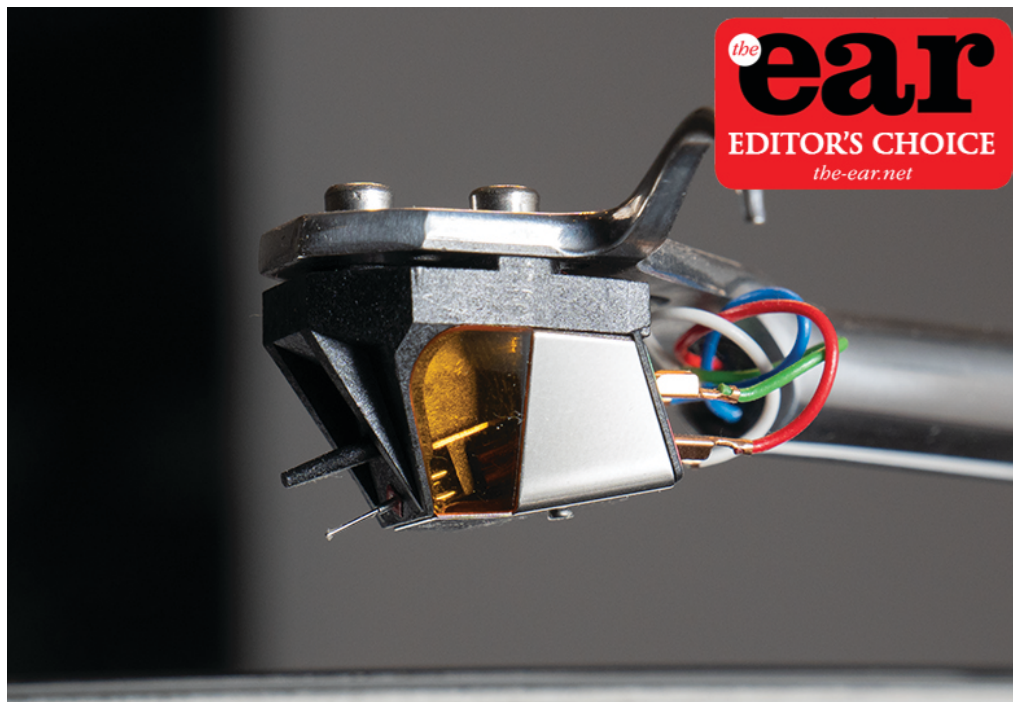


hardware review

Rega Nd9; the accidental vinyl playing masterpiece

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Rega Nd9 moving magnet cartridge

Sometimes, even when a product launch goes very well indeed, manufacturers can still be slightly taken aback by the results. Rega's Nd line of moving magnet cartridges is a case in point. For clarity, it would be churlish to argue that it has gone anything other than swimmingly. Since the three strong range launched in 2024, Rega has sold over 35,000 of them which is a testament to quite how effective they are. The use of neodymium magnets in a moving magnet cartridge; an industry first, has resulted in three models that are the equal of anything at their respective price points.

Where things get interesting is that the strongest selling member of the trio has been the range topping Nd7 (£450) rather than the more affordably priced Nd3 and Nd5. Spend a bit of time with an Nd7 and it's not hard to see why. The spec it offers for £450 is exceptionally good and the result is a bit of a bargain all things considered. Seen in the wider context of what the industry has been up to in the last few years, a £450 moving magnet cartridge is no longer the 'high end' option it might once have been. The price arena that MM carts compete in has risen dramatically to the point where Vertere's fantastic Dark Sabre is a full thousand pounds more than the Nd7 and offerings from Clearaudio and others are more expensive still. All signs pointed to Rega being able to sell a higher specification moving magnet with ease.

Except... like so many things that look like a quick win on paper, this wasn't entirely straightforward. The Nd models are not perfect equivalents to Rega's moving coil designs; there is no use of a bonded elliptical stylus seen on the Nd3 on the moving coil models which move to a line contact profile from the Ania Pro upward (the Ania Pro using Vital while the Apheta 3 and Aphelion 2 a bespoke fine line profile). The Nd7 already makes use of the same stylus and cantilever as the Apheta 3 all that is left to change is the cantilever and move to the boron one used in the range topping Aphelion 2.

Here is where the problems begin. The Nd magnet and generator assembly was designed around aluminium cantilevers because that is what Rega saw themselves using. The boron rod that forms the Aphelion 2 cantilever isn't the same so it's not a straight swap. Happily, the Rega Rolodex includes a watchmaker who has worked with the company to manufacture an ultra-fine connecting tube with different diameters at each end to mate the two different components together.

The result of this fastidious effort is that the Nd9 has an exceptionally light boron cantilever, which allows for faster reaction to the changes in record surface and is highly rigid for its mass. A more rigid cantilever bends less, so it transmits motion from the groove more accurately with notably less distortion. It also means that the Nd9 is unique; it's the only moving magnet that combines a boron cantilever and neodymium magnet available anywhere.



The generator assembly is the same as the other Nd models; which should be seen as Nd3 owners getting a mighty helping of economies of scale rather than the Nd9 being in any way short changed. It features miniaturised parallel coils which are wound in house utilising 38-micron wire with just 1275 turns. This produces a low inductance, low impedance generator giving vastly improved high frequency response. This is housed in an injection moulded glass filled polyphenylene sulphide body (PPS) which is a lightweight and highly rigid material and is used in all the Nd and more affordable moving coil models.

These materials help to allow Rega to create moving magnet designs that mimic the ultra low mass arrangements that they worked to create with the moving coil models. A similar (but not identical) approach to avoiding perishable suspension parts means that the design should perform identically throughout its life although if you want a user replaceable stylus, you'll have to go elsewhere.

The Nd9 gains a darker, amber hued Perspex section, which is closer (but not, so far as I can tell identical) to the Aphelion 2. It shares the same packaging as the other moving magnet models which helps it to achieve its very keen £695 asking price. This does mean that, while the Nd9 gains a coveted green 'Ref' next to its entry on the website like the Aphelion 2, you will have to forgo the exquisite torque wrench that Rega can budget for at nearly three thousand pounds more. Rega will also be making the Nd9 available as a factory fit option on the Planar 8 as well, which at £2,554, would save you £111 over buying the two items separately.

Same but better

I feel confident in saying that the Nd9 has more in the tank than partnering the Planar 8 though. This is because my test platform for it has been a Planar 10 which has lived here for some years and is bone stock save for the use of a 47 Laboratory deerskin record mat (and I make no claims for improved performance from this save for the fact that **whatever happened to Bambi**



in the slightly ghoulish process of turning him into a turntable accessory resulted in a device that is much less prone to coming off the turntable with the record when you lift it away). This Planar 10 has spent the last few months running with an Nd7 and I've been delighted with the result.

The Nd7 will *not* be making a return for as long as the Nd9 is on hand though. I have run it into the MM phono input of a Naim Supernait 3 (which is the reason why the Nd7 was fitted in the first place as it streamlines the box count in what is supposed to be a simple second system). From the opening chords of Mad Jack on The Chameleons' utterly captivating *Strange Times* it becomes clear that what results is 'the same but better.' Mark Burgess is delivered with a tangible realism and presence, defined against the swaggering supporting instruments but never detached from it. The Planar 10 (and to an even greater extent the Naia) specialise in the ability to keep extracting detail and order from material without dissecting it. The Nd9 is the perfect foil for this.

Some of this ability is down to the Nd9 leveraging an advantage that all Rega cartridges enjoy. With any advanced stylus profile, their efficacy lives or dies on setup and alignment. I recently tested the Audio Technica AT-VM760xSL; which with a boron cantilever and line contact stylus is a close match in spec and price to the Nd9. It's capable of superb performance too... so long as its setup is just so. On an AVID Ingenium with SME arm; generally considered to be the gold standard for setup faff, this was still fairly involved. The Nd9 by contrast required me to do up three bolts and make a ten second adjustment to the tracking force. On any Rega arm (particularly in a situation where VTA has been removed from the equation), the Nd9 is going to unlock more of its performance more easily than key rivals.

And that performance kept on giving. Left unsupervised, I wound up playing *Check Your Head* by the Beastie Boys. Genuinely one of the most unlikely candidates I can think of for the term 'audiophile pressing' it is nonetheless a masterpiece with truly subterranean low end. The Nd9 finds details and texture in this herculean bass that increases the sense of flow and dynamics you appreciate from the listening position. It still creates a sensation you feel in your chest but one that has an articulation you simply don't think these heavy hitting tracks possess.

The single most important thing the Nd9 does is keep the dynamics and sheer joy that the Planar 10 and Supernait 3; usually in company with either my venerable Acoustic Energy AE1s or – as here, the Neat Petite Classic – demonstrate together. The captivating *Live!* by My Baby (interestingly titled because it's *not* a live album in the classic sense of the word but is instead a studio jam session recorded as a complete band) would fizzle with energy on any deck. Here, **the sheer joy of one of the best live acts on tour today all but dribbles out the speaker cones.** Nothing that the Nd9 does in terms of its indisputable technical excellence gets in the way of it nailing Cato van Dyck's astonishing sustain at the end of Mad Mountain Thyme with spine tingling perfection. In the same way that when I tested the Rega Naia and Aura a few years ago, their resolute desire to not be the story was partly the story, so it is here.

Rega Nd9

It's hard not to feel it's the right product at the right time too. Over the last few years, the price points where amps that 'only' feature a moving magnet phono stage has crept up to the point where even a Planar 10 and Nd9 (to say nothing of the factory fit option on the Planar 8) look like perfectly logical options. Even when some devices offer moving coil support the simpler MM section can offer better and quieter performance. What the Nd9 does is act as the key to unlocking that performance with a Rega deck.



Conclusion

This makes the Nd9's slightly accidental arrival into the world, if anything, more joyous. It is a product that is so fundamentally right, you would assume it was a clean sheet of paper design rather than a talented adaptation of existing hardware; **the cartridge equivalent of the Bear Grylls 'improvise, adapt, overcome' adage**. It adds a formidable new option to a range already bristling with talent and I suspect Rega is going to do rather well with it.

A second opinion

I fixed an Nd9 into the headshell on my Rega Naia and initially fed its output to a Rega Aria phono stage and latterly into a Modwright PH.9 tube example. The results were very much like those that Ed heard, this cartridge has very little signature of its own and lets an awful lot of musical detail through in a totally coherent fashion. It is very good at sorting out dense mixes – letting you hear what each musician is doing even while those around him are going all out. I found this with several albums and with tracks that had not previously been all that easy to enjoy because of the complexity of the material.

The Nd9 sounds best when you are not really paying attention, then it manages to draw you in and illuminate the fabulous things that the band is doing. I found this with artists as diverse as Nils Frahm, Keith Jarrett and Captain Beefheart. I had never noticed how good the latter's *Circumstances* is before, the crunked up blues mayhem gained a degree of cohesion under the Nd9's auspices that made it that much more entertaining.

Like Ed I have no doubt that in the Nd9 Rega have found a recipe that moves MM cartridges up to being real competitors for their MC counterparts, the fact that it costs more than their base Ania MC would appear to confirm as much. JK