

Do Mercury & Solis make Rega a high end amp contender?

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Rega Mercury & Solis pre & power amplifiers

Rega have not made a pre/power amplifier combo for many decades so it was a surprise to see the casework for the Mercury and Solis at the Bristol Show a couple of years ago, however another Bristol came and went in February this year with no sign of a finished sample. I was beginning to wonder if they would ever see the light of production when news of dealer demonstrations began to filter out in the summer, Rega finally released details of the new range topping amps in November. This was clearly a protracted birth.

The price and scale of these two amplifiers places them significantly higher than existing Rega electronics – until now the best amp that the Essex company has created is the Osiris integrated (£7,875). In the early days of development Rega considered making a bigger integrated but came to the conclusion that they couldn't fit all the circuitry required into a single box without it being enormous. The Solis power amplifier is a beast on its own, weighing nearly 25 kilos, I and many Rega dealers are glad that they didn't make something bigger.

The development initially focussed on the question of which circuit to employ in the new amplifier, they could either go with the symmetrical circuit found in all the early Rega amps including their last pre/power, or they could build a bigger version of the Brio-R circuit found inside all of the current amps except the Osiris. Deciding which to go involved building prototypes of each and having half the factory over to founder Roy Gandy's house for a blind listening shoot out. It seems that the results were close but the symmetrical prototype took the day because it sounded better with the most natural acoustic tracks than the alternative.

It's important to note that a symmetrical circuit is not a fully balanced one in this instance, the Solis may have balanced inputs and the Mercury matching outputs but both are single ended circuits at their cores. The balanced connections were carefully developed and give these amplifiers broader connectivity but ultimately Rega considers fully balanced operation to

be unnecessary for domestic systems. I note that Rega supplies high quality RCA terminated interconnects with both Mercury and Solis, which says something. They also supply some very decent power cables with proper shielding, not something I have found with any other brand save Naim, but these are of a higher quality.

The Mercury preamplifier contains a DAC but no phono stage which might seem strange for company that made its name with turntables. I asked lead designer Ashton Wagner about this and he explained that there isn't enough space to incorporate a phono stage of suitable quality in the case, which is only a bit higher than the matching Aura phono stage. It would also have added cost which is something Rega has always been good at keeping under control. The DAC



is an evolution of that found in the Rega Saturn CD player and based around the Wolfson WM8742 chipset originally developed with input from electronics wizard Terry Bateman (creator of Rega electronics since the early days). Here the chips are used in a dual arrangement and supported by tweaked power supply, clock and jitter circuits to enhance performance. This is not a modern DAC chip, it doesn't support high rate DSD, but it's still the best that Rega can find.

The Mercury offers five line inputs including one on balanced sockets, and a tape loop which effectively adds an in- and output on top of the rest. The DAC has optical and coaxial S/PDIF inputs alongside USB. You can select from five digital filters for PCM and four for DSD via the front panel, with descriptions of each given in the manual. The same literature also explains how to disable the auto standby function that exists within both these amps, something of a novelty for Rega products but potentially useful too. You can also hook the two components together with the supplied 12V trigger lead so that they can be powered on and off with one press of the remote button. The handset is a lovely lump of metal, a tactile reflection of high quality casework found on the Mercury and Solis. It includes specific input buttons as well as filter switching, it also provides access to the menu where display mode, auto standby, AV bypass and DSD mode and more can be adjusted.

The Solis' output is rated at 168W, a typical Rega figure that suggests it might be more accurate than the round numbers found in other amp specs, this is delivered by three pairs of bipolar transistors per channel. The Solis gets warm but not hot in extended operation and remains reassuringly luke warm when on but not in use. Rega recommends letting it warm up prior to using it 'in anger' but this is generally a good idea with any amplifier in my experience.

Sound quality

Initial listening was with the Solis power amp connected to a Townshend Allegri Reference preamp and driving Dali Epikore 9 speakers via William Eikos cables. It didn't take long to appreciate that this is a very capable and revealing amplifier, in fact it's more transparent than



any amp I have heard at the price. Put on a decent recording and you know all about it, with real weight in the bass, image depth to die for and perfect timing. The balance is generous yet the Solis resolves huge amounts of detail, it has a degree of transparency that is rare and this brings huge insight into everything played through it. It really fleshes out each piece, bringing out facets of tone, image and dynamics that are not usually apparent.

It is cleaner and faster than my Moor Amps Angel 6 and extracts supreme grooves from tunes like Straight No Chaser by Keith Jarrett and co, delivering real energy from the drum break thanks to dynamic range that seems to be wider than usual. This is presumably achieved by reducing the noise floor within the circuitry, but whatever the reason it makes everything that much more diverse and interesting. I switched in the Mercury preamp and used its line inputs with my Bricasti M11 R-2R Classic DAC, one step at a time and all that. Then I played a track recommended in Rolling Stone's best albums of 1975 list from Richard and Linda Thompson called Night Comes In via Qobuz; I was in bits, how much feeling is in that guitar, and how well does the Mercury/Solis pairing deliver it. The tone is incredible on this track, and, as I was to discover, many more as well.

There followed an extended session with friends and a general 1975 theme which unearthed some real scorches, not least old favourites like Jeff Beck's Is A Woman and Neil Young's Cortez the Killer. Both of which have extraordinarily powerful guitar solos that really communicate in a way that cannot be achieved with words. All facilitated by the Mercury and Solis which are less expensive than my usual amplifier pairing. I mustn't forget Zappa's playing on Muffin Man (*Bong Fury*) which is in the same league when it comes to expression and intensity.

Operationally it can difficult to see where the volume is set on the Mercury in a less than bright room, good eyesight would help here but so would a numerical indication of level or an LED on the knob. But the remote works well especially when you spot the individual input buttons and stop scrolling through the whole lot! I really like the existence of a mute button on the power amp too, it means that you can change cables on the preamp and even disconnect signal cables all together without any nasty noises.

The overall impression of the Mercury/Solis/Epikore 9 combo is of immaculate timing, oodles of character in every tune and an ability to play at high levels without any sense of the electronics adding grain or glare to the sound. I have to say that I would very much like to hear the Brio-R circuit prototype for Solis but suspect that the symmetric approach has resulted in a cleaner, more even-handed amplifier and that Rega made the right choice in selecting it.

Moving over to the Mercury's onboard DAC proved a bit of a comedown until I figured out that the filter could be changed from linear phase half band, the default, to any of the three minimum phase options, of which both the half-band and apodising sounded best – which was preferable was programme specific but the difference is pretty subtle. Essentially the minimum phase filters time better than their linear phase alternatives. With that sorted the detail continued to flow with ease, the high frequencies in particular being unusually clean and

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extended which did a lot to expose subtleties that are usually hidden. The Mercury and Solis amps are particularly good at revealing instrumental and vocal timbre, that is the full character of each is clearer and this makes every recording sound more individual and real.

Fleetwood Mac's *Landslide* made me swoon with its beauty, the combination of fresh guitar strings being plucked with such precision and Stevie Nicks' voice at its most dusky made for a powerful listening experience. Bill Frisell's *Shenandoah (East/West)* has been on heavy rotation over the last few months but here it was shown to have more harmonic depth than had previously been apparent, and the recording has greater dynamic range for that matter, some gain riding was required to rein it in when things got going.



With PMC prophecy9 speakers hooked up to the Solis the results are nearly as impressive, these speakers are a bit more lean than the Dalis but have definition that matches many more expensive alternatives. This enhanced the sense of clean power from the Rega pairing, the bass being tight yet extremely powerful with so much shape and texture that it illuminates familiar recordings. Gwenifer Raymond's latest finger picked release *Last Night I Heard the Dog Star Bark* has some slightly odd bass enhancement and the Solis managed to pinpoint this effect very precisely. It revealed that the guitar's lowest frequencies have been enhanced in a specific but not terribly natural sounding way, I guess it makes the album sound thicker and heavier which might increase its commercial appeal.

Conclusion

The Rega Mercury and Solis are genuine high end amplifiers, they are built and finished to a very high standard and they deliver very high resolution sound. The DAC onboard the Mercury can be beaten by the better standalone examples but those cost at least half as much as this preamp alone, so that it's understandable. As a line stage the Mercury is remarkably good, hugely transparent yet almost devoid of the sense of it being powered.

The Solis is a work of audio art that has huge driving capability but has very little character, making it hugely transparent and revealing. The Mercury/Solis combination punches way above its price and anyone looking for serious amplification with a lifetime guarantee put aside their prejudices and compare it with the best in class.