Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Partners in rhyme

Rega has introduced an entry-level moving-coil cartridge and a partnering phono stage. ***Ed Selley*** gets his groove on

Not that long ago, Rega cartridges were almost the industry equivalent of a 'cosmological constant', as models enjoyed long lives while rival cartridges were updated or replaced. Since the introduction of its first moving-coil cartridge around 10 years ago with the original Apheta, the Southend-on-Sea company has been making comparatively more regular product updates with the recent Apheta 2 (reviewed *HFC* 425), which in turn spawned the flagship £2,998 Aphelion moving-coil cartridge. The new Ania turns the company's attention to entry-level moving-coil design and is around half the price of the £998 Apheta 2. Key to its design is the same principle of a suspension-free assembly that does without the rubber mounts that Rega says stretch and decay over time and alter the sonic properties of the cartridge. To do this, the coil assembly has to be small enough to avoid needing such a mount and the Ania uses the same very small cross-shaped winding as the Apheta 2. The major difference in terms of the playback hardware is the inclusion of a simpler elliptical stylus.

The other key difference between the Ania and previous Rega MC designs is the body. Instead of aluminium, it makes use of a single moulded piece of PPS plastic – a highly rigid polymer/glass combination called Polyphenylene Sulphide. The shape is almost exactly the same as the metal units and has the same clear guard to protect the delicate internals. Also retained is Rega's traditional three-point fixing, which when used in an arm that supports such an attachment provides automatic alignment and a more secure fastening. Around the back, the widely spaced and marked pins make attaching the cartridge tags a simple business.

With an output of 0.4mV, the Ania is in keeping with other moving-coil cartridges and should work with a variety of MC phono stages without issue. In Rega's case, however, the Ania is not a perfect fit for its existing phono stage range as its more affordable units are MM designs, while its MC-capable Aria offering is designed to partner the Apheta 2 cartridge. To solve this, the Ania is joined by the Fono MC, which is a dedicated phono stage specifically priced to partner the new cartridge.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega Ania

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Moving-coil cartridge

WEIGHT
6g

FEATURES
- ABS body with clear protector plates
- Suspension-free cantilever
- Elliptical stylus

DISTRIBUTOR
Rega Research Ltd

TELEPHONE
01702 333071

WEBSITE
rega.co.uk

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega Fono MC

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Moving-coil phono stage

WEIGHT
640g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
178 x 45 x 150mm

FEATURES
- Adjustable capacitance, impedance and gain
- FET output stage
- Wall-wart power supply

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The specification of the Fono MC is more ambitious than simply partnering it with inhouse cartridge designs, though. Built around a low-noise FET circuit, it promises a quiet performance even when being called upon to deliver higher gain and unusually for a model under £300, it also offers comprehensive adjustment for gain, capacitance and impedance loading. This means it should also be an effective partner for a wider selection of cartridges.

Visually, the Fono MC is an elegant device and finished to an extremely high standard. In keeping with most affordable phono stages, the power supply is a wall-wart type that proves completely silent in use. Even when placed on top of a wide variety of equipment, there's no sign of hum or other interference from nearby devices. It's easy to set up, too. The dip switches for adjusting the settings

Individually, these are two very strong models in their respective categories

are easy to access, and pretty much the only criticism I can make of the layout is that the input and output connections are positioned a little too closely together.

As a £750 package, this is an impressive pairing. The Ania isn't as elegant looking as its bigger brothers, but it is well finished and even if you aren't using it in a three-screw mounting, it isn't hard to get aligned. Rega recommends a tracking weight of between 1.75 and 2g and setting this with a Rega Atlas stylus force gauge (see page 117), I discover that best results are gained towards the upper end of the spectrum. One final, and very welcome aspect of the specification is that re-tipping the Ania comes in at a very reasonable £249, which makes long-term use look quite cost effective.

Sound quality

The Ania is fitted to a Technics SL-1200GR turntable (reviewed p46) mounted to an Ortofon LH-2000 universal headshell (£55) and connected in the first instance to a Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage (*HFC* 408). The most noticeable aspect of the performance is the speed and immediacy that was so apparent with Rega's Apheta 2 when reviewed in last month's *Group Test*. Listening to Talking Heads' *Stop Making Sense*, the performance of

Burning Down The House is hugely energetic. The drums have enormous levels of drive and energy and the definition of the individual strikes is superb. The bass extension isn't as deep as the similarly priced Audio-Technica AT33PTG/II (*HFC* 402), but it is unquestionably more agile.

There is also a fractionally greater warmth to the Ania over its bigger brother that – depending on what you listen to – can be very welcome. With the decidedly edgy pressing of Placebo's *Meds*, the Ania makes an excellent job of *Infra-Red* and avoids sounding thin or harsh at any stage. Some of the fine detail that can be found by the more advanced stylus profile of the Apheta 2 is missing, but at the more terrestrial price of the Ania the performance is deeply impressive. No less important is that good recordings still demonstrate their innate quality. The Ania gets stuck into Dead Can Dance's *Rakim* with aplomb, delivering a huge, effortlessly three-dimensional and entirely believable performance.

Swapping the Cyrus for Rega's Fono MC is worthwhile too. It can't match the astonishingly low noise floor of the Cyrus – few phono stages can – but it is commendably quiet at idle. The lower of the two gain settings is most effective with the Ania cartridge and this will still provide reasonable headroom in most systems. The Fono MC is able to deliver that warm yet immediate presentation that the Ania offers and it produces extremely good tonality for a relatively affordable design.

Most significantly, though, when used as a pair there is a fundamental joy to the presentation of these two devices that is extremely hard not to be very fond of. They pull you into the flow of the music in a way that

The Ania delivers a huge, effortlessly three-dimensional performance

even rather more expensive pairings than this can struggle to do. The duo seems unconcerned by what you choose to play, concentrating simply on delivering an accurate but consistently enjoyable performance.

Trying the Fono MC with a Goldring Legacy moving-coil on the end of an Avid Ingenium turntable (*HFC* 379) shows that many of these fundamental qualities are present all of the time. The very low (0.2mV) output of the Legacy requires the higher gain setting, which is fractionally noisier but still very impressive for the asking price. The slightly darker tonal presentation of the Legacy cartridge is well captured as is its excellent bass response, highlighting the impressive capabilities of the Fono MC. It seems likely that unless you're hoping to partner it with a cartridge that has exotic specifications, the Fono MC is very capable indeed.

The Fono MC demonstrates impressive flexibility at the price

Conclusion

Individually, these are two very strong models in their respective categories. The Ania is a tremendous moving-coil design at a great price that delivers on the speed and immediacy associated with this type of cartridge and is likely to win over many fans. The Fono MC phono stage is – if anything – even more impressive. It combines superb basic performance with unusual flexibility for a design at this price, making it a go-to design at or anywhere near the asking price.

As a pairing costing £750, it punches well above its weight and should work convincingly with a wide variety of different systems. Component synergy has long been part of the Rega appeal, and this combo is one of its finest examples yet ●

CONNECTIONS

1. RCA input
2. Turntable earthing post
3. RCA line-level output
4. Dip switches for load and gain settings

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: ANIA

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
FEATURES ★★★★☆

LIKE: Rich, spacious and engrossing sound; easy to mount; friendly specification

DISLIKE: Fractional lack of bass weight; looks a bit plain

WE SAY: A welcome affordable MC with plenty of trademark Rega virtues

OVERALL ★★★★½

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: FONO MC

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Superb performance; flexible setup and compact; handsome appearance

DISLIKE: Connections too close together

WE SAY: An outstanding affordable MC phono stage that delivers superb performance

OVERALL ★★★★★