



Rega System One

REGA'S APPROACH TO BUILDING AN ENTRY LEVEL HI-FI SYSTEM MAINTAINS ALL THE COMPANY'S TRADITIONAL PRINCIPLES AND PHILOSOPHY DESPITE A TIGHT BUDGET. ED SELLEY'S IMPRESSED

Brand loyalty is a curiously durable concept, and one to which I am particularly susceptible - to the extent that I've only bought one brand of trainer and toothpaste this century. For hi-fi manufacturers, the idea is a powerful one: hook someone at the start of their audio journey, and there's a good chance they'll stay with you as they upgrade. But as the cost of equipment has climbed relative to salaries, this has required more flexible thinking. You can argue that devices like the Chord Mojo and Naim Mu-so embody values that their manufacturers employ elsewhere in the range but they don't necessarily present a conventional starting point for further upgrades.

Rega has worked hard to maintain a 'first rung' for its products that's recognisably something from which you can progress up its range. As long ago as the 2020 Bristol Show – an event that increasingly feels utterly surreal – the company showed off the System One, combined the existing Planar One turntable with a new amplifier and speakers, all supplied in one box with the cabling required to get it up and running. The plan at that point was to offer it £999 and have it on sale later that year but the same issues

that have bedevilled everyone ensured it has taken until now to release it as a complete package, while the price has settled at £1200 – rather more than originally intended, but still impressive for a system constructed entirely in the UK.

The principles that the devices that form the System One adhere to are the same as every other Rega product. The Planar One is, in short, designed around the same priorities as the Planar 10: it's a belt-driven rigidly supported turntable focusing

on rigidity and reduced mass. The budget means it isn't possible to offer a glass platter at this level, so one made from phenolic resin is used instead, and while the RB110 tonearm is recognisably related to the company's more ornate models, it has a fixed antiskate mechanism designed around the company's pre-fitted 'Carbon' cartridge. Yes, this limits the scope for upgrading, but it does make it simple to set up and use.

While Rega makes a version of the Planar One with a phono stage on board, that's not required here: the lo integrated amplifier in this system has its own internal moving magnet stage. Like the Planar One, the lo – a class A/B design delivering 30 watts into eight ohms – is a condensed version of other Rega amplifiers, with that phono stage joined by a pair of RCA inputs, a headphone socket and a single pair of speaker terminals.

The casework is all metal and the lo itself is comfortably smaller than a sheet of A4 paper, while the simplifications required to create it didn't extend to omitting a remote control, making it an entirely practical device to use day to day.

The practicalities of making a speaker at this price to partner the electronics requires more changes to the approach that Rega has previously taken but that cuts both ways. The Kyte is a two way standmount with the same 125mm mid/bass driver and 'ZRR' tweeter as the RX-1 standmount: the RX-1 places the drivers in an MDF cabinet, but when Rega began looking into making a £500 speaker, it became clear that MDF simply wasn't an option.

A matter of resin

The result is a fine piece of lateral thinking: the Kyte has a phenolic resin cabinet fronted by a composite baffle that mounts the drivers. The shape of the cabinet is partly dictated by the moulding process so each edge tapers from the front. This means that, as extracted from the box, each Kyte would lean back at a fairly steep angle, so Rega supplies a small foot (also made of phenolic) that attaches to the rear and pushes the speaker into a more upright profile. And to stiffen the cabinet, a cruciform internal brace is fitted, reinforced with plates made of the same ceramic as the Planar 10 turntable platter.

By rights, the Kyte should feel somewhere between minimal and crude, but it doesn't: instead, the simplicity and lack of adornment translate into something that feels focused and unadorned. It's an impressive achievement that a speaker with so little in common with its more traditional stablemates is entirely like a Rega product.

In fact, this is perhaps the cleverest aspect of how the System One looks and feels. You can sit it next to Rega's statement equipment and, even if the logos were scrubbed off both, I think most people would

realise they came from the same place. What's more, you could begin with a System One and proceed up through the line to that range-topping gear in a way that most 'first rung' offerings from companies simply won't allow. Where they, at best, allow for a single extra device to be connected or to become a 'second system' in another room, the System One presents three distinct areas to upgrade and huge flexibility when it comes to choosing how to do it.

No less important is that, as a first introduction to Rega, the System One does nothing to intimidate or annoy. Setting up the Planar One is simplicity itself even without the standard selection of set-up tools, and the result – while not as accurate as using a stylus force gauge – is good enough. Yes, this is a different sort of installation experience to plugging in a one-box wireless speaker but I don't think it will take you any longer to get it up and running.

The presence of those two spare inputs means you can simply select a digital solution to suit, and though I agree with Rega's thinking that this isn't realistically something they need to add themselves, it does mean that 'full functionality' will cost more than £1,200. However, assuming you have records to play on it, I suspect anyone experiencing a System One for the first time won't be rushing to consider ways of augmenting it.

Before I launch into a sustained bout of effusive praise though, it's worth putting a few things in context. The Rega arrived shortly after a latest generation Bowers & Wilkins Zeppelin had departed. The £700 Zeppelin could go every bit as loud as the Rega set, and it had more absolute bass extension. The System One doesn't – at least in the most basic 'fill a room with music' sense – do anything beyond the abilities of more integrated options.

Obvious appeal

The appeal – and the System One has plenty – lies way beyond bald numbers, but selecting Joan Armatrading's *Me, Myself and I* and letting it play does a fine job of starting to show its strengths.

The first advantage is a physical one: with the Kytes a little over two metres apart, there's a natural width and soundstage to the System One's presentation that would require a fair amount of digital wizardry for a single box alternative to emulate. Armatrading escapes the confines of the cabinets and takes up her rightful place in the centre of the image, and the supporting instrumentation opens out effortlessly around her. It sounds 'right' in the way a one-box system would struggle to.

Nor does this 'rightness' end there: not only is there no form of processing at work to enhance the perception of width, there's no form of processing full stop, resulting in a presentation that's utterly direct and unforced. The music flows through the

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Planar One in a manner even very sophisticated digital can sometimes struggle to approach. It’s an experience I don’t ever recall from a system that arrived in a single box.

The role of the Io and Kyte in how this system sounds is just as important: I’ve spent time with the Io as a solo review item and what it offers that is tremendously satisfying, even if similarly priced rivals may have better connectivity, more power or indeed greater bass extension.

Timing, coherence and engagement

What those rivals find harder to match is the timing, coherence and engagement the Io delivers without breaking sweat. The effortlessly groovy *Africa Brasil* by Jorge Ben is magnificently together in the hands of this amplifier, sounding tonally vibrant, impressively detailed and absolutely compelling due to the consistent rhythmic energy underpinning all the technical attributes.

Delivered a signal of this inherent musicality, the Kyte doesn’t let the side down. None of its unique construction makes itself felt: instead there’s an immediate awareness that this speaker goes like the clappers. There’s no bloat or overhang and the integration between the two drivers is outstanding, the Kyte latching onto time signatures like a terrier with a stick, contributing to the wonderful absence of processing in the sound.

It is also only fair to point out that the ‘stretch’ of the System One makes pretty much any one-box alternative look a little silly. The Planar One can of course be tweaked to give a little more but the more profound realisation I reached after a few days was that you could replace the whole turntable with a Planar 2, 3 or even a 6 and the rest of the system would positively reflect the change.

In fact I would go further and state – having spent a very enjoyable few days testing this theory – that you can change any of the three components that make up the System One with a device that costs up to £1,000 and the other parts of the system will be able to handle and positively reflect that change. Of course, the components you choose don’t have to be Rega ones but the positivity that the System One gives you towards the brand probably won’t hurt one bit when it comes to making choices about how to upgrade.

In many ways though, all thoughts of how far the System One can be taken rather overlook how good it is to start with. Beyond specification, composition or even the format it uses, it offers a listening experience more immediate, more invigorating and more fun than pretty much anything I could picture myself assembling for a similar price.

This is the distillation of what got me utterly hooked on this hobby in the first place – and while, like many, I have moved some way further up the cycle since that initial experience, I can still recognise the spark of addictive brilliance this Rega system possesses.

Cause for celebration

In some ways, I have a slight pang of jealousy for anyone that gets to experience the System One as their first ‘proper’ hi-fi: I suspect that initial burst of listening will be simply sublime. As a means of bringing the Rega experience to a more affordable price point, it succeeds absolutely and Rega should be wholeheartedly congratulated for building it. As a means of keeping a quintessential hi-fi experience affordable, it’s arguably even more successful and it is something that we should celebrate to the rafters for existing at all.

