



A kind of magic

Rega's latest phono stage makes some of the tech from its flagship sibling available at a lower price point. **Ed Selley** listens in

Trickle down – the concept where a feature or design idea makes its debut at a relatively high point in a model lineup and later makes its way down the range in simplified forms – is one of the most durable underpinnings of the hi-fi industry and is a consistent element of how many manufacturers develop their products. It's probably fair to say that some instances of trickle down are more exciting than others. The one you see here has the potential to be very exciting indeed.

This is because Rega's newly launched AOS MC phono stage is built around a pair of Linear Systems ultra-low noise FET (Field Effect Transistor) transistors. These first debuted in the flagship Aura (*HFC* 446) and mimic the characteristics of the transformer coupled designs it used to employ in its flagship phono stages. The company abandoned

these because the rejection rate of transformers was uncomfortably high and instead went looking for another solution. The FETs mimic the same characteristics of these transformers and their tolerances are such that they automatically pair match, allowing Rega to build a circuit that eliminates bias current flowing in the cart coil so as not to upset the delicate magnetic geometry of the cartridge.

To shave off the amount of budget Rega has been able to here, the number of these pricey devices is reduced from four to two, but to see them at all at this price is notable. This transistor stage is mated to a passive high-frequency part of the RIAA equalisation stage before continuing to a symmetrical, Class A, differential amp with a common base driver stage (which actively handles the low-frequency section of the RIAA curve).

In one key aspect of its functionality, the AOS MC is identical to the Aura.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega AOS MC

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
MC phono stage

WEIGHT
2.9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
220 x 80 x 330mm

FEATURES

- Moving-coil support with capacitance and impedance adjustment
- RCA in and outputs

DISTRIBUTOR
Rega Research

WEBSITE
rega.co.uk

This is a moving-coil only phono stage with no provision for running a moving-magnet cartridge through it. In the context of Rega's range of amps and turntables, this makes a fair degree of sense as its more affordable integrated amps have internal MM phono stages while the models that don't are more price comparative with Rega turntables that use MC carts. Outside of this ecosystem, however, the AOS MC is less flexible than some equivalently priced designs.

It is important to note that the AOS MC offers fine tuning for moving-coil designs. It supports impedances between 70 and 400ohm, and capacitance can be adjusted between 1,000 and 4,300pF. There are also two

Few phono stages can match the speed and cohesion that the AOS MC offers

gain settings: a 63dB one for most 'normal' designs and a 69dB level for very low outputs. This means that (like the Aura) the AOS isn't a perfect match for the moving-coil designs built around a 1kOhm load that are becoming more common, but it will still handle a wide spread of designs.

The front panel dials of the Aura have been dispensed with in favour of dip switches on the rear. I'm not a huge fan of dip switches, but these are at least fairly easy to adjust and Rega has printed the legend on the rear panel so there is no need to dig

the manual out. Connections are RCA only as Rega is not convinced by XLR in a domestic setting.

The casework is half-width and is roughly equivalent to the power supply unit of the Planar 10 (HFC 477). Where the Aura feels unequivocally high-end, the AOS MC is a little more prosaic but it's still solid and confidence inspiring. The soft-touch power button and auto power off function are interesting – the latter being something I've never seen on a Rega device before.

Sound quality

I use the AOS MC with our resident Vertere MG-1 MkII Magic Groove (HFC 506) turntable outputting to a Chord Electronics CPM3350 integrated amp and Kudos Titan 505 (HFC 451) standmounts. As the Vertere Mystic (HFC 499) that is generally fitted to the MG-1 has a rather higher impedance than the AOS MC supports, the excellent Analog

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Relax EX300 (HFC 540) is used instead. From the start of listening, the AOS MC gives a significant taste of what the Aura is capable of.

Give it the sumptuous *Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet Vol II* by Fink, and the way Fin Greenall's vocals emerge from the background of music and audience noise is captivating. He's not over emphasised or given unnatural scale by the Rega, he's simply and unconditionally your main focus.

Impressively, this vibrancy is not conditional on feeding the AOS MC a supply of well-mastered 'analogue' pressings. The wholly electronic *Public Works & Utilities* by Warrington Runcorn New Town Development



If you have a single moving-coil cart with an impedance no higher than 400ohm, the AOS MC is capable of higher performance for £500 less than Cyrus' 40 PPA (HFC 531). It can match the astonishingly low noise level of the Cyrus and manages to sound a little sweeter and more dynamic. The caveat, of course, is that the Cyrus can handle a wider range of MC designs as well as moving-magnet (with an extra group of settings for high output moving-coils too). It does this over four inputs with onscreen adjustment. All of this makes the Cyrus pretty much untouchable, but if you know you have a cartridge it will support, the AOS MC could wind up being a better bet.



Plan still has a feeling of energy and presence that ensures these dense and brooding works are delivered with a slightly human edge to them. Give the Rega the altogether more joyous *Echo* by My Baby, and it revels in the pure happiness of the music, capturing the sheer pleasure the bandmates possess when playing. The closing track *Lightning* also gives the AOS MC the chance to show off some genuinely convincing bass. You can buy phono stages with more low-end shove than this, but few can match the speed and cohesion the AOS MC offers.

Swapping the Analog Relax for a Rega Apheta 3 (HFC 479), sees the AOS MC faithfully capture the Apheta's greater immediacy and propulsive force over the EX300. Some of the lushness and vibrancy of the Analog Relax is lost, but the AOS' natural ability to add some of this itself means it avoids some of the leanness that I have occasionally experienced from the Apheta 3 in the past. As you might expect, if you have a Rega cartridge, the AOS MC is a very happy partner.

Is it as good as the Aura? No... but this is perhaps to be expected for less

than half the price. Compared with the Aura's quite extraordinary ability to help generate a believable stereo image, the AOS MC has to be content simply being very good. Those live Fink tracks are airy and free of congestion, but lack the cinematic scale that the Aura bakes into its presentation. The flagship is still a supernatural experience at times where the AOS MC has to make do with merely being excellent.

Conclusion

Make no mistake, though, the AOS MC really is excellent. By focusing on a narrower specification than some of its key rivals, Rega has been able to capture enough of the essence of what made listening to the Aura such a revelatory experience when it showed up for review – at less than half the price. It's a perfect fit in the current Rega ecosystem, but the talents it possesses are likely to see it win many friends outside this product group too. Trickle down doesn't always deliver on the promises made, but Rega has done a fine job of keeping to these principles and come up with something of a bargain as a result ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Engaging and fluent performance; well made; compact
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Moving-coil only; dip switches
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Rega successfully captures some of the magic of its flagship phono at a very keen price point with excellent results
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL

