



All hail the new retro: JBL's classic 4349 'standmount'

Out of this world: Focal Celestee closed-back 'phones



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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BUYING GUIDE
100+ essential components p109

RAMP IT UP!

GROUP TEST

Six great 'first step' integrated amps go head-to-head

KEEPING THE FAITH

Musical Fidelity M6x Vinyl phono stage

TURN ON... TUNE IN...

The compelling history of radio



Here comes the summer!

Bang & Olufsen's on-the-move Beosound A1 2nd-Gen portable Bluetooth speaker

NEWSFLASH

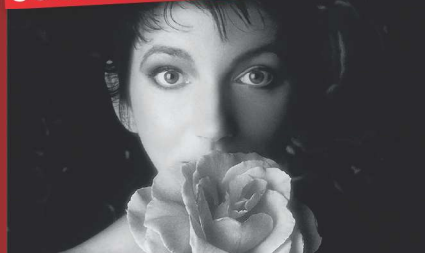
Launches from Noble, Cambridge Audio and Flare

BRAVO!



Standing ovation for T+A's Caruso R music player

SOUNDS OF LOVE



Music Legend: The magical genius of Kate Bush

ON TRACK



Audio-Technica's AT-LP5X direct-drive turntable



MAY 2021

£5.25
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PRINTED IN THE UK



Rega io £380

Though Rega's amplification starting point is analogue only, its sonic talent is no surprise

► DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Rega io
- ORIGIN**
UK
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier
- WEIGHT**
2.9kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
180 x 68 x 290mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted power output: 2x 30W (8ohm)
 - Inputs: 2x RCA, 1x MM phono stage
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Rega Research Ltd.

If you're tempted to infer from the io's name that the little amp is half a Brio (*HFC 422*), the model one tier higher up the range, that would be selling it somewhat short. Sure, it's quite a bit smaller and some £220 cheaper but, truth is, it's a Brio with a few strategic cost-saving revisions in a smaller, cheaper chassis. Arguably, this makes it even more cost effective than its thoroughly excellent sibling, and that's saying something.

The io made its debut as part of Rega's System One, three components in a synergistic alliance – a Planar 1 turntable, a pair of Kyte speakers and the io – for just £999. But it can also be purchased separately and only the AXA35 costs less in the group.

Power is limited to 30 Class A/B Watts, down from the Brio's 50W, because of changes to the power supply, a simpler power transformer without isolated windings and more affordable op amps. The lower power permits smaller, simpler casework which, realistically, necessitated fewer inputs, too: MM phono, two line-level

and a 3.5mm jack on the front is your lot, but it's enough to build a perfectly respectable system around.

The front panel is straightforward and neat, but obviously built to a price. Both the volume knob and input selection button are plastic, as is the fascia border. But the red backlit graphics are clear and smart while the metal casework feels solid and both the inputs and the speaker terminals on the admittedly rather cramped rear panel are of good quality. What's more, Rega hasn't stinted on the remote, which is mid-sized, clearly laid out and covers just about everything – so there's no need to get up close and personal with the fascia's not-so-pleasingly tactile controls.

Sound quality

There's a whole list of things the Rega io isn't. It isn't the cleanest-sounding amp in the group or, indeed, the smoothest. It doesn't have the most expansive soundstage or the kind of detail retrieval that makes you wake up in the middle of the night and shout: "Wow!" It's neither

conspicuously fast nor cosily warm. And while it goes loud enough to annoy the neighbours, there are other amps here that go louder still. Yep, even taking its digital feed from the famously on-it Hugo 2, none of the above applies.

Perhaps its greatest attribute is that when you listen to it you couldn't give a flying donut. It's because – like the Brio it's based on and all Rega amps – the io is almost spookily at one with music and seems much less concerned with ticking boxes assigned to specific hi-fi metrics.

A supple fluency and rhythmical literacy informs everything it plays. McDonald's *Motown II* workout is less obviously taut and strictly metered than it is with the Marantz and Cambridge, but it has more musical mojo and juice, sounding bouncier, looser and more fun from beginning to end. In the same vein, Elvis Costello is more in the room, more palpable, more intimate, more affecting. As you'd hope, the phono stage is very good indeed, releasing Joni Mitchell's voice from the NAD's benign smothering and allowing it to regain its natural edge and purity. Once again, it's the subtle intricacy of the musical message that hits home. The io doesn't have quite the weight and colour of the Edwards, but it is a little lighter on its feet. Both stand out from the assembled talent, albeit as analogue-only propositions ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Outrageous musicality for the money; size and simplicity
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing of note at the price
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** If it's musical communication you value above all else, look no further
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



Group test verdict

After a long week of listening, **David Vivian** is finally ready to weigh the pros and cons of a diverse but talented group and reveal a deserving winner


I LOVE THE juxtapositions *Group Tests* permit. Echoing what the late, great Rutger Hauer didn't quite say at the end of *Blade Runner*: I've heard things you people wouldn't believe. No, not attack amps on fire off the shoulder of Orion, but the act of the wee MaiA S2 taking on the big hitters here, beating most for features and, in all but ultimate loudness and bass power, rivalling the best sonically from the midband up. If limited space is an issue and your speakers are sensitive, the petite Pro-Ject all but chooses itself.

Given the broader brief of this test, however, it's just edged out by the

AXA35 – analogue only, but an object lesson in how to execute a budget Class A/B integrated amplifier. Its clear, open, honest sound, smart design, sturdy build and ease of use are textbook, and it's terrific value.

Fourth place goes to the Class D-powered D 3020 V2. If you're already wedded to the smooth, warm tonality and real-world grip and punch of the classic NAD sound, the original 3020's great granddaddy is a hugely appealing, versatile, forward-looking option. The caveat is not all types of music benefit from its over arching suavity.

First on the podium, Edwards' IA5 is lovely sounding with gloriously natural tonality and the kind of muscular control that delivers real body, depth and dynamics along with the impression it's cruising. An equally compelling case can be made for the Marantz. It ticks a lot of boxes, not least its astutely all-bases-covered sound quality. Plushly equipped, it romps through critical performance gateways yet, curiously, bristles before contesting a photo finish. It has everything going for it but perhaps that crucial extra scintilla of heart and soul.



WINNER

Which is why the Rega io snatches victory. It might be small and rather plain. It doesn't have many features or a truckful of watts. But give it a talented source, analogue or digital and, well, the music will never stop. An absolute joy and stone-cold bargain.



| Make/model | Cambridge Audio AXA35 | Edwards Audio IA5 | Marantz PM6007 | NAD D 3020 V2 | Pro-Ject MaiA S2 | Rega io |
|-----------------|--|---|--|--|--|--|
| Price | £300 | £500 | £500 | £400 | £450 | £380 |
| Sound | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Value | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Build | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Features | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Overall | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| | A capable, keenly priced amp that balances attributes with compromises | Has old-school charm, but the star of the show is the big-hearted sound | For the largest and best built amp with the broadest skill set it's close but no cigar | Class D and radical in shape maybe, but for sound quality this is a chip off the old block | Good things come in small packages, but so many? A real miniature marvel | Rega's knack of putting musical literacy before stereo effects continues |
| Website | cambridgeaudio.com | talkelectronics.com | marantz.com | nadelectronics.com | project-audio.com | rega.co.uk |

Key features

| | Cambridge Audio AXA35 | Edwards Audio IA5 | Marantz PM6007 | NAD D 3020 V2 | Pro-Ject MaiA S2 | Rega io |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| Quoted power | 2x 35W (8ohm) | 2x 50W (8ohm) | 2x 40W (8ohm) | 2x 30W (8ohm) | 2x 25W (4ohm) | 2x 30W (8ohm) |
| Phono stage | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Analogue inputs | 5x RCA | 5x RCA; 1x 35mm | 5x RCA | 2x RCA | 3x RCA; 1x 35mm | 3x RCA |
| Digital inputs | No | No | 1x coax; 2x optical | 1x coax, 2x opt, 1x USB-B | 1x coax; 2x opt; 1x USB-B | No |
| DAC | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |

TRY WITH THESE

STREAMER: Auralic Aries Mini **£450 HFC 442**

The Auralic isn't the prettiest streamer going, but the level of performance that it offers is beyond anything else at the price. As well as superb sonics, you get an excellent control interface and it can even be used as a server.



TURNTABLE: Rega Planar 6 **£1,050 HFC 427**

Fit the Rega with a moving-magnet cartridge to work with any of these amps and you have a fine turntable that manages to sound bigger and more capable than the sensible price suggests it should. It's also beautifully made and a joy to use.



CD PLAYER: Audiolab 8300CD **£1,000**

The Rega io is easily capable of showing a £1k digital source at its best and, when it comes to CD spinners, the Audiolab is a star. As well as being highly flexible, it really sounds the part, with a lot of detail and a spacious, clean soundstage. It's beautifully built, too.

