





# The Rega Saturn CD Player

by Steve Dickinson

Dictionary definitions of “saturnine” tend to use words like “gloomy, melancholy, taciturn, sluggish”. Holst described Saturn as “The bringer of old age”. Not, perhaps, the most obvious choice of name for a CD player? Then again, if the product you were replacing had been called the Jupiter (jollity, joviality, a source of happiness) and you wanted to make the point that this went even further, then you might be persuaded Saturn sounded good, and trust to luck that some nitwit with a paragraph to fill didn’t remind people of the dictionary definition. Oops, sorry guys. However, five seconds in the company of the Saturn is enough to dispel such negative associations.

By way of making amends, it’s worth reminding everybody that the £1000 Jupiter, Rega’s previous range-topper was a stonking player full of musical insight and even-handedness. Rega are refreshingly slow to churn their model range, “design well, design once” seems to be their philosophy – but events, dear boy, dictated otherwise. Change was effectively forced on many manufacturers by Sony’s decision to cease OEM supply of CD transport mechanisms in 2003. Rather than merely re-engineer using an alternative transport, Rega found a UK company who were completing development of a new disc operating system and software. PM, reviewing Rega’s first player to use it in issue 42, declared the \$500 Apollo superior to the Jupiter. The operating software and chipset, together with a more positive disc-clamping system, allows better data retrieval and 20Mb of memory means a much more transparent error-correction regime. That the fundamentals used in the Apollo had further potential was obvious: given

more development, a bigger budget and a higher price point they might be on to something rather special. Key differences between Apollo and Saturn include the use of two, parallel-connected, Wolfson WM8740 dual differential DAC chipsets instead of one, a high-stability low-jitter master clock, better power supplies and a more liberal use of “audiophile” components such as Nichicon Fine Gold capacitors. So, can the £1300 Saturn run rings around the Jupiter?

The initial, rather overwhelming impression was of torrents of detail. After a couple of days the sound developed more homogeneity, and lost a slightly upfront assertiveness which, while far from unpleasant, tended to draw attention to the sound of the player rather than the music. The Jupiter had a very understated style that grew on you, rather than the more attention-grabbing approach favoured by less self-assured operators so it was encouraging to discover the Saturn following company precedent. Happily, though, the detail was still very much in evidence.

It’s not the impressive-but-pointless detail that tells you what brand of plectrum a guitarist is using, but it is simply more satisfyingly crammed with musical information. It’s the sort of detail that allows you to perceive the changes in pressure of bow on string rather than merely adjustments of volume, or follow a contrapuntal line because you can isolate the voices not just the change of harmony, even in a large choir. A few years ago, on a cycling holiday in Burgundy, my wife and I discovered a local curiosity, a wellspring which was both wide and deep. The remarkable thing was that such was the clarity of the water, the bottom appeared to be perhaps a

couple of arms’ lengths down, whereas in fact it was a good few metres deeper. I was reminded of this while comparing the Saturn to the Jupiter. While the Jupiter might suggest where the bottom lay, the Saturn shows you the texture of its surface. It’s not the levels of fractal detail you get from something like the dCS P8i for example, owners of true high-end equipment need not apply, but it is without doubt a significant step up at this price.

Of course detail, while useful, is not sufficient by itself and there is much more to the Saturn than just this aspect. This player is a great communicator. I remarked in a previous review that the Creek Evo CD player had a vitality

which the Jupiter, for all its sophistication and lushness, didn’t quite convey. I’m pleased to report that the Saturn lacks nothing in this department. Dynamics are truly vivid and to the Evo’s enthusiasm it adds a grainless, buttery smoothness and a lustrous luminosity – like Mediterranean, rather than Mancunian sunshine.

There is also a strong feeling of solidity. Not merely in the sense of a stable image, although that is certainly evident, but in the way the player creates a palpable musical event happening before you. It’s not just the fact that the soundstage goes deep, because conversely it’s not particularly wide, and the player doesn’t create the sort of laid-out-before-you, walk-around image of the dCS. But such is the tangibility, the consistency of



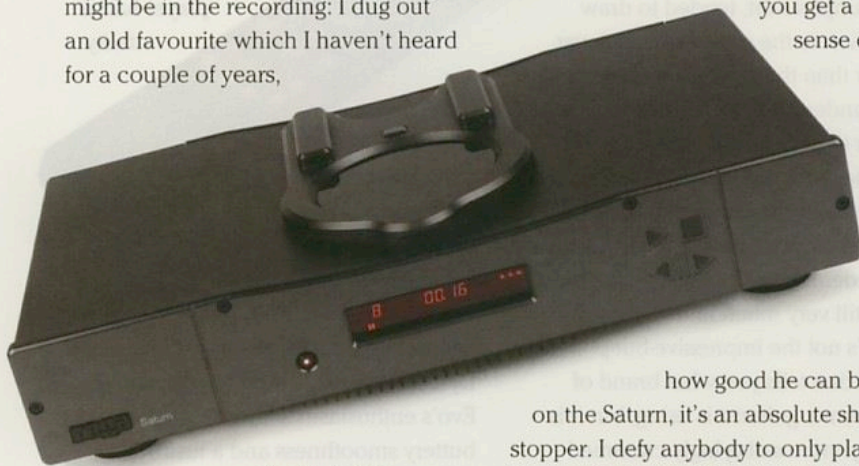


▶ tonal colour that instruments themselves become more 3-dimensional. You can sense the volume of the soundbox in stringed instruments, for example. Percussion has mass, as well as power.

It's also about control and subtlety: 'Nimrod' from the Elgar *Enigma Variations*, CBSO/Rattle (HMV 5 86725 2) had a breathy calm and sense of anticipation in the quiet passages, albeit a slight sense of compression to the image in the more full-blooded bits. But that would be to quibble. As a player for orchestral or large-scale music the Saturn does have the ability to conjure a sense of space, with good levels of separation and image depth. Ramirez' *Missa Criolla* (Naxos 8.557542) had excellent spatial rendering of orchestra and soloists, and a strong sense of the acoustics of the performance space. I also suspect that those hints of compression might be in the recording: I dug out an old favourite which I haven't heard for a couple of years,

The sense of mass also extends to smaller-scale music. kd lang's cover of 'Helpless', from *hymns of the 49th parallel* is accompanied by strummed guitar chords. There is clarity and crispness aplenty when strings are struck, but the ongoing chord has a smooth silkiness, like swimming in warm double cream. It is euphonious, but there's no suggestion that imperfections are being airbrushed away. I have a Joe Cocker compilation which probably came from a petrol station bargain bin, and it's a warts and all presentation (well, mostly warts, truth be told) but the last track, Randy Newman's 'Guilty' is Cocker at his undisputed, heartbreaking best. On lesser players, you get a sense of

concentrated on power supplies and choice of DAC chips, then came jitter control and messing around with digital filter algorithms. That the operating software can also affect the sound is much less intuitive. Yet the evidence is before me; the Saturn delivers a level of performance I've not heard from anything approaching its price. It improves on its predecessor in every important aspect of music-making which, when you consider that the Jupiter was considered a benchmark, is gratifying. That it does so to such a degree is surprising. That it is not double the price of the Jupiter is remarkable. The more astute reader might discern that I like this player. In truth, I think the Saturn and I could easily live happily ever after. ▶+



Berlioz' *Te Deum* LSO/Davis (Philips 464 689-2), turned up the volume and put on the finale, *Judex Crederis*. I have one word in my notes: "Wow!" Some of it is texture, some of it is spatial, some is dynamics and speed but it's all about musicianship which, like comedy, relies on one crucial attribute. Err, timing. You can relax and forget about the where and when, taking that aspect more or less for granted. Notes start and end as they should, simple as that.

how good he can be, on the Saturn, it's an absolute showstopper. I defy anybody to only play it once. Similarly, Brian Eno's "Deep blue day" from *Apollo* is overflowing with luscious gorgeousness, but any suggestion of over-romanticised schmaltz is skilfully compensated by subtle rhythm guitar and percussion. It is abundantly clear that Mr. E. knows a thing or two about music.

It is interesting to note that Rega attribute many of the improvements in the Apollo and Saturn players to the implementation of the new operating software and chipset. Not long ago, designers of digital players



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Rega Saturn	
Type:	One-box CD player
DAC:	2x Wolfson WM8740 dual-differential
Outputs:	1pr RCA Phono analogue 75 Ohm co-axial digital Toslink digital
Output Level:	2.2V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435 x 100 x 270mm
Weight:	5kg
Finishes:	Black; Silver
Price:	£1298.00

**Manufacturer:**  
Rega Research Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)1702 333071  
Net. www.rega.co.uk