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Rega's Ultimate Statement:

The Current P9 Table and
the Apheta Cartridge

— Jeff Dorgay



Usually, we review cartridges and turntables as separate items. With the Apheta being Rega's first moving coil cartridge after a few years of development, it now takes its place at the top of their cartridge line. The RB1000 arm is also updated, so it made perfect sense to capitalize on the synergy and review these items together as a complete LP playback system.

In case you are not familiar with this turntable and cartridge, the P9 has a suggested retail of \$4495 and the Apheta Moving Coil cartridge is \$1695. The accessory Tungsten counterweight is an additional \$100. This is definitely a serious turntable, folks. Rega has been steadily moving upmarket with their P5 and P7 models, which are great turntables in their own right, but the P9 is the flagship and having spent time with both of them I feel that the P9 is really in a class all its own.

At first glance, the P9 looks like a P25 with a bit larger wood base, but if your analysis stopped there you would be missing the boat entirely.

One of my favorite things about Rega is that their products all have an understated elegance about them. If you want a big, bulky turntable, that screams 'dig me', the P9 is not going to be your cup of tea. But don't let the subtle styling fool you; take a peek under the traditional felt mat and gaze at the high tech ceramic platter. Pop the ceramic platter off and check out the machined sub platter. The plastic part in the P3 and P25 is gone.

Cast your glance over to the RB1000 tonearm. According to Rega, it takes one technician as much time to hand assemble and adjust an RB1000 arm as it does to make 30 RB300s and it shows the first time you pick that tonearm and set it down on a record. Definitely a work of art. *(continued)*

And the idea that Rega has a moving coil cartridge, is also pretty exciting.

Designed from the ground up, they have eliminated the tie wire and foam damper found in conventional moving coil designs.

The result is indeed, very clean sounding with a tremendous amount of detail on tap. As much as I like the sound, I love the clear body, allowing you a peek inside! Very nice touch!

For a more in-depth technical analysis of the new arm and power supply, head over to the Rega website. (www.rega.co.uk) Thanks to a power supply that is the same size as a Rega integrated amplifier, you no longer have to pop that platter and move the belt on the pulley to get 45rpm playback. Just plug in the umbilical cord, turn it on and choose the speed you want.

I can't imagine that there is anyone out there who hasn't heard of Rega, or even owned one at some point in time. My guess is if you did, it was probably a P2 or P3. Aside from the Linn LP-12, the Rega P3 is probably one of the best selling turntables in history; certainly if we are talking about belt drive tables. (NO surly emails from Technics SL-1200 owners!!)

Like anything that has been around for a long time, there are a number of misconceptions, urban myths and other bits of misinformation floating around. So let's get the BS out of the way and clear the air. Here are the Rega myths exposed and explained once and for all:

1. Rega turntables don't have good speed accuracy, they tend to play a little fast.

Way back in the beginning, some of the Rega tables did play a smidge fast but that has not been an issue for many years now. The engineering staff at Rega has painstakingly worked to rid themselves of this problem and they are so particular, they actually measure speed with a record playing to take the drag from tracking a groove into account.

Even with the P1, this issue is LONG a thing of the past and the P9 had perfect speed accuracy. I had a P25 that was a touch fast, but the minute I changed the belt, it was right on the money, so this would be the first thing I would check if you are having an issue in this department. Most turntable manufacturers suggest changing the belt yearly or at least every other year.

2. Rega turntables don't have deep bass, they sound a little thin.

I guess this one is a matter of personal taste. I have always found the P2, P3 and P25 to have more of a 'fast' sound compared to some other things in the price range, with fantastic detail retrieval and a very nice midrange. One man's fast is another man's thin. Remember, I like minimonitors and panels, so I'm not a big bass freak to begin with. Even on a big system, I've always found these tables to be pretty well balanced and bass has never been an issue. I suspect that those that complained of Rega bass being thin, did not have the VTA set correctly...

3. You can't adjust VTA on a Rega and hence can't use other manufacturers cartridges very easy.

Again, not true. Granted, it's not as easy to adjust the VTA on a Rega table as it is on an SME, but should you decide that you would like a cartridge other than Rega (which have a 14mm stylus to top of the cartridge body distance) there are a few options. You can use one of the aftermarket VTA adjustment devices or if you measure this distance on your cartridge, chances one of Rega's tonearm shims will do the trick. They now have these available for the RB250/300/600 arms as well as the RB700/900/1000 arms and you can just order whatever combination you require from your dealer in 2, 4 or 10mm thicknesses.

4. That felt mat drives me nuts, I've had way better luck with (insert mat of the week here)

Just shut up and use the felt mat. It works just fine, especially when you are spinning a lot of records in a listening session. You can just leave the platter spinning and change records, fantastic! So let's get back to the job at hand and talk about the P9. Right. (*continued*)



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Initial Setup

The P9 came with the new Apheta moving coil cartridge installed, but because it uses Rega's three point mounting system, you can set it up in a jiffy yourself. Attach the wires, insert the screws and you are good to go! No adjustments to make, just tracking force and Anti-skate; not quite as easy as putting a CD in the drawer, but the easiest turntable setup I've ever experienced. Five minutes and you will be playing records! I dare you to accomplish that with any other \$6000 record player.

I spent the initial break-in time (about 150 hours) in my second system and experimented with about eight different phono stages that I have had in for photography before sending them on their way to the various reviewers, so I have found the secret to making the Apheta sing.

Loading. That's the secret. At least 100 ohms, 50-75 if you can and a touch lower if you've got it. If you only have a 1000 ohm setting on your phono stage, there is a high probability that you will find the Apheta bright. Anything higher than that and you will definitely find it bright and possibly way too bright.

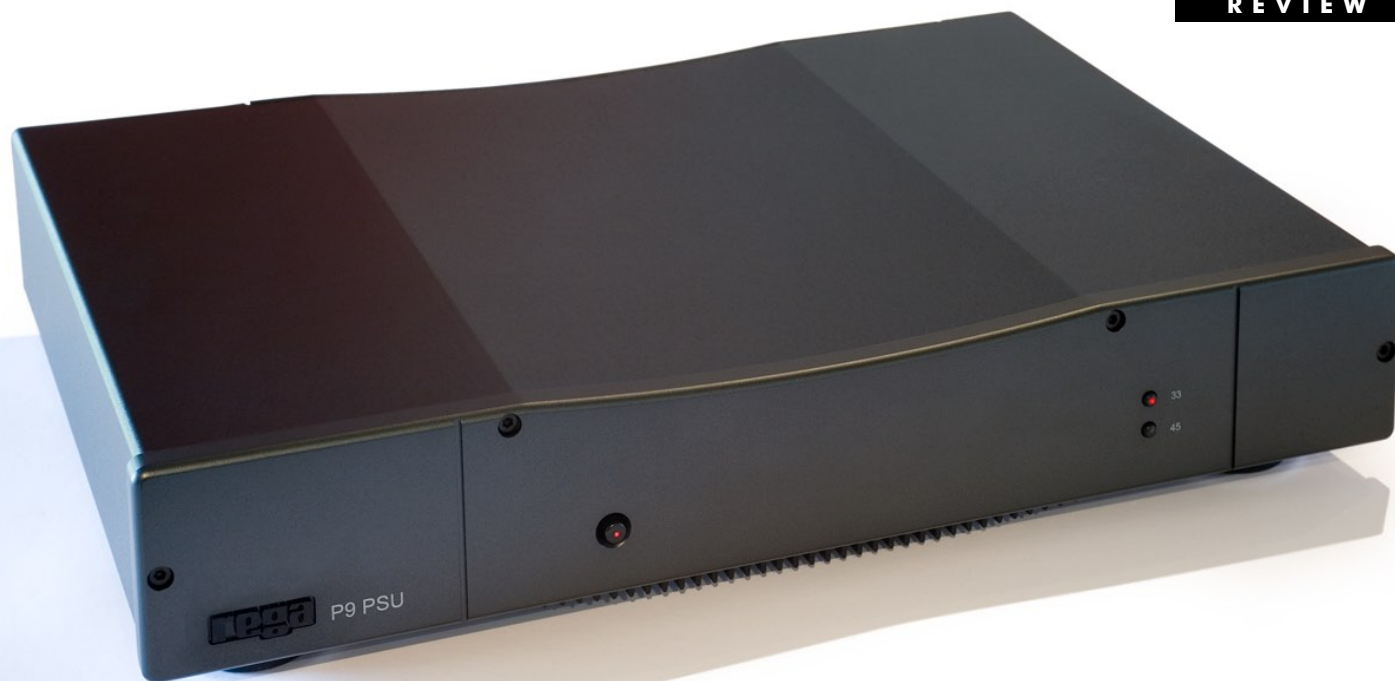
I found that the Modwright 9.0 SWLP on its 50-ohm setting and the BAT VK-10SE with the user definable setting at 33 ohms was just what the doctor ordered. Down here, the cartridge can still breathe and the top

end is smoothed out very nicely. All of my serious listening was spent with the ModWright, because I felt that this was a good match financially as well. I felt a \$3k phono stage was probably a more realistic combination for a \$6k turntable than a phono stage that cost just as much! However, the P9/Apheta combination has enough resolution to justify a more expensive phono stage, should you decide to go there.

A Great First Impression

Often times, first impressions really do stick with you and getting the P9 out of the box was quite a surprise. I was very impressed with the table right away, with the P9 offering a much bigger and more powerful presentation than past Regas I've listened to. If you were on the bubble and in the 'Rega tables sound a bit thin' camp, you can flush that misconception down the toilet. The P9 has a very authoritative presentation, especially in the lower registers.

The first record I put on that familiar felt mat was Patti Smith's **Trampin'**. The first song on side two, *Cartwheels* has some very deep bass riffs that were reproduced with the usual Rega texture but a lot more weight than I'm used to. *(continued)*



The next cut, *Ghandi* has a lot of air and some very tasty drum fills over the top of some very strong bass parts too. What the P9/Apheta combination excelled at was keeping everything placed about the soundstage, without losing focus or grip. Some cartridges I have heard in this price range get mushy when the music gets texturally complex, but not the Apheta.

This is when you know that you are listening to first class analog, the sense of air and texture is there along with plenty of detail, yet lacking in grain. The more I listened, the more I was impressed with the Apheta cartridge and marveled at how it had a speed, extension and clarity that I would normally associate with CD, yet with the smoothness I would expect from analog. Quite anomalous behavior from a company that didn't even start making digital products until recently.

And their top of the line digital player has an amazing amount of the positive attributes of good analog. Very interesting indeed, but you will have to wait until our next issue to read about the Saturn!

It's Getting Better All The Time

I spent a ton of time with this turntable/cartridge combination for a number of reasons. First, the sound quality is fantastic. The P9 has everything I'm looking for in a table at this price range: all the PRAT stuff we audio geeks live for, a healthy dose of weight and a high degree of resolution and nuance.

After becoming very familiar with the Apheta and giving it plenty of time to adequately break in, I moved it out into my main system with the ASR Basis phono stage and my SME 10, so I could bounce back and forth between my reference gear. Again, barely loading down this cartridge at all was the ticket to bliss. The Apheta did a fantastic job with the ASR's ultra low noise floor and offered up a presentation that was CD quiet with pristine records.

This table and cartridge combination is definitely up to the task, even with a phono preamp that costs more than the pair!

Moving through the gamut, I put on the recent Willie Nelson album, *Songbird*, which was produced by Ryan Adams. This is a great album, with a lot of depth and spatial cues. Definitely one of those 'delicate space between the notes' kind of records that really conveys Nelson's vocals in a more soft-spoken manner. Same with the **Johnny Cash American Recording** album; the presentation of *Delia* was RIGHT THERE.

The P9/Apheta had such a good combination of resolution and ease, it made for some very fatigue-free extended listening sessions. Load this baby wrong and you will curse it forever. Get it right and it is a very nice dose of analog bliss.

I also noticed that this cartridge did quite a good job with very dense musical passages, regardless of whether it was ten layers of overdubbed guitars or the violin section in an orchestra. So the heavy metal fan as well as the orchestra lover should be able to find peace here. *(continued)*

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Exploring Other Options

Just to be thorough, I did spend some time mounting other cartridges to the P9 to see how well it would perform. Again, it passed with flying colors. My Sumiko Celebration has a 14mm stylus to top measurement, so it did not require any spacer, just a quick HTA adjustment and a rebalance of the tonearm. A bit more on the lush side than the Apheta, this might be a good combination for those needing a bit less detail.

With two of the 2mm spacers at my disposal, I also spent a little time with my trusty Shelter 90x. This cartridge is about a thousand bucks more than the Apheta, but again the P9 did not let me down. Potential P9 owners take note: This table will do well with a modestly priced cartridge (I had great luck with my Grado Platinum as well...) but has enough resolution to support just about any cartridge you would want to put on it.

Tough to Beat

Once you get to this price range in turntables, there is quite a bit to choose from and every table has its own characteristic sound. Right now I have an Oracle and an AVID Volvere here in the studio which are similarly priced and while I don't believe in shootouts, I will say the P9 does hold its own with the others in it's class that I have at my disposal.

If I could change one thing on the P9, I would love to see it offered with a set of balanced connectors so those of us running a fully balanced phono stage could take advantage of the additional noise reduction this configuration offers. That's my only gripe and it probably only applies to 2% of the people who might buy this table.

Where the Rega P9 excels is offering up a nice big dose of analog excellence with NONE of the hassle. This is as close as you can get to close and play ease of use with this level of musicality and detail. Yes there are tables (at this price point) that might reveal a little more of this or that, but if there is another table for this kind of money that offers up this much music, yet requires NO setup expertise, I'll eat that felt mat.

An old friend of mine used to say, 'Dude, why do you want a Rega, you can't tweak it!' To which I would reply 'Dude, that's why I want a Rega, I don't want to tweak it, I want to listen to records!' And I still feel that way 28 years later. This one's a keeper. Highly recommended. ●

**The Rega P9 Turntable and Apheta
Moving Coil Cartridge:**
MSRP: Table – \$4495, Cartridge – \$1695
(tungsten counterweight, \$100)



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PERIPHERALS

Preamplifiers: Conrad Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Aurum Acoustics Integrus CDP

Phono Stages: Aesthetix Rhea, BAT VK-10 SE, ModWright 9.0SWLP, ASR Basis Exclusive

Additional Phono

Cartridges: Shelter 90x, Sumiko Celebration, Dynavector 17D3

Power Amplifiers: Conrad Johnson Premier 350, Nagra PSA, McIntosh MC275

Speakers: Martin Logan Vantage, Tetra 506 Custom, Penaudio Serenade, ACI Sapphire XL w/REL B2 subwoofer

Interconnects: Tara Labs The One, Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cables: Tetra Artet, Cardas Golden Reference

Power Cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference, Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco, Haley, Duke

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature, Cereballs, Cerepucs

Room Treatments: Sonex Classic, GIK Panels, GIK Bass Traps