

Rega Planar 2

The latest in a long line of 'affordable audiophile' turntables from a highly popular UK brand, the Planar 2 offers easy set-up, good looks and a taste of serious hi-fi sound
Review: **David Price** Lab: **Paul Miller**

The 1970s were something of a high watermark for the vinyl format. Bolstered by Mike Oldfield's smash hit *Tubular Bells*, 1975 saw the highest ever LP sales in the UK, and this drove demand for turntables. At the time, the budget king was Garrard's rudimentary SP25, but soon the Japanese gifted us the fine Pioneer PL-12D, a deck that really raised the performance bar.

Then in 1977, Rega launched its new Planar 2 – a slick British vinyl spinner that many thought was the most affordable, serious hi-fi turntable around. Its bigger brother, the Planar 3, was highly lauded too and sold like hot cakes. By the end of the decade, owning a Rega had become a badge of aspirational audiophile cool.

LEGACY TONEARM

Naturally the Rega range has expanded over the years and the company currently also makes the Planar 1 and Planar 6, RP8 and RP10 high-end derivatives [*HFN* May '14 and Aug '15], as well as the shellac-friendly RP78. The formula remains the same however, for these are all minimalist, high quality turntables and the £375 Planar 2 reviewed here is essentially the company's top 'entry level' product.

It's basically a better-made 'starter' Planar 1 (£248) while the Planar 3 (£550) is aimed more at tweaky audiophile types. It comes pre-fitted with a MM pick-up so is beginner-friendly, yet a serious attempt has been made to get it sounding good too. This latest derivative has come a long way since the original [see boxout, facing page].

The new RB220 tonearm is a direct descendent of what is arguably Rega's greatest ever product – the original, iconic RB300 of 1983. It features new ultra-low friction bearings, a stiffer bearing housing and an 'automatic' bias adjustment. As before, the housing has an elegant integral armrest and lock. The 9in armtube is

still made from aluminium, with a non-detachable headshell and that familiar Rega fingerlift. The arm is a pleasure to operate, as with all Rega variants, and although it will certainly accommodate top-flight cartridges, the lack of VTA adjustment limits your choice marginally.

Unlike the original Rega Planar 2, this deck comes (as noted) pre-fitted with a cartridge: the Audio-Technica derived Rega Carbon, a medium output MM design – 2.5mV is claimed. It features a spherical stylus and carbon cantilever.

The Planar 2's compact acrylic plinth is now a laminated design available in gloss black, white and red finishes, but it still lacks any form of isolation from the outside world aside from its feet. These have been redesigned for the new Planar 2 for greater stability and lower vibration transfer, but all Regas benefit from proper siting on a light and rigid wall shelf, or at least a good equipment rack. They have always

been more susceptible to vibration than independently sprung subchassis designs, so need all the protection from structural-borne noise that they can get. Playing them with the acrylic dust cover removed also substantially improves the sound.

UNPACK AND PLAY

The platter is only 10mm thick, but is made to a high standard from a float glass called Optiwhite. This is spun by the new electronically controlled 24V AC synchronous motor that gets its power from a separate mains-plug type PSU. The power switch is now underneath, on the front left of the plinth, which looks neater, but is fiddlier to use than before.

As ever, you change the speed by moving the belt on the pulley even though this means you have to remove the platter. The main bearing is a new 11mm self-securing brass affair, which is said to offer lower friction and a tighter manufacturing



RIGHT: The Planar 2's acrylic-laminated plinth hosts an AC motor mounted at 12 o'clock under a glass platter. Its RB220 tonearm comes fitted with a Rega Carbon MM pick-up



tolerance. It's never hard to get a Rega up and running and the Planar 2 is no exception. Indeed, now that the turntable is pre-fitted with a pick-up, it's simply a case of unboxing the deck and balancing the arm, which can be done in less than a minute if you're used to such things.

You just screw the arm counterweight on until the cartridge floats 1mm from the record surface, rotate it another full turn and it's set at an optimal 2g. The fiddly bit – aligning and tightening the cartridge to the tonearm – is already done for you, the VTA is correct and the bias is preset. This done, you plug in the power supply and the phono leads to the amplifier or phono stage, and you're ready to play.

A FINE ALL-ROUNDER

There's no mistaking Rega's 'house sound' for the new Planar 2 is a precise and tidy performer combining a good smattering of detail with an innate smoothness and balance. Unlike many rivals it's a fine

all-rounder, with nothing specific letting the side down. It has an air of control and confidence that's unexpected at this low price point, with none of the 'nasties' that plague many cheap vinyl spinners, such as speed instability or noise [see PM's Lab Report, p71].

The result is that the Planar 2 sounds a lot more expensive than it really is.

Recorded in the year that the first Rega Planar 2 came out, Supertramp's 'Take The Long Way Home' [from *Breakfast In America*; A&M Records SP-3708] is a classic '70s rock track mixed for the US FM radio of the period. It can sound

rather bright, yet this turntable turned in a polished performance, offering a clean sound with tight bass, an open and spacious midband and smooth, extended treble. Indeed, when I was just a few bars into the track, it was hard to remember that I was listening to something that costs only £375. There's commendably little surface noise, virtually no detectable

Rega's Planar 2 sounds a lot costlier than it really is'

ABOVE: The P2 is the most affordable in Rega's range to employ a glass platter and felt mat. High gloss black, white and red plinth finishes are offered, plus a removable hinged lid

rumble or hum, and excellent speed stability at the price. True, this is no quartz-locked, direct driven Technics SL-1200G, or GR [HFN Nov '17], but still it never appears vague or wobbly due to pitch issues. This is interesting, because earlier generations of the Planar 2 were rumoured to be less good in this respect.

GROOVING ALONG

All this means that the deck won't distract you from the music. For example, the opening harmonica solo on the Supertramp track glistened with harmonics, as did the first piano cadence. Roger Hodgson's lead vocals were delivered unsullied and intact. One could really hear the emotional expression in his singing, as well as the distinctive grain of his voice.

There are plenty of speed-stable turntables that can still manage to sound as dull as ditchwater, so this is no guarantee of a good sound. The Planar 2, however, seems to do more than just rotate at the right speed for, musically, it really satisfies. Spinning up Suzanne Vega's 'Cracking' [from *Suzanne Vega*; A&M C28Y3042] showed how good it was at imparting the music's natural rhythmic flow. The song's slow pace and sparse arrangement can make it seem rather meandering, but the Planar 2 got right into the groove. Its crisp, immediate nature meant it was able to convey the subtle rhythmic inflections in Vega's phrasing as clearly as the dynamic contrasts.

So although the Planar 2 might not deliver the sort of fireworks that an expensive deck can provide, it still did enough to pull this listener right into the musical performance. Switching to the denser and more uptempo electronica ➔

PLANAR PROGRESSION

Launched in 1977 – three years after the iconic Rega Planet – the first glass-plattered Planar 2 came with an Acos-derived S-shaped tonearm and a wood surround to its satin-black painted MDF plinth. In 1984 that all changed, and the wood was discarded to give a similar look to its Planar 3 bigger brother. The arm was replaced by the RB250, a trickle-down version of the radical RB300 with its one-piece alloy tube. This sold strongly right up to the turn of the century, when the P2 2000 took over – this revised Planar 2 featured an HDF (high density fibreboard) platter instead of glass. The intervening years saw subtle modifications, including fitment of the RB251 tonearm (essentially an RB250 with improved three-point mounting) – but this latest version marks one of its most major upgrades, along with the return of the iconic Planar name. The new arm, platter, motor, bearing and plinth all, naturally, lay claim to improvements. The result is that today's Planar 2 sounds better than an old Planar 3 of two decades or so ago, especially when fitted with the optional Performance Pack. Any new Planar 1 or 2 owner can purchase a thick wool platter mat, upgraded belt and Rega Bias cartridge from Rega for the princely sum of £95.

TURNTABLE



ABOVE: Rega's AC motor is driven by a wall-plug 24V power supply. A fixed pair of phono (RCA) cables exit from the base of the latest RB220 tonearm

of Nu Era's 'Lines Between Us' [from *Geometricks EP*; Omniverse OMNI1201] showed me that little has changed in terms of the Planar 2's overall balance. The latest deck to carry the name remains smooth but a little dry – it certainly doesn't offer any extra coloration to sweeten the musical pill, and this might disappoint some analogue addicts. Bass is a little light in absolute terms, too, although certainly no worse than price rivals.

Yet what there is remains taut and tuneful, and properly integrated with the midband and treble. The result is that you get a purposeful, enjoyable sound with a fair low-end punch delivered in a fast and fluid manner. The treble is sweet and civilised too, even with the budget Rega Carbon cartridge – although of course this can be upgraded for better sound at a later date.

OPEN AND ENJOYABLE

Spinning my cherished pressing of Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony [BPO/Karajan; DG 253 1106], I found myself engrossed in the pleasing spread of sound that the little Rega served up. It was detailed and engaging, and well able to communicate the physical presence of the orchestra's massed strings within the venue. Earlier generations of the Planar 2 were more opaque and rhythmically ponderous, without the greater insight offered by this newer model.

That's not to say this current deck is beyond reproach, however, for you can easily hear its limitations against a good £1000 turntable. In absolute terms it is a little dynamically compressed, spatially constrained and deserves a stronger and more tangible bass, along with more insight up top. Nevertheless, the fundamentals are pretty close to

being right. Spatially, it's a decent performer too. Playing Herbie Hancock's 'I Have A Dream' [from *The Prisoner*; Blue Note BST 84321] – a classic slice of late 1960s 'progressive' modern jazz – the deck delivered a pleasingly wide soundstage, inside which instruments were accurately located. This is one of the real strengths of vinyl and I find it hard to imagine an equivalently priced CD player and/or streamer doing anywhere near as well.

The bundled Carbon MM isn't the world's most expansive-sounding cartridge but it was still well able to give the sense of a group of superb musicians playing together brilliantly within a wide recorded acoustic. Depth perspective was also good, compared to rivals at the price, so everything sounded open and enjoyable. With this new Planar 2 it's all too easy to forget that you're listening to a humble budget product that costs less than an armful of audiophile LPs. Therein lies its strength, for the Planar 2 is simply better than it has any right to be at this price. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Historically, Rega has proved highly adept at making affordable high performance vinyl spinners, and the latest Planar 2 shows why. It feels much less built-down-to-a-price than its rivals, and is more solid, better finished and smarter looking too. Then there's the sound, which is far more musically enjoyable than you have any right to expect for just £375. Its painless, straight out of the box set-up is a real bonus too!

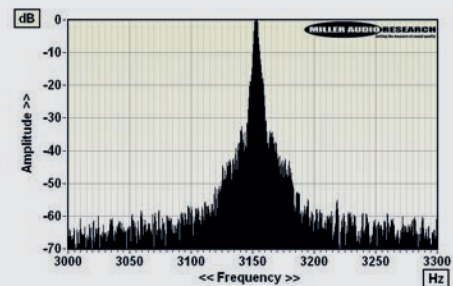
Sound Quality: 84%



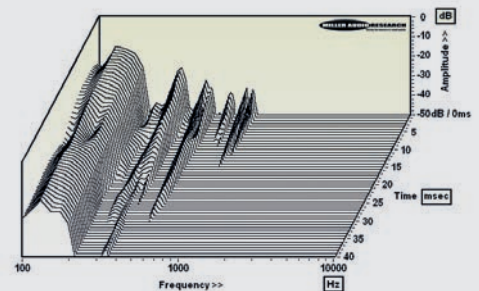
REGA PLANAR 2/RB220

Rega's RP6 [HFN Apr '12] was the first turntable in its range to employ a laminated glass ring platter and since then, and with a 10mm float glass 'Optiwhite' disc being developed, the benefit of glass has once again been realised in its more cost-effective decks. Indeed the glass platter marks a key upgrade between Rega's starter deck, the Planar 1, and this Planar 2 model which still offers a reasonably swift 4 second start-up time. This, plus the new 24V twin-phase synchronous motor and 11mm self-securing brass bearing, helps maintain a low peak wow and flutter of just 0.05% [see Graph 1, below]. Similarly, its through-groove rumble is only a dB behind the older RP6 at -68.1dB (with the felt mat in place) as is the through-bearing rumble of -69.4dB. These are perfectly good figures for a sub-£500 deck that includes both a MM pick-up and a class-leading tonearm.

Rega's new RB220 tonearm may have its new 'zero play' bearings but its design is clearly evolved from both the RB303 [HFN Oct '11] and RB101 [HFN Dec '15] with its 237mm effective length, 23° offset and 11g effective mass. Its performance is closest to the RB303 which shares the same one-piece alloy tonearm (the RB101 has a plastic headshell). This rigid tube offers a well-defined main resonance at 140Hz followed by harmonic and torsional modes at 170Hz and 330Hz at lower amplitude [see Graph 2, below]. The higher-Q resonances at 500Hz and 900Hz decay quickly and, as we saw them in the RB101 and RB303, are probably linked to the cueing/arm lift mechanism or fingerlift. Play is minimal in both vertical horizontal planes and, while 'zero' is difficult to verify, any bearing friction/stiction is certainly less than 10mg. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz, 5Hz per minor division)



ABOVE: Cumulative tonearm resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing, pillar and 'tube' vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.63rpm (+0.89%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.02% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-68.1dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-69.4dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-63.8dB
Power Consumption	3-4W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	447x117x360mm / 5.5kg