You Say You Want an Evolution?

Rega RP8 Record Player and Apheta Moving-Coil Cartridge

BY WAYNE GARCIA / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOEL SALCIDO

THE WONDERFUL NEW YORKER CARTOONIST Michael Maslin frequently draws amusing tableaux picturing human evolution from fish to man. One favorite ends with a strutting Groucho Marx brandishing a large cigar. Another shows a startled restaurant patron approaching three restroom doors. The first has an image of a walking tetrapod; the second door depicts a crouching Neanderthal, the third modern man.

If you'll imagine me taking pen to paper, I'll sketch for you the evolution of the Rega turntable. It begins with the relatively rudimentary Planar 2, which was essentially a thin slab of fiber board with a phenolic-resin skin for a plinth, a tripod of rubber feet, a simple low-vibration motor with an O-ring “suspension,” a felt-mat-topped glass platter supported by a plastic belt-driven sub-platter, and an S-shaped tonearm. This was nearly 40 years ago, and the Planar 2's simple low-mass design and engaging playback qualities quickly established it as the “go-to” company for a good sounding, affordable, and reliable record player.
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Rega's first great leap forward came in the early 80s with the RB300 arm, which in turn became the "go-to" affordable tonearm for consumers as well as other small turntable manufacturers who didn't have the ability to produce their own arm—or at least one as good for the same money.

Subsequent Rega turntables morphed and multiplied, and became available in an array of colorful plinths; while outboard power supplies and many other tweaks brought the P Series to its ultimate conclusion with the recently discontinued, ceramic-platter P9. Although the P9 was quite good, and certainly fits into this evolutionary progression, and brought Rega's design, craftsman, and performance to new levels, for whatever reason the P9's sound never quite grabbed me.

But in the past year or so Rega is suddenly rocking it. In relatively quick succession it's released the RP3, RP6, and now the RP8. Each subsequent model is an evolution unto itself.

To recap, the $1095 RP3 (with Elys 2 moving-magnet cartridge) includes the latest incarnation of the RB300 arm, the RB303, a 24-volt low-noise motor, and a lighter, more rigid plinth. But the most dramatic design, and (I speculate) sonic, improvement arrives via Rega's "double-brace" plinth technology, which can be seen as the thin silver strip with O-shaped cutouts bridging the main bearing hub and the arm mount. Fabricated from the same phenolic resin material that clads the plinth, the double-brace—one on top of the plinth, the other on the bottom—creates what Rega calls a "stressed beam" assembly to increase rigidity between these two critical points.

At $1990 with the Exact 2 moving magnet, the RP6 incorporates each of these design elements plus a few others of added significance. Most notable is a two-piece, 16mm-thick flywheel platter made of float glass, a technique wherein molten glass is floated over molten tin in order to create the flattest possible surface and overall uniformity of thickness. To form the flywheel platter, Rega joins two separate pieces of float glass, bonding the secondary "ring" platter to the underside of the main platter, thus adding mass to the outer circumference to increase the platter's natural flywheel effect, improving speed accuracy and stability. The platter sits atop an aluminum "top hub adaptor," which sports six-raised plateaus as points of contact, further ensuring a very flat surface for records to spin on.

The RP6's tripod feet are improved, too, over Rega's standard rubber-cup-like jobs. The new feet are made of a much more stable sandwich of aluminum and rubber.

Finally, the RP6 is delivered with the latest version of Rega's TT PSU outboard power supply, which I highly recommend as a significant performance upgrade for RP3 users.

At a price of $3995 with the Apheta moving-coil cartridge ($2995 without), the RP8 effectively doubles the price of the RP6/Exact 2 combination. Yet what you get is not only the most radical expression yet of Rega's low-mass/high-rigidity approach, but to my ears the first Rega design that competes jab-for-jab in the middleweight (price) division.

At first glance the RP8 appears to follow Rega's classic rectangular shape. But a closer look reveals a jigsaw-puzzle-piece cutout forming a dramatic plinth that reminds me of Frank Stella's painted reliefs from the late 70s. What gives? This is Rega's clever way of allowing those who want to use a dustcover to have their sonic cake and eat it, too. Because, when you think about it, one thing such "skeletal," round, or otherwise non-traditionally shaped turntable designs cannot offer is the ability for their owners to employ a hinged dustcover. For me this isn't an issue, as I find dustcovers a hassle to use that arguably diminish the performance by adding resonance of their own. But enough potential buyers must feel otherwise, which I assume is why Rega chose to offer the option. In any case, the solution is brilliant in its simplicity. The RP8's skeletal plinth rests inside an outer frame by dropping inside a trio of sub-feet that have been equipped with a triangular elastic webbing to minimize contact between the two pieces. Thus, one gets the benefits of a skeletal plinth along with the ability to use the dustcover. In theory, this sonically isolates one from the other. But a comparison of Decca's great recording of Gerhard's Libra, Gemini, Leo convinced me that the RP8's sound is livelier, with greater dynamic pop, more detail, more air, and simply more musical magic when the outer section is removed. Besides better sound, the RP8 looks a whole lot sexier this way.

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The plinth, by the way, isn't simply one of a newly curvaceous shape. It's been reengineered to weigh a remarkable seven times less than the one found on the original Planar 3. Developed over a three-year span, the RP8’s ultra-light and rigid plinth features a “unique new stressed skin structure produced from thin phenolic skins sandwiching a featherweight nitrogen expanded, closed cell, polyolefin foam core,” which is visible when the table is removed from the outer frame.

The RP8’s “super flywheel” platter builds on the RP6’s described above. Born from a collaboration with a young British glass engineering company, the idea is to create a platter with enough mass to retain a constant speed, but not so heavy as to create problems for the main bearing. To this end Rega has fabricated a three-piece layer-cake-like platter with the third layer being a final ring of float glass that adds mass to the outer circumference, which Rega believes is the only place that mass in a turntable makes sense.

The “high specification” 24-volt motor is now a Rega standard, as is the excellent TT PSU power supply.

The RP8 also features Rega’s new top arm, the RB808. Like the RB303, the RB808 uses CAD technology to taper and thus redistribute mass to increase overall rigidity. Rega arms are hand-assembled, and the RB808’s high-quality bearings are hand-matched to each arm’s tightened-spindle tolerance to minimize friction and increase detail recovery during playback. The RB808 is equipped with a higher-quality low capacitance phone cable with a “twist and clamp” connector consisting of only two parts to improve connectivity.

At the cartridge mount, however, I was disappointed to see that the RB808 uses the same flimsy copper cartridge-lead connectors Rega has used for years. I’ve never liked these things because they do not easily fit the varying pin sizes found on the vast array of cartridges out there. And
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frankly, they bend (and ultimately break) if you try to force them onto a fat cartridge pin. If you never or rarely change cartridges this is less of an issue. But if you enjoy trying different cartridges or are in the reviewer's chair, this is a frustration. Surely, given the care put into the RB808 (or RB303, for that matter), Rega could equip these new designs with improved cartridge connectors.

As to the cartridge itself, the Apheta is Rega's first and only moving-coil design, priced separately at $1795 (one saves $800 when purchased with the RP8). Rega spent four years developing the unit, and, as per usual with this company, decided on a different approach than that found in conventional mc designs. Rega's experiments resulted in the elimination of both the steel suspension tie wire and the foam rubber damping employed to tame high-frequency ringing in the 8-12kHz range. Rega doesn't disclose many more details of the design, but simply states that it is "inspired by modern materials and the basic laws of magnetism. The Rega Apheta contains neither a tie wire nor a foam damper."

Given a relatively tight deadline for this 40th Anniversary Issue of TAS, I did not have the time to listen to other cartridges on the RP8, although I will. Which means the sonic descriptions that follow are based exclusively on the package as offered by Rega and U.S. importer The Sound Organisation.

Getting right to the point, the RP8 delivered on the high level of performance I was expecting after my time with the RP3 and RP6.

In my experience, the success that contemporary audio designers have had in reducing electro-mechanical noise has brought new levels of excellence to every component category. And that certainly applies to the delicate interaction of stylus to record groove, where we're talking about tracking information at levels down to hundredths of an inch.

Returning to the Gerhard LP referenced earlier, the RP8 combo brought out the most from this remarkable recording, beginning with the explosive piano attack that opens the piece, introducing an impressively convincing and airy stage in which the various players in the chamber orchestra are arrayed. The violin, piano, guitar, and multiple percussion instruments

I felt as if transported to the recording session, so alive, involving, present, and thrilling was the music-making.
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SPECS

Type: Belt drive, unsuspended turntable
Speeds: 33.3, 45
Dimensions: 17.5" x 14.5" x 5.5" (with dustcover)
Cartridge output level: 0.5mV
Weight: 26 lbs.
Price: $3995 with Apheta moving-coil cartridge

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Leave You" [Led Zeppelin, Classic reissue] the RP8 delivers plenty of pulse, power, and detail. Tradeoffs are part of life. As with my reference Magnepan 1.7s, which I prefer without a subwoofer, that kind of visceral bass is something I can live without, and will happily trade off for tone, texture, and speed of attack.

Interestingly, one could say the same about a musical example, Karajan's rendition of Wagner's Die Walküre [DG "Tulip" label]. Though it doesn't possess the justly praised sonic greatness of Decca's Solti Ring, or its all-star cast of Bayreuth veterans, I prefer Karajan's decision to bring out the music's lighter, more poetic side, as well as his cast of younger singers, especially Jon Vickers' Siegmund and Gundula Janowitz's Sieglinde. Then you have the incomparable Berlin Philharmonic, which, and yes, I know it's a DG, was captured with a fine clarity and overall balance. Here is Wagner for the Burgundy lover—nuance over power.

Again the RP8/RB808/Apheta seemed to delve deep into the grooves to extract the most from this music. Strings were both silky and resinous, brass instruments rich and throaty, and percussion explosive and precise. The voices were even more impressive. Vickers bold ringing tones had great solidity, clarity and purity of top notes, with no sense of strain or added hardness. As did Janowitz's enchanting Sieglinde, all of which leads me to conclude that Rega's philosophy for all aspects of these designs has paid off in huge musical dividends, the kind that lead us into the music, and away from an obsession with the gear that plays it.

As stated above, this design vaults Rega into the big leagues. Meaning that, while yes, the RP8 as reviewed is another fine value from a company known for value, in this case one needn't add the qualifier "for the money." It's simply among the best mid-level designs on the market.

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