if I were staring directly at one of the drummers!

Concerning timing issues, the Rega gear reproduced the song with varying degrees of success. At moderate listening levels, everything sounded as it should. At a fairly high volume, Simone's voice started to wane a little and lose some definition. Her voice became muddier as I turned up the volume. However, from the same album, "Glider Pt. 1" sounded a little off through the Rega pair. The orchestra was present, and I could hear the pages of the sheet music turning on the recording, but the three-dimensional quality of the music seemed missing.

The ability to pick out all the little background sounds of an orchestra really expresses the amount of resolution that this Rega combo can produce. Using my Linn Kan speakers was almost overkill on resolution and clarity, which created an almost sterile-sounding system. The music had excellent timing, but the overall imaging seemed artificial.

Looking over my notes that I took while listening to the Rega pair, I came across some interesting remarks jotted down while listening to Diana Krall's *When I Look In Your Eyes* [Verve IMPD-304]. While listening to "Let's Face the Music and Dance," I wrote "better imaging and depth with guitar/piano." Reading my chicken-scratch brought me back to the way the Rega seemed to re-create effortlessly the electric guitar and piano that are always present on Krall's albums. When I'm first trying to impress non-audiophiles, I always sit them down and play a few tracks off of a Diana Krall album. I tell them to notice when I change the volume if the music just gets louder or if the instruments sound more full and lifelike. It's usually at this point that whomever I'm converting has a big smile on his or her face as if to say, "Eureka, I understand your hobby. I hear a difference!" The Rega pair proved adept at exhibiting these effects.

Using the Cursa 2000 with my Arcam Alpha 8P power amplifier lowered the noise floor a little more than what I heard with the amp being driven with the preamp section of my Arcam Alpha 7r integrated. With the Maia 2000 being driven from my Arcam integrated amp's preamp outputs, the sound was definitely louder, but not really any better defined. I think to get the most sound out of each Rega component, it should be paired with another piece of Rega gear or a similar-sounding piece of equipment (Linn comes to mind). For its cost, I would be hard-pressed to find a better, quieter preamp than the Cursa 2000. The Maia 2000 is a nice mate for the Cursa 2000; with other preamps, the Maia 2000's strengths seem to diminish somewhat compared to other amplifiers on the market in its price range.

Conclusion

Are the Cursa 2000 and Maia 2000 the best preamp/power amp combo on the market today? Of course not. At \$950 apiece, they're not exactly cheap, but they are not in Mark Levinson or Spectral territory either. Any owner of this combo is getting a lot of resolution and a very

low noise floor at a great price. For twice the price of the Rega pair, you could buy a really great preamplifier, but you'd be ampless. And this speaks to the true challenge -- building great equipment that gives the most bang for the buck, but keeping the bucks spent at a reasonable level.

For sheer sound quality, ignoring for a moment usability and features, the Rega pair ranks up there with the best-sounding equipment at its price. If you don't need tone controls and just want a great two-channel setup, I suggest you put the Rega Cursa 2000 and Maia 2000 on your short list for audition.

...Troy McHenry

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Rega Cursa 2000 Preamplifier and Maia 2000 Amplifier

Price: \$950 USD each.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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