

TONEAudio.

ISSUE 16. 2008

The Rega Ios

By Jeff Dorgay

When I last reviewed the Rega P9, which now retails for \$5000, and their Apheta moving coil cartridge, I wondered when Rega would release a phono stage that was at the same performance level of these two excellent products. The Ios completes the phono trilogy of top-shelf components and is actually the first in a series of a new, premier line of components in the works from Rega designated Signature 3.





You can tell that this preamplifier was designed by a group of people that are obsessed with analog.

Priced at \$3195, the los is priced for the serious analog enthusiast, but it won't break the bank, like some of those five figure phono stages lurking out there. Sharing the same casework as the power supply from the P9, it looks rather smart sitting on the rack with a P9 and a Rega Saturn, should you happen to have one of those too.

A quick peek at the rear panel reveals a pretty spartan aesthetic; input, output, ground and IEC. The fun is around the front. You can tell that this preamplifier was designed by a group of people that are obsessed with analog.

There are two gain settings at 64 and 70 db respectively and a couple of other easily accessible adjustments that will help you tailor the los to just about any MC cartridge you might have. None of my cartridges have a lower output than .3mv, so I never had to switch to the higher gain setting to achieve enough gain through my preamplifier. When I did try the higher gain setting, no increase in background noise was apparent, so it should be a breeze for those of you in the audience with extremely low output moving coil cartridges.

Though most of the other designs we've auditioned lately switch in a pair of step up transformers for the higher gain settings only, the los uses them for both. When I was discussing the circuit design with Roy Gandy, he told me that they feel like a transformer is the ideal way to load a very low level transducer like a moving coil cartridge (or a microphone). "The transformer in the los only provides a minimal amount of gain, it's there more for the consistent load it presents to the

cartridge. It may seem a bit low-tech to use a transformer, but we've had the best results using a transformer."

Friendly!

While many MC preamplifiers offer a fair amount of adjustability, most (like my previous reference, the ASR Basis) require that you remove the top of the enclosure or poke around with tiny DIP switches on the rear panel. Rega thoughtfully puts all of the adjustments right out on the front where you can easily fiddle with them.

There is an adjustment for loading, DC resistance and a notch filter that has a bit of cut at 6.5kHz that is supposed to help with MC cartridges that have a bit of harshness in this range. Unfortunately, I didn't have a cartridge in my collection that needed any help here, so this is the only feature of the los that I can't comment on yet.

The DC resistance switch helps to optimally load the moving coil to the input transformers. To really wrap your brain around this, think of it as you might when using a tube power amplifier, with multiple output taps. Most speakers seem to couple to one set of windings on the transformer better, providing that last bit of synergy to the playback. It's the same thing with the DC resistance switch. Most of the time going with the manufacturers suggestions worked just fine, but a little experimentation here (Rega encourages this in the manual as well) might lead you to a touch better marriage between your moving coil cartridge and the rest of your system, delivering smoother sound through the frequency spectrum. *(continued)*



“We didn’t built it to a price point, we made the best phono preamplifier we were capable of.”

Loading can be set at 50, 100, 200 and 400 ohms. While not quite as wide of a range as others that go up to 1000 or 2500 ohms, I was more interested in having the 50 ohm setting, because the Rega Apeheta cartridge is smooth as silk at a 50 ohm setting. Most MC’s require loading somewhere between 100 and 1000 ohms, so you will probably be just fine throughout the range the los offers. I tried the los with quite a few cartridges and got the best results between 100 and 200 ohms, only occasionally needing the 400 ohm setting. Having the settings right out on the front panel encourages some experimentation.

Quiet, Yet Powerful

For the last year, I’ve been listening to the king of quiet phono stages, the ASR Basis Exclusive. With battery power, it doesn’t get any better than

this in terms of a “black background” that hifi reviewers like to rave about. With such low level signals, every bit of noise that can be eliminated will benefit a phono stage.

Removing the los from the box, it is apparent that there is a substantial power supply inside. As you can see from the picture, this is a very complex phono stage indeed! The circuitry is discrete throughout, with only a couple of op amps used in various stages of power supply regulation.

Having a fully differential circuit also helps dramatically lower the noise floor, though again, making the los more complex. Gandy said, “Usually, we tend to take a simpler is better approach, but the los is perhaps the most complex circuit we’ve built. We didn’t built it to a price point, we made the best phono preamplifier we were capable of.”
(continued)



He's not kidding, the los delivers the goods even before you place the stylus on the record. The ASR Basis is the only other phono preamplifier I have used that has absolutely no noise when you put your ear up to the tweeter (or in my case, panel) and listen.

Even with the stock power cord, going straight into the wall, the los is one of quietest phono stages I've had the pleasure of listening to. Swapping the stock power cord for a new Shunyata Helix and plugging in to my Running Springs Dimitri power conditioner peeled off one more layer of background and put the los right in battery powered territory. The engineers at Rega have definitely done their homework.

Making it a point to listen to some recent Blue Note remasters, quite a bit of classical and even some of my favorite rock warhorses that have a lot of quiet passages, you can really see where the los excels; the sound just decays all the way down to nothing during the quiet bits.

Top Shelf, Indeed

The los' ability to do it all is what makes it a worthy contender for being on the list of *top phono stages ever*. The more you listen to acoustic music and pay attention to the way the los captures the texture of even the most delicate instruments, you realize that this is some of the best analog has to offer, with outstanding tonality.

In order for any component to go from the "quite good" column to the "top of the heap" column, is its ability to do everything at an equally high level and in the case of a phono preamplifier, that means quiet, tonally correct *and* dynamic. Again, the los is a contender. When using the Raven table, with a Dynavector XV-1s mounted on each arm, it's very easy to bounce back between one preamp and the other, keeping everything else equal.

Comparing the los to the \$10k Conrad-Johnson TEA-1, and the \$6000 Nagra VPS, it definitely held its own. The CJ had more ultimate weight and a slightly wider soundstage, with the Nagra right on its heels, but these were both tubed preamplifiers. Where the ASR Basis exclusive was somewhat dry and sterile, (or completely neutral, depending on how you want to call it) The los had that something extra, a touch of warmth or weight that I wasn't expecting that was very exciting at this price point and certainly not from a solid state phono preamplifier.

There were no shortcomings with the los for me. The tube thing has always been a love/hate relation-

ship (I love my Nagara VPS, but it only has two tubes under the hood). Sure, I'd love to see a second input, perhaps the ability to accept a 47k input on that second input and a mono switch, but then the los would be five grand. Mr. Gandy felt that adding the ability to accommodate a MM cart too would have made compromises to the MC inputs, so who am I to argue?

Quite the Journey

Why then did it take Rega so long to make the los? Considering that their website says that they are "the last high major hi-end manufacturer to make a CD player" I guess this seems pretty much on track. Gandy adds: "The los is something that developed over a very long period of time. We used a similar circuit when we first started making integrated amplifiers quite a while ago. When we were working on this pre-amplifier we had a single ended circuit that improved dramatically when we added transformers; then the lightbulb went off – what about the los? We then went back to the symmetrical design and had what we were looking for".

Bottom Line

I had a fantastic time listening to the Rega los and had the opportunity to pair it up with some first rate record players. One of the things I have always enjoyed about the Rega P9 turntable is that it gets you close enough to what the cost no object tables offer with a

Roy ended our conversation by saying that "he's never completely happy unless they've accomplished something just a little bit special."

minimum of fuss and ease of setup at an accessible price. Whenever I get bogged down trying to wring the last bit of performance out of a turntable, I always take a break, go back to my P9 and think, "why bother?"

The los offers the same thing in a phono preamplifier.

Yes, some of the mega preamps (with their mega pricetags attached) will extract more information from your grooves. But I guarantee none of them will be this easy to use and live with every day. Think of the los as the Acura NSX that you drive every day because you don't want to rack up the miles on your much more expensive to maintain Ferrari. Or perhaps you are that more logical person that doesn't need the Ferrari at all.

Roy ended our conversation by saying that "he's never completely happy unless they've accomplished something just a little bit special." British understatement at its finest. Go buy this one.

Second Opinion

By Marc Phillips

“Whatever you do, don’t scratch it,” Jeff told me as we loaded the Rega Ios into the trunk of my car. “I bought it...it’s mine!”

I grumbled as I drove away, thinking, “Of course I’m not going to scratch it...who does he think I am?” After a short time in my system (too short, in my opinion), I discovered why he was so protective about this particular piece of gear. It really is something special.

First of all, the Ios is the quietest phono pre I’ve ever used. I’m sure you’ve read reviews where the item in question (usually an amp or preamp) was so quiet; the reviewer didn’t think it was turned on. I’ve had that experience before, but never with a phono preamp. There’s always something, a little tube rush, a tiny bit of hum, that almost but not quite imperceptible sound of air particles colliding with the tip of the stylus. I literally jumped, however, when the stylus hit the groove and I realized, much to my surprise that the Ios was hooked up correctly.

Once it settled in, I was even more enthralled with Ios’ ability to deliver an extra bit of detail to familiar recordings. I know, it’s another reviewer cliché, but I was always able to hear something new in several of my favorite LPs. For instance, on “Duke’s Place” from the Classic Records version of *Louis Armstrong & Duke Ellington*, I could hear Pops extend each note he sung, straining ever so slightly for a second or two longer than normal, his distinctive vibrato wavering into oblivion. Yes, with the Ios, each note hung in the air just a bit longer. Of course, that level of detail is directly related to those jet-black silences.

Over the last few months, I’ve listened to perhaps a half dozen \$1000 phono preamps, each one a winner in its own way. Just prior to that, however, I used a couple of phono stages in the \$5000 to \$7000 range. The Rega Ios easily belongs in the latter group. The build quality is astonishing (it’s certainly the heaviest phono preamp I’ve used), the flexibility world-class. The sound quality was perhaps the most addictive I’ve experienced in my system, and now I want that Ios as well.

Upon return, I did notice a tiny scratch on the top of the case. Was it a self-fulfilling prophecy or passive-aggressive behavior? Arrgh! ●

The Rega Ios Phono Preamp
MSRP: \$3195

MANUFACTURER

Rega Research Ltd.
Essex, England
www.rega.co.uk

US Distributor:

The Sound Organisation

159 Leslie Street
Dallas, TX 75207
972-234-0182
www.soundorg.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifiers: Conrad-Johnson ACT2/ Series 2

Phono Stages: Nagra VPS, Conrad-Johnson TEA-1, ModWright 9.0SWLP, ASR Basis Exclusive

Analog Sources: TW Acoustic Raven Two w/SME IV.Vi arms, SME 309 arm and Rega RB1000 arm mated with Dynavector XV-1s, MoFi 3.5C, Lyra Skala and Zu Denon 103 cartridges. Rega P9 w/ RB1000 arm and Apheta MC

Power Amplifiers: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Speakers: MartinLogan Summit w/ Descent i subwoofer

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares

Speaker Cables: Shunyata Orion

Power Cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence “Reference”, Running Springs Mongoose, Shunyata Helix Alpha VX

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco and Dimitri

Vibration Control: Finite Element Pagode Signature, Cereballs, Cerepucs

Room Treatments: Sonex Classic, GIK 242 panels, GIK tri traps

Accessories: Furutech De-Mag, Clearaudio Simple Matrix record cleaner