

Rega Rebirth

REGA P3²⁴ (£398/£199)

Rega's perennial Planar 3 is reborn as the P3²⁴ with improved motor and arm. Is it still the mid-priced deck to beat?



Tested by Steve Harris

A different kind of company might have celebrated three decades in the turntable business with some gold-plated, double-the-price anniversary edition. Rega seems to have done the opposite, trying to get 'back to the roots' of its original designs, putting money into things that improve the sound, saving on things that don't.

There is a new upmarket turntable, the P9, but there is also now the P1, a very basic model with a new budget arm and (like the Rega-built Goldring) a mediate platter. Meanwhile, the P3, arguably the key model, has been quietly upgraded to become the P3²⁴.

The new deck may not look much different from the old P3, but there have been major changes. For this review, we tried it with Rega's best moving-magnet cartridge, the £199 Exact.

SOME HISTORY

Rega was founded in 1973, but the story really starts with the launch of the Planar 2 turntable in 1975. The Planar 3 came out two years later, the most obvious difference being a thicker glass platter. At first, both were fitted with an S-shaped arm made for Rega by Lustre in Japan, but from 1983 this was replaced by Rega's own arms. Eventually, in 2000, the Planar 3 became the P3, which had a smarter-looking plinth with



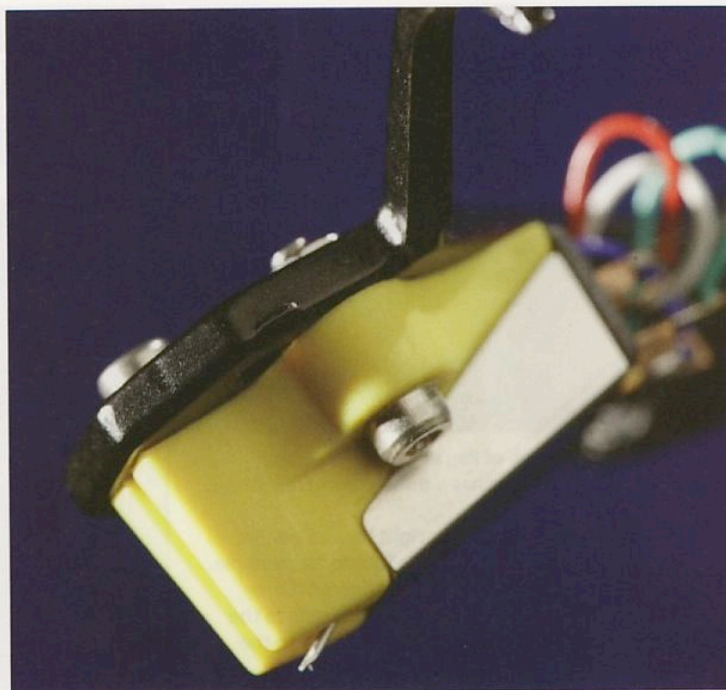
LOW VOLTAGE, LOW VIBRATION

Like many other belt-drive decks, Rega's long-running Planar 3 used a mains-voltage synchronous motor, driven by the 50Hz alternations of the mains current (60Hz in the USA). In order to rotate, this type of motor needs to be fed with an additional second power supply 'phase', correctly timed so that the alternations keep pushing it round in the right direction.

The simplest way of doing this is to use a capacitor, which will give a current with a phase lag of 90 degrees compared with the mains voltage. However, for the P3 2000 (as it is known internally) Rega used a tuning circuit to set the second phase more precisely to suit the motor, dramatically reducing motor vibration.

This meant that the motor could now be stuck rigidly to the plinth, dispensing with the rubber suspension mounting used previously. This in turn gave better speed stability and better start-up behaviour, eliminating the Planar 3's familiar 'rattle' on start-up.

Rega has taken this approach a big step further in its P5, P7 and P9 turntables by switching to a low-voltage and hence intrinsically lower-vibration motor, individually hand-tuned for the lowest possible vibration. This 24V AC motor is also now used in the P3²⁴.



the motor fixed rigidly to it rather than decoupled [see 'Low Voltage, Low Vibration' panel]. Now, for the P3²⁴, there has been a switch to the 24V motor already used in the more expensive models.

As purchased, the P3²⁴ is connected to the mains via a small plug-top transformer, but replacing this with Rega's separate power supply unit (£148) should give a further improvement in sound quality and will also provide electronic 33/45 rpm speed switching.

There are arm improvements too. The RB300 is replaced here by a new variant called the RB301, using a new bias compensator that is essentially a plastic version of the assembly used on the top-of-the-range RB1000. It is wired with a better-quality cable, as used previously on the RB700. Finally, the 20mm-thick plinth, as on the P2, replaces the fancier chamfered-edge version seen on the P3 2000.

You can buy the P3²⁴ with an Elys cartridge for £498, or on its own for £398, or you can do as we did and add the Exact cartridge. Fitting would normally be done by a

Rega dealer, but is pretty straightforward. Rega supplies a torque wrench, allowing you to get the fixing bolts really tight without risking breaking the cartridge body.

ABOVE: The review P3²⁴ turntable was fitted with Rega's best moving-magnet cartridge, the Exact, which uses a special three-point headshell fixing along with a 'vital' stylus profile

'Dire Straits is still a good demonstration of Rega's way with rhythm, and the P3's utterly clean bottom end'

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SOUND QUALITY

Appropriately, I thought, I started off with a record that must have been playing on almost every Planar 3 in 1978. *Dire Straits* [Vertigo 9102 021] is still a good demonstration of Rega's way with rhythm, and the P3²⁴'s utterly clean bottom end. On 'Sultans Of Swing' you could appreciate the cunning, slightly recessed presentation of Knopfler's forceful if tuneless singing, giving most of the spotlight to his fabulous guitar, and the tremendous beat.

Going back a few more years (but to a different world, I'm afraid), Joni Mitchell's sublime *Blue* [Reprise KK4128] seemed to have a little more presence emphasis than you'd get from many analogue combinations, but it had a fundamental rightness ↪

AUDIO FILE

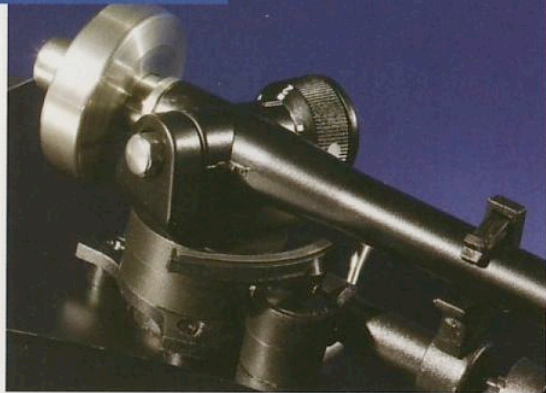
Record player with manual 33/45 speed change

Made by: Rega Research

Telephone: 01702 333071

Web: www.rega.co.uk

TURNTABLE TEST



ABOVE: The new version of Rega's classic RB series tonearm, the RB 301, now has a three-point screw fixing

about it that brought the music right to your ear. In terms of subtlety and detail, it highlighted for example, the way the elaborate yet still production on 'Carey' gives Joni's voice a sound that's quite different to the preceding tracks, and gave a satisfying clarity to the background vocals as well as the instruments.

Back to the 1960s, and the Hammond sound on Jimmy Smith's *The Cat* [Verve 2317 010] was something special with this combination, the big-band brass blaring wildly and excitingly in the huge echoing soundstage, but never degenerating into harshness. Lalo Schifrin's 'Joy House' theme sounded so menacing it brought a big grin to my face.

Next, a very old favourite indeed *Sir John Barbirolli Conducts English String Music* with the Sinfonia of London [EMI ASD 521], which includes Elgar's Introduction and Allegro for strings, Vaughan Williams' fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis and magical fantasia on 'Greensleeves'. Here there was the usual holding of breath while waiting for the harp, and it didn't disappoint. Everything in the recording remained in proportion, nothing seemed too loose or overblown.

With Barenboim playing Mozart's piano concerto No 21 with the English Chamber Orchestra in 1967 [EMI ASD 2465], I felt that there could have been more subtlety and ease to the string sound, and the piano wasn't as pure and limpid as I'd hoped. But again the sound had a clean quality, free of any bottom-end muddying. The lowest piano notes in the cadenza came over with realistic weight and power, and likewise the

'The lowest piano notes in the cadenza came over with realistic weight and basses provided convincing foundation'



REGA TURNTABLE
P3²⁴/ £398/£199

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RESULTS

New motor is mounted below the platter here, screwed to the plinth instead of compliantly mounted



Below the record, the platter is made of MDF instead of glass as seen on the original. On top of this is a 2mm felt wool mat, now also available in a choice of colours

BELOW: The RB301 features an improved vertical bearing housing, and uses a bias compensator derived from the RB700 arm

double basses could provide a convincing foundation for the music, but with perfect control and rhythm.

RECORD AFTER RECORD

It is true that the simple, non-suspended Rega needs to be placed on a solid shelf (which is what I did) or other rigid support, but there are plenty of more elaborately-constructed turntables that still also need careful siting, and many which never quite manage that poised confidence in bass performance, imaging and speed stability which this one gives.

It would be possible to pick holes, to say that it would be nice to have luxuriant extra depth and gloss of a good mC cartridge, or to point to a very slightly damped effect overall. This is perhaps the price you pay for effortless stability, satisfyingly 'black' quiet backgrounds and rhythmic integrity. But by the end of the all-too-short review period I was simply putting on record after record and enjoying music without giving a thought to the system, just knowing that everything would be right, that the sound would just be there.

I think this is really how things ought to be. This is not an expensive combination, but although it comes fairly low down in Rega's own hierarchy, the P3²⁴ is not just a safe stepping stone on some treacherous 'upgrade path'. It's a great product by any standards. Ⓟ

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Shortcomings are minor against the Rega's consistency and freedom from the usual analogue vices. Bass has remarkable realism. Nor do the upper registers shout at you when things get loud and complicated, and the P3²⁴ does give you that wholeness and coherent reality in the sound, which is what keeps us listening to vinyl.

