

Rega Aethos integrated amplifier

REGA MOVES TO FILL A KEY SPACE IN ITS AMPLIFIER RANGE WITH THE AETHOS, AN UNUSUAL EXERCISE IN 'TRICKLE UP' ENGINEERING. ED SELLEY TAKES A LISTEN



Over the last eighteen months, the main focus of Rega Research's activities has been its range of turntables, cartridges and phono stages. While hardly surprising, this has but it meant that the range of supporting amplifiers no longer matched the turntables as closely as they once had. In particular, the significant hole between the £1,679 Elicit R and the £6,399 Osiris was an issue for people looking to partner the Rega Planar 8 or 10 with a matching Rega amplifier.

To fill that gap, Rega has launched the Aethos. At £2999, it sits roughly equidistant between the two existing amplifiers, and rather than taking the Osiris and stripping it back, it is instead a beefed up version of the Elicit R. Terry Bateman, responsible for the Aethos and the rest of Rega's electronics, designs even gave it the development code '1600E', in reference to that range-topping variant of the Ford Cortina with all the bells and whistles on it.

The Aethos isn't simply an Elicit R in a hefty box: while its power output is quoted at 125W into eight ohms – a rise of 20W over the smaller amp – the key difference isn't the bald number but the implementation. The output stage now features a quartet of 160w Sanken Darlington transistors rather than a pair, as part of a low source impedance emitter follower Class-A driver stage. Rega says this enables the Aethos to deliver its quoted output without any significant strain on the components.

Another aspect of the design borrowed from the Elicit R – and very distinctively Rega – is the volume control. This changes both input and feedback levels, Rega saying this helps improve the level consistency between channels while reducing noise and input overload at the same time.

Using this volume control is a mixture of good and mildly infuriating: the channel balance does seem to be exceptionally good, even at extremely low levels, but less satisfactory is the enormous change in gain available in less than a quarter of a rotation. Add in a remote motor that doesn't happily make fine adjustments and you have an amp on which it can be tricky to set the correct listening level, particularly with sensitive speakers.

The Aethos is not equipped with an internal phono stage which, at first glance, seems like a curious decision from a company that sells so many turntables, especially at a time when rivals such as Naim are busy reinstating phono capability after years of being line-only. However, the internal volume of the Aethos is 'full', with no location where

a phono stage could easily be placed and enjoy a degree of isolation from the other sections. This is compounded by the fact that turntables suited to pairing with the Aethos are likely to use moving coil cartridges, further increasing the engineering challenges of a phono stage. Rega continues to make a selection of external options, however.

The Aethos has five line inputs, a tape loop (with parallel outputs so you can drive a headphone amp and record at the same time), a power amp in and preamp out, while the speaker outputs are partnered with a headphone amp feeding a 6.35mm socket.

Heavy metal

The new casework design mixes influences from both the pricier Osiris and the more affordable components: immensely hefty for an amplifier at this price, it makes a major contribution to an all-up mass of over 17 kilos. It is beautifully finished and feels exceptionally solid: Rega has already begun the process of ensuring that devices likely to be partnered with it are fitted with matching casework.

There are, however, some minor operational quirks. There's no direct input selection: instead you have to cycle through them, although you can at least cycle in both directions. What's more, the supplied 'Solaris' remote handset is also fairly long in the tooth, and festooned with buttons no longer relevant to the control of the Aethos, although it does work pretty much regardless of where you point it, which is welcome.

The review sample had plenty of hours on it, so it was immediately connected to a Chord Electronics MScaler/Hugo TT2 combination and a pair of Focal Kanta No1 speakers – a design sensitive enough to demonstrate the limitations of that volume adjustment. The most immediately identifiable trait was a consistent sweetness across the upper registers, encouraging the listener to push the level even when listening to music that can