



# Natural selection

As Rega's classic integrated continues along its evolutionary path, **Chris Ward** finds out if it has what it takes to be the best of breed

**T**here has been a Brio amp in Rega's product lineup for 26 years and the inspiration for the original circuit dates back still further to 1970, so this latest integrated has serious heritage. Brio is defined as "liveliness or vivacity of spirit" and the sound qualities of the original 'clamshell Brio' version of 1991 turned many heads for its musical abilities. I own a clamshell Brio and regularly return to it for its *joie de vivre*. So, this latest 2017 version joins a long line of

evolutionary leaps, meaning that it may have become a very different animal from previous incarnations, or possibly there is something about the ethos and DNA of this entry-level integrated that is resolutely the same? Its slim, half-width profile is sculptural but utterly unfussy. The dark, gently curved fascia is very understated, sporting a discrete red Rega logo, an on/off button, 6.35mm headphone output, input selector with bank of LEDs and a rotary volume control. The input selector

**DETAILS**  
**PRODUCT**  
Rega Brio  
**ORIGIN**  
UK  
**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
5.1kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
216 x 78 x 345mm  
**FEATURES**  
 • Quoted power output: 2x 50W RMS (8ohm)  
 • Inputs: 4x RCA  
 • MM phono stage  
 • Output: 1x RCA  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Rega Research Ltd  
**TELEPHONE**  
01702 333071  
**WEBSITE**  
regaco.uk

button is small and I occasionally push the headphone jack fruitlessly, but all functions are replicated on the remote so this is a minor gripe. Around the back, the Brio caters for a moving-magnet phono input, four line-level inputs, a fixed gain 'record output' and a sturdy pair of speaker binding posts. A phono grounding point is located on the underside of the amp. The features meet the current trend for a rather 'old-school' spec, enabling the connection of a turntable and analogue line signals, but no digital inputs. The designer, Terry Bateman, confirms that Rega's mission was to maximise analogue sound at a sensible price. And while this may suggest a focus on internal qualities, the build and finish of the bodywork is better than ever, made from reassuringly thick, silky aluminium castings with no unsightly fixings. This amp is clearly built to last and a fine testament to the original vintage 'clamshell' Brio I still use today. The remote is simple and basic, but highly functional and better than most.

I connect some cherished Rega R5 floorstanding loudspeakers via Black

Rhodium Foxtrot speaker cables (HFC 412) and my reference Shanling CD-T100 player via Chord Company Shawline interconnects (HFC 412) along with a classic Rega Planar 3 turntable with RB300 tonearm featuring an Origin Live structural upgrade for vinyl spinning duties. From unpacking, the integrated seems to benefit from having a day of running in, after which time it comes on song within five minutes of switch on.

## Sound quality

Playing Keb Mo's cover of *For What It's Worth* on CD is an ideal way to showcase the Brio's virtues. The opening organ, bass and drum groove is effortless and infectious. My feet are tapping within seconds and making notes will have to wait. This is a highly musical little amp. Everything is where it should be; rim shots crack and high hats shimmer with metallic zing, Keb's vocals are warm and rounded, but dripping with rich detail and the bass line is particularly phat and luscious. The soundstage has good width and depth, but it's the totally joined up,

transparent, but above all musical communication of the whole performance that really stands out. A Hammond organ gently ripples in the background as punchy stabs of brass cut through the lush, rhythmic wall of sound. This track may have started as a peace song, but this combo of Keb and Brio is as sultry as it gets.

The quality of the bass here is noteworthy and deserves more explanation. While many manufacturers increasingly seem to aim for a relatively taut, dry bass with the perception of added control, this presentation of the lowest registers feels far more organic and supple. This isn't a quality of reaching deeper; more that the Brio bass quality feels more visceral, with greater flow and a richer bloom. This doesn't mean it has less agility than a drier amp, just that it feels more fluid. By way of an analogy, this is very much a fruit-laden, new-world wine rather than a dry, flinty, French classic. Music is like a building and the foundations need to be just right. For some, this bass quality may feel a tad louche compared with other brands, but the more I listen to this track the more it sounds like real bass and a real band. Some hi-fi can make you feel you're in the crowd watching the band, this makes you feel like you're in the band.

Swapping to vinyl, I spin the Sheffield Lab direct cut of *I've Got The Music In Me* by Thelma Houston and Pressure Cooker. The track starts simply enough and the amp locks straight into the funky seventies groove. The phono stage is admirably quiet and retains all the qualities I've heard from the line-level input. For all its digital know-how, Rega is still a self-confessed analogue addict and I sense that it sets its own bar pretty high for a modestly priced integrated amp phono stage. Thelma's dynamic

voice presses forward out of the plane of the speakers as the piano gives a menacing dark growl while the cymbals and tambourine shine. Backing singers sit back in a deep soundscape and a wall of strident brass creates truly luscious texture. This classic recording gets richer and denser, but the little Brio is never wrong footed, able to tease out each performer, but never losing that sense of a single, joined-up piece of music. Treble is sweet and unfatiguing, the midband is lush but highly

## This amp is clearly built to last and a fine testament to the original Brio

transparent and the bass has a glow and free-flowing, unforced quality. Equally, the amp exhibits valve-like qualities around the sonic picture it paints. The music feels like one performance, rather than a series of spotlit performers, yet you are able to follow any instrument in isolation. Terry Bateman confirms that he still uses a Leak Stereo 20 integrated valve amplifier as a benchmark to aim for, and from knowing that amp well, he has done a sterling job.

Playing the Largo movement from Shostakovich's *Cello Concerto No.2* is very informative. I had wondered whether the Brio's obvious flair for a tune and bassline was less suited to classical music, but far from it. If anything, its ability to portray big pictures and deliver lifelike, voluptuous and flowing bass is a revelation for classical music, doing a better job than many amps around this price (and above). The textures of the solo cello are superb. Tiny details from the drawn bow on strings ▶

## CONNECTIONS



- 1 MM phono input
- 2 Loudspeaker binding posts
- 3 Fixed gain 'record output'
- 4 Four line-level inputs

## Q&A

**Terry Bateman**

Chief electronics engineer, Rega



**CW: What changes have been made in the latest Brio design?**

**TB:** Products continually evolve and I'm always looking at ideas to improve on the previous variant. That said, the Brio is a very synergistic design, which means you have to think carefully when improving the circuitry as you could make a technical improvement that upsets the sonic recipe. In the case of the latest Brio, I took ideas from earlier blueprint prototypes, which weren't used in the previous Brio-R, to create improvements to power supplies and operational amplifiers in the line and phono amplifier.

**How did you go about incorporating the headphone and phono stages?**

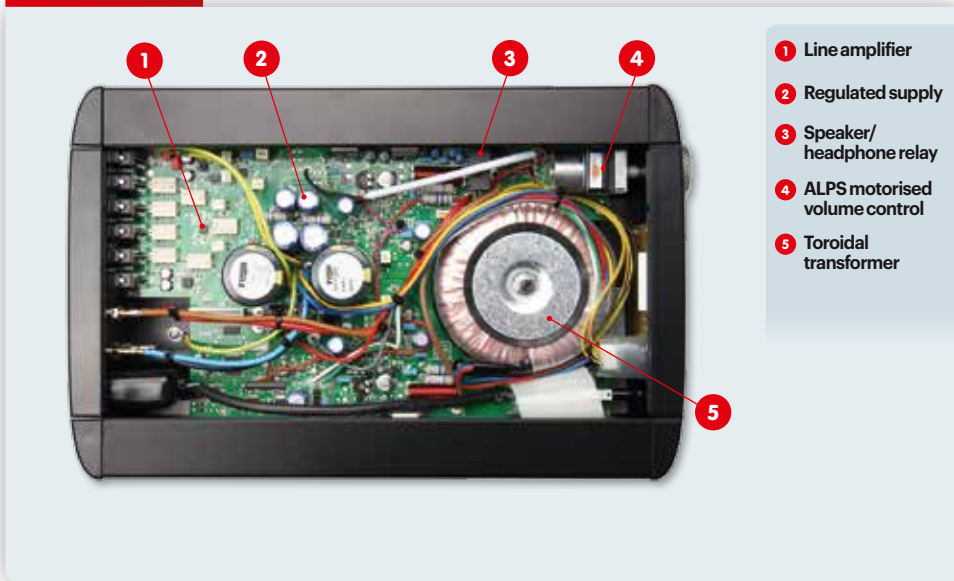
I took the approach that the best amplifier to drive a pair of headphones is the actual power amplifier in the Brio – so we used that. The problem is the switching/muting of the speakers when headphones are plugged in. In the Brio, the jack contacts activate a high-quality relay to disconnect the main speakers.

The phono stage is a two-stage design where the RIAA equalisation is split into two parts and incorporated into the two stages. Careful attention has been paid to low-frequency response, loading and the first stage operational amplifier to get the best performance from most cartridges. Rega has deep understanding of the synergy that exists between the tonearm, cartridge and phono amplifier and this phono stage helps squeeze the most from vinyl.

**How did you achieve the Brio's musical sound?**

It starts with choosing circuits that exhibit good technical and sonic capabilities. Sometimes I pull on ideas gathered building valve guitar amplifiers, where you have to understand how an electronic circuit interacts with an instrument. As for knowing when you've arrived at a musically finished product, it'll be a case of playing a favourite track, then playing another, then another, thinking "Yes, that's a cracking sound", but there's also a feeling you get when it hits the spot!

## CONNECTIONS



- 1 Line amplifier
- 2 Regulated supply
- 3 Speaker/headphone relay
- 4 ALPS motorised volume control
- 5 Toroidal transformer

are clear, yet the notes bloom and sustain their rich tone in a very realistic manner. The movement develops with many deep, dark sweeps from the orchestra, which the Brio presents at full scale with proper brooding menace. The solo cello moves between melding with and jarring against the ensemble while rasping detail from deep bassoons is still distinct. The xylophone and plucked string notes have real cut through, but plenty of ambient air that helps position the instruments

credentials. Conversely speaker designs with overt bass pretensions could feel like too much of a good thing. Suffice to say, my Rega R5s work brilliantly with this Brio amp.

## Conclusion

Some amplifiers tell you what music should sound like. The Brio helps you know what music should feel like. There are amp designs that are more forensic, transcribing greater detail from recordings, but few at this price will make as much musical sense with what they communicate. Equally some competitors may present more clinical sonic vignettes, but the Brio gets the big picture spot on. And don't pigeon hole it as a party animal that makes a bee line for a funky bassline. The Brio would be good value for its line-level amplification alone, but add in an excellent phono stage and headphone driving abilities and it becomes stunning value. Sensibly priced integrated amps are back in vogue, and this one is a cracker ●

## This presentation of the lowest registers feels far more organic and supple

within the orchestra. Timpanis join the piece with aplomb. The drums have proper depth and impact, but never swamp other dynamic details. The Brio comes into its own and the densest sections just make sense. This is a stunning performance with real soul. Again, it's as though the amplifier just 'gets music', able to communicate much of the meaning of the piece, not just the right notes in the correct order. Orchestral works are conveyed superbly as cohesive, nuanced, total performances with the correct sense of scale, drama, light and shade; with deeper instruments and percussion sounding epic, yet properly balanced against the tone of other instruments.

From my experiments of listening to the amplifier with a few different loudspeakers the Brio seems well suited to driving designs that don't always impress for their bass



The **Cyrus ONE (HFC 417)** is a similarly small but mighty proposition for £699. The Brio majors on rhythm, swing and musicality, while the ONE has more direct presentation with tighter bass control, as well as Bluetooth for surprisingly effective digital playback. The style of the two are very different, you may well love one and dislike the other. The **Creek Evolution 50A (HFC 377)** at around £700 is also worth auditioning. It has similar specs, refined musical virtues and an OLED display in a very contemporary full-width case. Lastly, if you like the Brio, you might also consider spending a tad more on Rega's **Elex-R (HFC 420)**, priced at £898.

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Rhythmic, engaging sound; phono stage; build
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Some may find bass too fluid
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent value, highly musical integrated analogue amp that punches above its weight
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

### OVERALL

