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Rega Brio

Integrated amplifier

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The most affordable amplifier in Rega's armoury is not just prettier than its predecessor the Brio-R but it sounds more powerful to boot. But look at the specs and you'll see that both are rated to produce 50 Watts, so what gives. A lot of small but significant changes, that's what, and the fact that rated power does equate to perceived power. Unlike cars there is no horsepower figure that indicates absolute power in an amplifier, to find the most powerful amplifier you have to listen to it with the speakers you want it to drive.

At a glance it looks as though Rega has merely replaced the front and rear of the Brio-R to give the new Brio a facelift, but look closer and you'll notice that the fixing bolts have disappeared from the top and that the main body of the case is made from two aluminium extrusions. There is only one fixing on it and that's the transformer bolt that's hidden underneath, it's a very neat case. Not perhaps as slick as something from a Japanese brand like Marantz but cleaner and more purposeful. The casework provides heat sinking for the output devices and houses the circuit that Rega's electronics wizard Terry Bateman has pimped up. When asked what had increased perceived power he said it was the addition of a second 'raw' power supply, which means that the driver and output stages have their own rectification and results in the latter having more in reserve to control the loudspeaker. He also says that the upgraded op-amps reduce distortion, which makes for a cleaner sound at higher levels. Given that the Brio has not increased in price this seems a remarkable achievement.



Connections extend to four line inputs and phono with a dedicated MM phono stage for vinyl spinning sources, the latter benefits from improved isolation between stages inside the amp and higher spec op-amps providing gain for attached cartridges. The other key connection these days is the headphone output, this was not a feature of the last Brio nor of the other amps in Rega's range but the popularity of this style of listening has clearly made an impact in Southend. The Brio's specs include output voltages available for different headphone loads and we're told that Terry went to some lengths to ensure that the switching circuit required to mute the main output during headphone use did not compromise sound quality.

Controls are as minimal as ever on the Brio, an on/off switch, input selector and volume knob. But it's a lovely knob if I dare say so, machined and polished aluminium with a notch cut out to indicate position. All controls are mirrored on the remote handset, which also has controls for Rega CD players. The speaker cable terminals have got fancier with gold plating instead of plastic covers and the shrouded nature of the casework means that all of the connections are hidden from above, this makes it a little more attractive but the cables will be visible.



Sound

Listening commenced with a pair of PMC twenty5.23 floorstanding speaker, this is an expensive speaker for the amp and one that proved a little too difficult to control in the bass for the Brio. Moving over to the standmount twenty5.22 proved a far more rewarding experience, this delivered highly coherent tabla playing, lots of low level detail and inspired some 'air bass' playing when that instrument joined the mix, always a good sign in my book. With this speaker you get bass weight and excellent timing, it isn't fat bass it's tuneful melodic bass that makes the music swing. Detail levels are good for the price, you can hear plenty of what's going on but not down to the sort of levels you get with a doubling of budget, something has to give. But in all honesty the things that count are very well sorted on the Brio, in my book that's timing and musical engagement. Image scale is strong too, Amandine Beyer's solo violin filling the room and revealing much of the depth of the recording venue. Another classical piece, Mozart's Requiem was particularly well served and encouraged me to listen for far longer than usual.

Trentmoller's sophisticated beats also work well, with plenty of punch thanks to the Brio's remarkable grip for its size, it's also adept at revealing dynamics for the same reason. Talking Heads' 'Crosseyed and Painless' sounding tense and rhythmically taut, a reminder of just how good that band was at its peak. The Brio is pretty transparent to source, switching from a USB to an Ethernet connection on the Lindemman Musicbook:25 streamer/DAC brings up a lot more fine detail, adding nuance to Tom Waits' instrumental classic 'In Shades', another track that proved hard to turn off. This is a characteristic of Rega products and the current range of relatively affordable integrations, Brio, Elex-R and Elicit-R, they are so musically enjoyable that you just want to keep listening. Alternatives can often sound more sophisticated and refined on demonstration but they don't make the music so compelling in the long run. Rega amps focus all their energies on making the music as convincing as possible, they are less concerned about the aesthetics of the experience than the emotional communication, and that is what musical enjoyment is ultimately all about.



As I still have a Brio-R I made a few comparisons between the two and found that the older amp sounds thinner, less relaxed and lacking in scale. Moving to the new Brio brings in real body to instruments and voices, fine detail and, surprisingly, better timing. You can also play louder without discomfort and there's more power in the bass, hence the observation about perceived power increase. This was also the case with the phono input, the new amp delivering much better bass control, more drive and tighter groove than its predecessor. I also contrasted the Brio with a contemporary alternative the Cyrus One at £100 more, for which you get a Bluetooth receiver, pre-out and AV inputs plus an extra set of speaker terminals per channel. Its 100 Watt class D output stage makes it sound meatier in the bass and brighter in the treble but not as vivid overall nor as

open or tonally rich as the Brio. As a result instruments and voices sound more realistic on the Rega. Comparing headphone outputs brought the same results, it's nice to find some consistency! Cyrus clearly realises that features are as important as anything else at this end of the market and I hope that doesn't mean fewer people consider the Brio as a result of its relatively purist approach. After all we buy sound systems to enjoy our music not to twiddle switches, but if your music is on your phone this could be a problem for Rega. They will just have to mention that Bluetooth receivers can be had for just over £30 and can connect to the inputs on the Brio.

The Rega Brio remains the budget amp to beat at its price point, it may not win the features war but it is hands down the most musically rewarding amplifier in its class. Combine that with its improved aesthetics and a remote control that is big enough not to lose in the couch and you have a piece of kit that offers fantastic value and top light entertainment in a compact container.

SPECIFICATIONS:

Type: Integrated amplifier with built-in phono stage and headphone amplifier

Analogue inputs: MM phono, 4 line-level

Digital inputs: none

Analogue outputs: tape

Input impedance: line – 47kOhms, Phono – 47kOhms, 220pF

Headphone Loads: 32 – 300 Ohms

Power Output: 50W/8 Ohms, 73W/4 Ohms

Dimensions (HxWxD): 78 x 216 x 345mm

Weight: 5.1kg

PRICE: £598