

# Start ME UP



## Rega Brio-R Integrated Amplifier and USB DAC

Musical Synergy

Neil Gader

**D**on't mess with success—just ask any company about to introduce a new product. Remember New Coke anyone? It's sweaty palms time. But that's exactly what Rega has done with its fully re-imagined Brio-R integrated amp. It's taken a proven winner in the Brio 3, tempted fate, and beaten the odds. And that isn't all. In a bow to the inevitable, Rega, an ardent supporter of analog, has also introduced its first USB DAC called simply the "DAC," a well-appointed unit that joins a high-end growth sector as explosive as a long-ago outbreak of tribbles on a well-known Federation starship. (Trekkies will understand.)

Housed in custom aluminum-and-steel casework, the \$895 Brio-R and \$995 DAC have slender form factors with narrower front panels and minimalist controls. In fact, placed right beside one another, their combined width is a cool seventeen inches, coincidentally the standard width of most components (hint, hint).

The 50Wpc Brio-R features engineer Terry Bateman's newly designed circuit. In Rega's words, it emulates "Class A conditions with good thermal stability and lower standing currents in the driver stage." Technically it uses a low-source-impedance emitter-follower Class A driver stage, which feeds a complementary pair of 150W Sanken Darlington output transistors. Bateman, an unrepentant tube fan, based the circuit on unfinished designs he'd uncovered from way back in the 60s. Nearly impossible to

implement in its day due to thermal-resistance issues, today's high-speed Sankens and advancements in circuitry layout and surface-mount technology have allowed the circuit's potential to be realized.

The Brio-R's phonostage, a moving-magnet design, has also been upgraded to reflect the current improvements in the Rega Planar turntables. A remote control has been added (hence the "R" in the Brio name) and is isolated from delicate audio signals by its own circuitry and power supply. Although there's no jack for headphones, the IEC AC sockets in the rear of both units invites users to bring upscale power cords to the party—I got great results from the Shunyata Venom 3. One downside to all this new compaction is a competition for back-panel space. For the many RCA interconnects that have larger than-the-norm sleeves it's a tight squeeze. And unplugging interconnects provoked a bit of panel flex that I found worrisome.

As for the newly introduced DAC, some will ask, "Hey Rega, what took you so long?" But as Rega founder Roy Gandy pointed out in a conversation, small companies like Rega approach new formats with a necessary degree of caution until the format reaches a threshold of user acceptance. Then it's up to Rega to satisfy itself that it can design a competitive component that performs up to, and hopefully beyond, the expectations of its users.



The Rega DAC is a 24-bit design and is based largely on the architecture and USB input stage of Rega's flagship Isis player [\$8999, reviewed by Chris Martens in Issue 213]. The DAC's digital-to-analog conversion stage uses a pair of parallel-connected Wolfson WM8742 DAC's (24-bit/192kHz capable), which are driven via a buffer stage. Its input stage comprises a Wolfson digital receiver paired with a high-stability low-jitter clock. The receiver and PLL have their own dedicated power supplies, while the clock oscillator is actually the same one used in Rega's Isis. The DAC back panel offers a pair of isolated S/PDIF inputs and two TosLink inputs.

In a departure from the current norm, the DAC is non-upsampling and processes each stream at its native rate. From Rega's point of view this keeps the signal processing to a minimum. The DAC's front panel includes a switch for selecting between five digital-filter settings in the Wolfson DAC. My advice is not to get too obsessed with the minutiae of filter comparisons. Differences are slight and are mostly determined by the amount of naturally occurring spatial information on the recording.

My first strong impression of the Rega Brio-R and DAC occurred serendipitously. I usually begin listening to a review subject while doing other things—almost as background music. I have a favorite playlist on iTunes, so after cinching up the AudioQuest Carbon USB cable, I set the MacBook to shuffle and then left the room while the amp and DAC settled in. I came back awhile later and found some Cat Stevens' tunes from *Tea For The Tillerman* playing. And then I sat down. I had to. During the opening chorus of "Longer Boats" I was hearing something I hadn't heard since I played the original LP a long time ago. Deep in the mix there's a lightly tapped cymbal that accents the end of each line as in, "Longer boats are comin' to win us" *splash*, "comin' to win us" *splash*. As I listened more and the hours began to spin by, it became ever clearer that this duo creates a special symbiotic relationship—as in, it's hard to tell where one component takes

over for the other. They share the most basic and enviable sonic character—balance. The criteria I most prize—neutral tonal balance, transient speed, micro-dynamic energy—complement rather than compete with one another. There is a hint of warmth and fullness, which I'm thankful for. It's a factor that lends a fine perception of air and ambience to good acoustic recordings. As I listened to Judy Collins' cover of "Send in the Clowns" on *Judith* [Elektra], I noted the immediacy of the oboe introduction and the wider acoustic that it was playing in. Likewise, there was also a clear sense of body and resonance from the cello and the delicate, gossamer-like interplay of rising and falling violins. For me, vocals are critical and the Rega captures every nuance in Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" from *The Bodyguard* [Arista], a master-class performance for pop artists in breath/vibrato control. The upper treble is smooth and just a bit shaded overall. And there's very little congestion in the top octaves.

## SPECS & PRICING

### Brio-R

**Power output:** 50Wpc into 8 Ohms

**Inputs:** Four line-level, one mm phono (RCA jacks)

**Dimensions:** 8.5" x 3.1" x 12.5"

**Weight:** 12 lbs.

**Price:** \$895

**Outputs:** RCA analog, S/PDIF and TosLink digital

**Dimensions:** 8.5" x 3.1" x 10.6"

**Weight:** 9 lbs.

**Price:** \$995

### THE SOUND ORGANIZATION

(U.S. Distributor)

159 Leslie Street

Dallas, TX 75207

(972) 234-0182

soundorg.com

### DAC

**Digital inputs:** One USB, two S/PDIF, two TosLink

To my ears there's a lot to be said for an amplifier that doesn't sound conspicuously solid-state or tube but suggests the strengths of both. Right out of the gate, I was impressed by the weight, tonal density, and authority the Brio-R brought to recordings. Brass had the requisite brilliance but avoided aggressiveness. Even on orchestral passages filled with heavy low strings and winds and big percussion, the Brio-R goes a long way maintaining timbral cues and controlling the waves of harmonics.

Keep in mind that at 50Wpc the Brio-R is no earth-mover, but it's well suited for smaller floorstanders and compact speakers of medium-high sensitivity. It became the ideal mate for a small loudspeaker survey that I've been conducting. It really impressed me with the way it defined the differences, eccentricities, and sheer diversity of speakers like the Penaudio Cenya, the Audio Physic Step 25, and the LSA1 monitors (all reviewed next issue).

The Rega USB DAC provides yet more evidence of the strides this format is taking. My largest complaint with the earlier implementations of USB—and I'm referring to everything from DACs to cables—has been the narrow, inwardly-collapsing soundstage and the latency artifacts which diminish image focus and add high-frequency noise. Take Jen Chapin's cover of "You Haven't Done Nothing" from *ReVisions* [Chesky]. This was one of the first songs I uploaded to iTunes and it proved to be a disaster with early USB DACs. Chapin's vocal was bleached out, flattened like road kill. The baritone sax was dynamically lifeless, and I won't even discuss the disfigurement wrought upon the acoustic bass. Now with the Rega DAC, this track was not only listenable but in many ways never sounded better—not quite the match of the SACD but remarkably close to the standard compact disc. As an aside, Rega stated that in the course of its R&D it identified the noise generated by the PC's switching power supply and other input sources as a major drawback for USB and spent a lot of resources tamping down these artifacts. I'd say the money was well spent.

I do have a couple quibbles, which seem rather petty given the sub-\$1k price point of the Regas, but here goes. On a track like Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, some of the playful micro-dynamic transient delicacy of the high strings and triangle was not as apparent through the Brio-R. And during Nils Lofgren's "Keith Don't Go" from *Acoustic Live*, I felt the vocalist's sibilance range could have been a touch cleaner, the guitar transients snappier and more immediate. At the other end of the tonal spectrum bass cues were a little less specific than I've sometimes heard. As noted previously, the Brio does one helluva job

replicating the foundation of a symphony orchestra; however, when I replaced the Brio-R with a mega-integrated like the Lindemann 625, the foundation beneath the orchestra expanded and solidified commensurately. The Lindemann amp possessed a bit more body and was cleaner. Compared with top-flight USB components the DAC also lacks a bit of crystalline transparency and micro-dynamic liveliness, though overall the Rega DAC was musically at home in leagues well outside its price point, even when paired with loudspeakers as ruthlessly revealing as the vaunted mbl 120s. In sum, the Rega Brio-R and DAC are a great tandem—a seamless tag team that play to each others strengths, and at a painless Start Me Up price.

They say don't mess with success. But they also say, play to win. I say: "Mission accomplished." **tas**

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