

Rega Io Integrated Amp Review

Good things really do come in small packages

by Ed Selley Today at 8:35 AM

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REGA IO STEREO AMPLIFIER (2020)

SRP: £379.00

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Introduction - What is the Rega Io?

The Rega Io is an integrated amplifier. It is the smallest and most affordable integrated amplifier that Rega has ever made. If we do some crude inflation weighted calculations, the £380 asking price of the Io would have been £300 in 2010, £220 in 2000 and £170 in 1990 and there hasn't been a Rega integrated amplifier that has hit those price increments before.

This is part of a wider program from Rega to continue to provide a 'first rung' in the ladder that gets people into Hi-Fi. After all, given that Rega's own range now extends up to such choice offerings as the Aethos and Planar 10, it makes sense to get people in early and keen

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on Rega. Of course, they're only going to be keen on Rega if the lo turns out to be any good.

And there's the rub. The lo costs less, than any Rega amp that precedes it but it still needs to have certain features and it is still made by the same people in the same factory as the more expensive units. On paper - a sheet of which in A4 size, the lo comfortably fits on - the constraints that it has to work to are considerable. Is this dinky amp good enough to have you choose it over something that didn't have to come to being in such demanding circumstances? Time to find out.

Specification and Design

Rega lo

The lo is able to sit on a sheet of A4 paper

The lo is a class A/B amp that produces a figure of 30 watts into 8 ohms. No figure is given for four ohm operation but the amp itself seems happy enough running into a four ohm load. In 2020 where amps can extract herculean claimed figures from a chassis even more compact than this, the Rega might seem somewhat unambitious with this figure but there are solid reasons for the lo being the way it is. The first feeds back to the idea that, in miniature, it represents the same principles that go into the creation of any Rega amplifier. There would be no point designing this amp in a way that was completely abandoned in the next amp you bought. This means that design practice like Sanken output transistors, the linear power supply and ALPS volume pot are here because they're present on the other amps too.

The second is that, for almost any application you might reasonably expect the lo to be asked to perform (and I am aware that 'reasonably' is a structural word in that sentence that is me asking you to consider this through a lens of realism rather than imagining exciting ways of blowing an lo to bits), 30 watts is entirely sufficient. The principle partner for testing the lo has been the [Triangle Borea BR03](#). Some quick tests with a voltmeter have established that the *most* (not the average, the most) power I've used for a sustained listening level has been 12 watts. For sure, the Borea is a sensitive speaker but it suggests that there is sufficient power in reserve to work with a less sensitive design without hitting the limits of that output figure.

Rega lo

The chassis is all metal and very sturdy

This power is made available to three inputs. Two are conventional RCA connections and the third is a moving magnet phono stage. This is again, something of great importance to Rega because the affordable sources that the company makes are turntables. When the complete £999 system that Rega exhibited at Bristol goes on sale, it will be vinyl fronted and make use of this phono stage. Could the lo do with more than two line inputs? I don't feel it is too limiting but, on the assumption you will add a digital source that may have inputs in its own right and I don't know what other analogue source you'd be looking to add, you'll need to consider your own use patterns to make a final call on that. In any conventional configuration it should be sufficient. In terms of the inclusion of digital inputs, these aren't present on any other Rega amp so, again with the idea that the lo is a Rega in microcosm, they aren't present here. Where it might be felt that there is a legitimate gap in connections is that there is no sub out connection, which would have vastly simplified the use of a 2.1 setup with an lo.

It isn't all bad news though. Rega has fitted the lo with a headphone connection on a 3.5mm socket and it also has remote control of both

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volume and input selection (although power is on a physical two position button). Furthermore, the remote that Rega supplies with the lo, while smaller than the 'Solaris' unit shipped with the Aethos, I'd argue it is actually nicer to use and live with. It also means that living with the lo is completely painless - it's not a piece of hair shirt puritanism for the sake of it.

Rega lo

It also feels solid. 'Feel' is subjective and we have different visual and tactile references for what we might think is good and bad but the lo doesn't feel cheap, flimsy or - something that's always a risk given how small it is - toy like. You can sit the lo next to the Aethos - an amp that is nearly eight times as expensive - and they feel sufficiently alike that, even with the branding scrubbed off, you'd probably twig that they came from the same company. The metal chassis is solid and the points of contact, volume control, speaker terminals etc, all inspire confidence.

Compared to an amp from a Far East source at the same money, the lo feels different, there's no curves or LEDs buried in controls - little things that only work at large volumes - but crucially, it doesn't feel any less well made or cruder. I also feel that the small size is a great idea. Even as recently as five years ago, it might have felt incongruous. Now, where almost any piece of partnering equipment, barring a turntable, is no larger, it feels like the right thing to be doing. The lo is small enough to sit on desks, sideboards, even bookshelves and, when you don't want it to be a focal point, it won't be.

Rega lo

Like an Aethos after an extremely hot wash

BB ...in miniature, it represents the same principles that go into the creation of any Rega amplifier

How was the lo tested?

The lo was connected to an IsoTek Evo3 Sigmas mains conditioner and has been used with both a [Chord Poly](#) and [Mojo](#) combination and an iFi Zen DAC, both taking a feed from a [Roon Nucleus](#). Due to a schedule snafu, an affordable turntable which I'd hoped would be present wasn't so the phono stage saw testing via a Rega Planar 10 turntable, refitted with an [Audio Technical AT VM95SH](#) cartridge; not a typical partner I grant you but a fairly demanding one. Speakers used have been the Triangle Borea BR03 and the [Spendor A1](#). Material used has included FLAC, AIFF, DSD, [Tidal](#) and [Qobuz](#) and vinyl.

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Performance

Rega lo

The handset is small but very pleasant to use

Implicit in the idea of the lo being a 'Rega in miniature' is that it has to behave like a Rega amp. While it is an overstatement to say that there's a 'house sound' that every single amp I've tested from the company conforms to, there are behavioural traits that they share and having spent some time with the lo, it very much shares those traits. It also demonstrates that Rega's insistence on building the same pattern of amp as the larger models, simply on a smaller scale, really does work.

Listening to the lo with the marvellous and recently discovered (by me, anyway) *ATW* by All Them Witches, is an elegant demonstration of what



the lo can do. This is a well mastered album but it is dense and, at times, congested to the point of confusion. The lo is able to resolve these layers and conflicts in a way that means that the music is the sole focus of your attention. The shuffling *Workhorse* is utterly compelling; a head nodding, bluesy masterpiece that oozes the darker edge of America from every pore and it is something that the lo delivers without you ever thinking, "hey, that's good for a little amp." There are no provisos, it's simply good.

This is because all of the basics are dealt with correctly. With both the Mojo and Poly combination and the unreasonably talented Zen DAC, the lo's tonal balance is ideal. It sits, by the *tiniest* margin on the warm side of neutral and this means that, partnered with the ebullient Triangles and commendably neutral digital sources, the overall presentation is pretty much perfect. Voices and instruments unfailingly sound right and there's no appreciable limits to the scale of a performance either. The soundstage isn't the most absolutely expansive going - but this is a trait shared with other Rega amps and there's a caveat to it that we'll come to.

The more you listen, the more Rega's design principles make sense. The use of a decent power supply and output stage means that the lo 'grips' speakers in a way that means they start and stop as instructed which helps the perceived speed and immediacy of the music. This isn't something that only works with uptempo material either. Gentle pieces also benefit from this immediacy and control and it is instrumental to the way you perceive the lo.

Rega lo

The small number of controls are all entirely logical

Of course, the way that Rega really wants you to perceive the lo is via the phono stage. Now, I confess it felt a bit ridiculous connecting the Planar 10 to an amp that is physically smaller than the power supply of the turntable and, even shorn of its Apheta 3 cartridge, a turntable that is nearly ten times the price of the lo... but the lo holds its own. All the basics are handled correctly; noise floor is low, there's plenty of gain and no discernible trace of interference of hum or other nasties.

More than that, this is a *great* partner for a turntable. Provided that you've chosen your speakers with any degree of care, I'm going to state that the lo doesn't give away much to the Brio when used with a turntable - and that comes with the friendly reminder that there's not much I'd rate above the Brio at £600. Listening to *Strange Times* by The Chameleons, the Rega sings. I love this album and there was no point during proceedings that I felt the lo wasn't doing it justice.

It's also able to take the exceptionally spacious image from the Planar 10 and use it to boost its own width. Given that this extra space is something that is present down to the more sensible end of the Rega turntable range, the lo's own traits have to be seen through this intended partnership. It is very definitely greater than the sum of its parts. I've mentioned in the past that there is an unavoidable price premium to really good analogue replay and it is high enough that if you're in any doubt about meeting it then you should prioritise your digital where, as devices like the Zen DAC demonstrate, the price of utter brilliance is incredibly low. Nevertheless, the lo helps to drop the point at where vinyl really starts to move beyond 'fun novelty' and starts to show why some of us persist with it.

Rega lo

A small box that makes a big impression

BB There are no provisos, it's simply good

Verdict

Pros

- Sounds utterly brilliant
- Very well made
- Fine internal phono stage

Cons

- Limited number of inputs
- No sub out
- Some (minor) thought has to be put into speaker choice

Rega Io Integrated Amp Review

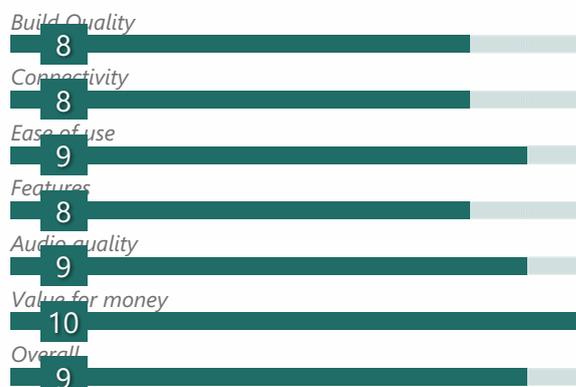
This is not really the space for comments on politics and social policies but in summing up the Io, I feel it is important to wander cautiously into this area. In 2020, great play is made of company ethics and practises. We talk about the living wage and guilt free supply chains and we urge companies to make greater efforts in this area. In the face of chronic uncertainty and

unpredictability in the UK and the wider world - both unprecedented and self inflicted - Rega has built their most affordable ever amp. They've done in it the UK with employees treated fairly and from parts suppliers where, by and large, you can check for the same things. If you wish to pay more than lip service to these ideals, here is about the most affordable example I can envisage happening for an amplifier.

The thing is though, you don't have to reassure yourself with the knowledge that you did the right thing. You can instead revel in the fact that you have bought a truly great amplifier. Everything that makes Rega one of the most compelling manufacturers of Hi-Fi in recent years is here in miniature. By making careful reductions to power, connections and casework, Rega has kept everything that makes their amps what they are. The Io is genuinely brilliant; an amplifier that does a little less to give you more than pretty much any rival and, for these reasons, it's an indisputable Best Buy.



Scores





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