

Three for all

The Planar 3 turntable is one of Rega's most iconic models, but as **Ed Selley** notes this traditional mid-range deck is no rehash



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega Planar 3

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
447 x 117 x 360mm

FEATURES

- 33 & 45rpm
- 'Optiwhite' glass platter
- RB330 tonearm
- Upgradeable external PSU

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Some product designs achieve a level of immortality through a magical formula of exceptional performance, aesthetics and longevity that leads to such considerable success that they are forever associated with the brand and in its psyche. Such consumer awareness is the holy grail of a brand's success, but it can also prove to be something of a poisoned chalice when it comes to approaching any form of update or modernisation to what is considered an iconic classic.

In the case of Rega, its icon has been its belt-driven, low-mass unsuspended plinth turntable that has worn a few different names over the years but has always pertained to the number three – the Planar 3, P3, RP3, the list goes on. Although the design of the three has changed over the years, it has retained the same basic form factor and has become indelibly associated with the turntable manufacturer. Now, Rega has released a new version that it claims is the most substantial revision yet and coupled this with a reset of the name so that you can buy a Rega Planar 3 once again.

It has a powerful and impressively deep bass that never loses texture and detail

How substantial are these changes? Rega claims that only two parts of the Planar 3 are shared with the outgoing RP3, effectively making it all new. If you look closely, however, it quickly becomes clear that while the basic form is the same as before, there are some key differences. The plinth is stiffer and has a much improved finish over the preceding model and it's available in black and white high-gloss finishes. The bearing is also re-worked with a new brass central section that improves fit and quality to lower the noise floor and reduce the stress on the bearing itself. This is in turn mated with a new sub-platter that is stiffer and built to tighter tolerances than the preceding version.

Key to the way that the Planar functions is a new bracing system that links the arm mount and bearing together. This comprises a 3mm plastic bottom bracket and a visible top bracket with a metallised skin. This makes the Planar 3 a great deal more rigid and controls the movement between the two. Rega calls this arrangement a 'stressed beam' and claims that coupled with



The RB330 tonearm has no VTA adjustment, so choose alternative cartridges carefully

the stiffer plinth, the Planar 3 is considerably more inert than any previous version, which should audibly reduce distortion.

The arm has been even more heavily reworked. The new RB330 is visibly similar to the old RB300, but given it includes a new bearing housing, armtube and counterweight, it can realistically be thought of as all new. As well as performance improvements, Rega has also worked to improve the day-to-day usability and to this end there are some adjustments to the anti-skate settings and cable plugs that are very welcome. It still lacks VTA adjustment, which is a minor irritant but not the end of the world with careful cartridge choice (see the Needlework box out).

Finishing touches

Finishing off these substantial revisions is a series of detail improvements. Most noticeable among these is the platter. It's still made of glass, but is now 12mm thick, finished to a high tolerance and has 'Optiwhite' polishing around the edge. It looks extremely smart in the flesh and the whole deck rests on revised feet designed to improve isolation. While the new supports are an improvement on what came before, the turntable will still benefit from being placed on a surface that gives it further isolation from the outside world.

As supplied, the Planar 3 comes with a wall-wart power supply, but Rega has ensured that you can upgrade the deck at a later date to use the TT-PSU, which gives improved

performance and the bonus of electronic speed control. Without it, speed adjustment is carried out by changing the belt on the pulley, which is simple enough to do. The biggest change, though, is in the aforementioned tonearm. It might look similar to what has gone before, but the smoothness of the movement and the general feel it offers is much more impressive.

It might seem a little curious that a deck with such extensive revisions looks almost exactly the same as it did before, but the Rega's beauty stems from its simplicity. While the looks are similar to previous incarnations, it feels different to its predecessors once extracted from the packaging. The improved finish on the plinth, the wonderful edge to the platter and the overall levels of build help it to feel more expensive than the moderate price rise over the RP3 might otherwise suggest.

Sound quality

In many ways the sonic performance of the Planar 3 echoes the aesthetic improvements that have been made. Connected to a Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage (HFC 408) and Naim Supernait 2 integrated amplifier, it manages to sound very much like a Rega deck should, yet simultaneously more capable and infectiously lively. Selecting *Motion* by The Cinematic Orchestra as a starting point, the complex but magnificent *Ode To The Big Sea* demonstrates its abilities and motors through the complex beat with an absolute assurance and a genuine sense of fun.

Where the differences start to show is in the way that the Planar 3 presents the complex and slightly congested midrange of the track. It opens up the material, never making it sound disjointed or confused, but instead managing to create a sense of space and soundstage where many similarly priced rivals might struggle. There is a three dimensionality to the Planar 3 which allows it to sound believable and consistently enjoyable.

This spaciousness doesn't require a toe tapping beat to reveal itself either. The lovely repress of Air's *Moon Safari* is involving and intimate, but still possesses an ambience that makes it sound real. The beautiful *All I Need* is delivered with an almost liquid quality with Beth Hirsch's vocals layered effortlessly across a soundstage that is simply exceptional. With the sweeping, semi-orchestral *Talisman*, the Rega effortlessly ups the scale but keeps that same fantastic sense of involvement.

Something that helps across a wide variety of music is the fact that the Planar 3 has gained a bass response that is deeply impressive for a turntable built from these materials at this price point. It manages to produce powerful and impressively deep bass that never loses the texture and detail needed to be a convincing

It is completely unfazed by any genre of music that is thrown at it

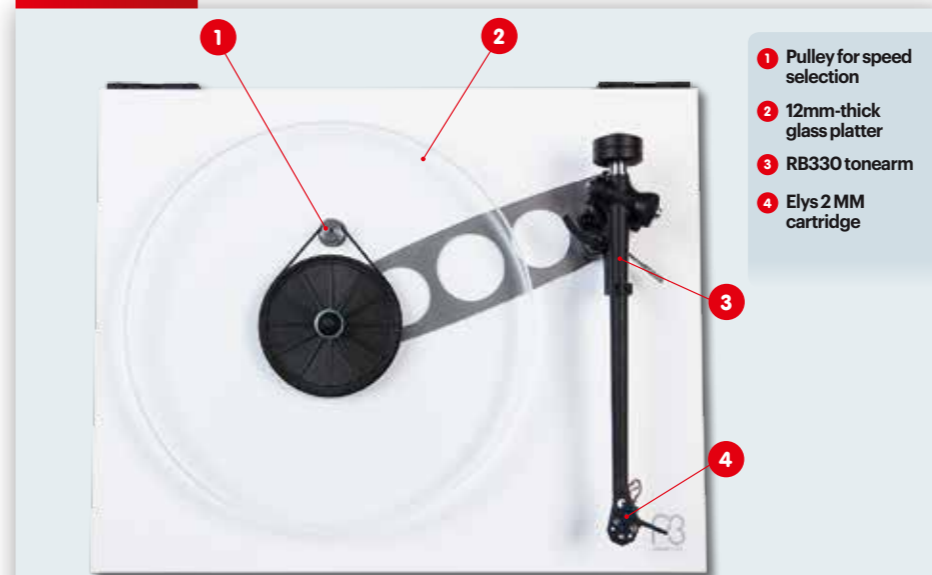
part of the performance rather than big uncontrolled slabs of low end. The integration is also seamless. You don't really notice the swell of the lower midrange until it becomes genuine bass extension because the Planar 3 does it perfectly and it does so whether the bass is the swell of an orchestra or the pounding low end of Leftfield's *Alternative Light Source*, for example. There is a substance to the sound that shines through almost regardless of the partnering equipment.

At the other end of the frequency extreme, it shows perhaps its only meaningful weakness. Through the peerless and extremely refined Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage, it never really does anything other than provide a sweet and detailed treble, but switching to the Graham Slee Gram Amp 2 Communicator (HFC 407) – which is more representative of the sort of phono stage that it's likely to be partnered with – results in



At £550 without cartridge, the Planar 3 has a comfortable performance advantage over pretty much any turntable at the same price. The first to really put up much in the way of a fight is The Funk Firm's *Flamenco* (HFC 391), which at £850 minus a cartridge is a hefty £300 more than the Rega in the same condition. The *Flamenco* has an outstandingly open and natural presentation and Funk's expertise in the use of DC motors helps the timing and overall presentation. For the same money, though, it would be possible to spec the Rega with the optional TT-PSU (£198) – which would likely narrow the Funk's advantage – and still give you £100 spare change for cartridge shopping.

IN SIGHT



NEEDLEWORK

The Planar 3 can be ordered with the Elys 2 cartridge as tested here and represents a £45 saving on the price of the cartridge on its own. While the Planar 3 is all new, the Elys 2 is a veteran and has been the supplied cartridge for preceding '3' models as well. As noted, the exceptional virtues of the Planar 3 ensure that this is the most impressive performance I have heard an Elys 2 cartridge produce, but given the performance of the deck as a whole it should be seen as a limiting factor in its potential.

The slight catch to choosing an aftermarket cartridge is that as the RB330 tonearm has no VTA adjustment, care needs to be taken over what you choose. Fitting a Hana

EH high-output moving-coil cartridge (HFC 410) to the RB330 tonearm results in the arm adopting a slight 'tail down' position that affects the sweetness of the Hana's top end. Changing the Hana to a Nagaoka MP150 (HFC 375) is much more successful, though.

The Nagaoka has almost identical dimensions to the Elys 2, which results in a more level arm profile. The resulting performance is genuinely excellent with an open and expressive top end and further improvements to the bass response. The combination of Planar 3 and Nagaoka cartridge is likely to cost around £800, but it offers outstanding performance at the price.

the treble sounding a little thin and edgy with less than stellar recordings. Some of this is down to the packaged Elys 2 cartridge (see the box out above), which can be a little strident when pressed, although it is worth noting that the Planar 3 gets more out of it than any other Rega turntable I've heard. Additionally, some of the materials that are used in the deck will add a degree of top-end brightness, but not so severely that they can't be tuned out.

Keep that top end under control, though, and the Planar 3 is consistently entertaining. It is unfazed by any genre of music that is thrown at it and the basic attributes it possesses are consistent regardless of whether you're listening to something small scale and elegant or a massive piece of live rock. The assurance with which it handles such a wide variety of music is deeply impressive. More than almost any relatively affordable turntable I have listened to in recent times, it doesn't require the caveat that it is good at the price.

This consistency and ability is admirable, but what really impresses is that it also manages to impart very little of itself while it does so. There is unquestionably some of the life and

energy that's often associated with Rega turntables, but the Planar 3 gives fine neutrality and should be as happy in a low-power valve setup as a high-power solid state one.

Conclusion

Rega's new Planar 3 is something of a star and is an ideal starter turntable for those looking to discover just what vinyl is capable of. Rega has taken its iconic simplistic philosophy and run with it, and by throwing the Elys 2 cartridge into the bundle it represents the driving force for affordable vinyl playback ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Superb sound; excellent build; great finish; easy setup

DISLIKE: Cartridge has slight treble limitations; no arm VTA

WESAY: It might look similar to the previous model, but this is a huge leap forward and a star at the price

Q&A

Simon Webster

Sales and marketing coordinator, Rega



ES: Was there ever the temptation to leave the RP3 unchanged rather than embark on the level of changes embodied in the Planar 3?

SW: At the point we decided to launch the new Planar 3, the RP3 was seeing some of its highest sales since launch. However, the new model did not appear overnight. Two years of intense development work focused on redesigning almost every single detail of the design dedicated to improving performance in every area is an expensive process. Rega had learnt so much since the launch of the hugely successful RP8 and RP10 and this new knowledge was able to trickle down in the new models. The investment we made and our confidence in the new product made the decision to launch easy. Equally, Rega has a policy of developing all aspects of the company and the RP3 was in its sixth year and ready for a replacement in what is currently a very competitive market.

The changes between the two is extensive. Is there a single one that stands out above all the others?

Two areas of the Planar 3 offer the biggest sonic improvement. The combination of the new central bearing (patent pending) designed with tighter tolerances and a unique fitting method, which removes potential energy from the plinth and the bearing itself. Secondly, it would be the RB330 tonearm, with its redesigned bearing housing and new bearings this arm is operating at the tightest tolerances seen at this price point. However for us the lift in performance over the RP3 is the amalgamation of all the changes, each giving improvements which once combined give the biggest step forward in the three model range we have achieved to date.

Does the launch of the Planar 3 mean we can expect any alterations to the RP1 and RP6 in the future?

Rega is always working on new models and is currently reviving the Planar 2 for launch in May. By the end of the year we expect to have at least three new Planar models available, but I can't give you any more details.