



New tricks

The latest arrivals from Rega might look like business as usual, but **Ed Selley** thinks there's a quiet revolution underway

▶ DETAILS
PRODUCT Rega Saturn MK3
ORIGIN UK
TYPE CD player
WEIGHT 9.7kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD) 432 x 82 x 340mm
FEATURES
● Top-loading CD mechanism
● Inputs: 2x optical; 2x coaxial; USB
● Outputs: RCA; 2x optical; 2x coaxial
DISTRIBUTOR Rega Research Ltd.
TELEPHONE 01702 333071
WEBSITE rega.co.uk

Over the last decade or so, two-channel audio has undergone one of the most revolutionary phases of evolution in its history. You can now construct tremendously capable stereo systems that look almost nothing like what would have been the case even a few years ago. As the margins between source and amp blur into nothing, some companies seem to have little interest in altering their approach – but even long-standing holdouts are making some changes. At first glance, what you see here is an ultra traditional pairing of amp and CD player, but the reality is a little more interesting.

As a prolific builder of turntables, Rega is a logical candidate to build amplifiers that concentrate on being amps, but even it has reached the decision that a little extra connectivity might help the cause. The Elicit MK5 is the first amp to augment analogue inputs with digital ones. This being Rega, it is more the significance of there being inputs at all than the inputs themselves being radical. One optical and one coaxial input are fitted with both offering support for PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz. Decoding comes via an unspecified Wolfson DAC.

This small digital section joins four RCA line inputs and a moving-magnet phono stage, the latter being retained from the previous Elicit-R, making this

the largest Rega amp to feature an internal phono stage. The amplifier section benefits from Rega's work developing its Aethos (HFC 457) and this is most apparent in the preamp. The new Elicit uses a FET-based circuit with an ALPS potentiometer in place of the microprocessor-controlled system of its predecessor. This means that input selection has been moved to a separate control although, like the Aethos, there is no direct input selection.

The new amp is significantly more powerful than the outgoing model. Rega quotes 105W into 8ohm, rising to 127W into 6 and 162W into 4, making the Aethos significantly more powerful than some key rivals). Power

is available to a single set of speaker terminals and a 6.35mm headphone socket. The result is an amplifier that, on paper at least, moves on from its analogue-only predecessor while also changing the dynamic of how you might build a system around it. You could realistically use the phono stage, the coaxial input for something like the iFi ZEN Stream (HFC 485) or a CD transport while entrusting your TV to the optical connection – resulting in a complete and modern system.

This makes the Saturn MK3 – the device Rega envisages being partnered with the Elicit MK5 – initially look a little curious. In the Rega tradition, it is a top-loading CD player built around Rega's own mechanism and making use of a pair of Wolfson WM8742 DACs for decoding. This DAC section also supports another five digital inputs: two coaxial, two optical and a single USB-B. The sample rate handling is the same 24-bit/192kHz maximum as the two on the amp, giving you no less than seven across the two devices. The reality is that the inputs on the Saturn MK3 give it flexibility when used with the Aethos or any other amplifier that doesn't have its own digital board – giving it broader



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appeal than a regular 'straight' CD player might offer up.

The Elicit MK5 and Saturn MK3 together do look fabulous, though. The trickle down of Rega's new casework and styling cues from the Aethos results in some very attractive Rega products and proportionally these two are arguably even better looking than their sibling. The slight slimming of the casework – identically sized on both units – gives them an elegance when combined that eludes a great deal of

The Rega duo is effortlessly musical in a way that eludes more expensive rivals

other equipment. Something I would be careful about – however good it might look – is stacking the two units directly on top of one another. The Elicit MK5 runs warm so I add a set of Quadraspire QPlus Advanced feet (HFC 448) under the Saturn MK3 to help ventilate it.

This aside, the Rega duo is entirely confidence inspiring. The build quality of both is excellent and the top-loading

▶ DETAILS
PRODUCT Rega Elicit MK5
ORIGIN UK
TYPE Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT 12.5kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD) 432 x 82 x 340mm
FEATURES
● Claimed power output: 2x 105W (8ohm)
● Connections: 4x stereo RCA inputs; MM phono input; optical input; coaxial input
● Record in/out; power amp in
DISTRIBUTOR Rega Research Ltd.
TELEPHONE 01702 333071
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mechanism of the Saturn MK3 feels solid and has a little ceremony to use in a way that most tray mechs do not. The Solaris remote that controls both devices is not a work of art, but is reliable and is easy to use. So long as you have the required clear space over the top of the Saturn to open the door, there should be no issues in accommodating them both.

Sound quality

The novelty of going direct to a Rega amp is too much to ignore and by using an M2Tech USB to SP/Dif converter, it is attached directly to a Roon Nucleus (HFC 435). The single most important thing that the Elicit MK5 does from the outset is to show that this digital section might be small, but it is certainly no afterthought. The 24-bit/96kHz stream of Punch Brothers cover of *The Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald* is beautifully handled with Chris Thile sounding absolutely convincing; distinct from the beautifully layered instrumentation, all of which has considerable tonal realism and enough energy to be both believable and engaging.

The amp section is still the main star of the show, though, and reading back through my notes on the Aethos, it is

impressive how often the smaller amp mimics its bigger brother. That same sense of agility when presented with something energetic like Bloc Party's *Rough Justice* is hugely entertaining. Without flinching from the surprising level of heft that the recording possesses, the Elicit MK5 absolutely dances through the track in a way that makes many rivals feel like disinterested observers. This is helped by the considerable reserves of grunt on tap. It might not be as powerful as the Aethos, but this is still an amp that's likely to be able to drive any remotely price-comparative speaker to well beyond any domestically acceptable volume levels.

The extra functionality is good too. You can reasonably argue that some of Rega's own standalone phono stages might eke a little more performance from the Planar 10 (HFC 456) and Vertere Sabre cartridge that serves as a test partner, but it successfully captures the former's glorious and unfettered transparency and the huge reserves of headroom mean that gain is unlikely to be an issue. The headphone amp is also very close to the Aethos in overall performance and is more than up to the job of being used on a regular basis ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Moving-magnet phono stage input
- 2 4x stereo RCA inputs
- 3 Record in and outputs
- 4 Preamp output
- 5 Optical input
- 6 Coaxial input

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rather than merely a convenience feature that's employed now and again.

Whatever arguments might be made on paper about the Elicit MK5 being a more self-contained device than its predecessors, however, ignore that listening to the two Rega devices together is a lesson in design synergy. The Saturn MK3 is not a radically specified device judged by the standards of 2022, but the way it

Proportionally these two are arguably even better looking than the Aethos

performs is a reminder that there are aspects of digital that are more than merely sample rate handling.

Digging out my CD copy of *This Never Ending Now* by The Chameleons, the Saturn MK3 simply delights in how it handles this pared-back version of the band's classics. The highlight is *Swamp Thing*; a world away from its stark eighties ancestor with its warm and involving beauty. The Saturn MK3 is

gloriously 'undigital'; a statement that might seem odd given its function, but one that should make complete sense the moment you hear it. Without smoothing off or losing any aspect of the musicianship, it avoids any sense of processing or the slightly 'etched' presentation that some state-of-the-art solutions can deliver.

The Rega is not some soft and woolly relic, though. Switching to the USB input and playing the startlingly dynamic *Simmer* by Hayley Williams reveals that the Saturn MK3 has sensational bass. As well as an impressive level of out-and-out extension, it's the texture and control that it possesses that truly sets it apart. It's this punch and a greater feel of three-dimensional space that allows it to demonstrate an advantage over the digital inputs on the amp. You can listen to the coaxial input of the Elicit MK5 all day and not once feel short changed, but the standalone digital source is an obvious step forward from the very first moment you hear it.

Combine the two and the results are simply outstanding. Listening to Sturgill Simpson's sensational *Cuttin' Grass*



High-quality relays, Sanken output transistors, discrete circuitry, and polypropylene capacitors are used throughout the amp design

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Volume 1, the Rega duo is effortlessly musical in a way that eludes even considerably more expensive devices. You can use the power of the Elicit MK5 to set any listening level you fancy (and Q Acoustic's Concept 50 is a gloriously obliging partner in aiding and abetting this behaviour) and then simply let everything flow effortlessly. The gloriously tongue-in-cheek *Long White Line* fizzles with all the energy packed into the recording and, without ever really compromising on the technical accuracy of what you're hearing, the two Rega units see me stop analysing the performance and just sit back and enjoy it instead.

Conclusion

It's this pleasure that marks these devices out as something special. You can't measure enjoyment and I don't imagine you specifically seek to create it at a design brief level. Nevertheless, across hours of listening to anything I can think of, this pair makes music an emotionally pleasurable experience. You can reasonably argue that these are the most flexible and 'modern' Rega devices yet, but that has been achieved without altering what the company has always done so well. The Elicit MK5 and Saturn MK3 are the perfect embodiment of 2022, but they remain timelessly Rega while they do so ●



In the same way that the Aethos is a competitor to the Naim Supernait 3, the Elicit MK5 is a logical competitor to the NAIT XS3 (HFC 454). While I prefer the Supernait 3 over the Aethos by a small margin, here it is the other way around. The Elicit MK5 keeps the NAIT XS3 honest in every comparable aspect of their spec (I fractionally prefer the Naim phono stage, but think the Rega's headphone amp is better), but the Rega goes on to offer two digital inputs, which makes it rather more flexible. No less importantly, it is £500 cheaper than the Naim.

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SATURN MK3

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILT QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Effortlessly musical; connectivity; pleasant to use
DISLIKE: No DSD; needs to be on the top shelf of stand or rack
WE SAY: A supremely talented digital source with appeal well beyond the remit of a Rega system

OVERALL



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ELICIT MK5

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILT QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Lively, potent and refined sound; spec; build and looks
DISLIKE: Runs hot; no direct input selection
WE SAY: A brilliant update to the Elicit that delivers more features without changing the same fundamentally enjoyable performance

OVERALL



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