

TURNTABLES

There's little to beat the ceremony of listening to your music on vinyl. These decks will make you appreciate your discs all the more

Elys 2 Cartridge

The cartridge has three-point mounting - a great benefit, as alignment is assured so you get minimal distortion.

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Best turntable £400-£800

Rega RP3/Elys2 £550

Another year and yet again it's Rega's RP3/Elys 2 that picks-up our top turntable Award. This is the RP3's third consecutive Product of the Year win, and that follows four years of its predecessor also picking up wins.

Like every Rega deck we've reviewed, the RP3 is a simple design. It has little in the way of suspension, bar a trio of rubber feet, and is as manual as these things get. Want to change speed? You'll have to move the drive belt from one step of the motor pulley to the next by hand.

The lack of suspension means the RP3 is a little fussy about positioning and support used. Keep the support light and rigid, and well away from the speakers for the best results.

The RP3's innate simplicity is appealing, but it's not the reason Rega decks tend to do well in our reviews. That's all down to the excellent engineering and performance.

This is a carefully conceived and beautifully engineered deck that has evolved over decades. Any rough edges were smoothed away years ago.

The RP3 may look just like previous offerings but look closely and you'll see the plinth features bracing between the arm base and main bearing, and the long-running RB300 arm has been given a gentle make-over.

You can buy this turntable without a cartridge (at £75 less), but we wouldn't. The Elys 2 moving magnet cartridge is a good, solid design that works seamlessly with the rest of the package. It doesn't matter if it's the complex electronic music of Radiohead, or the jazz of Miles Davis, this deck has the insight, timing and dynamic discrimination to impress.

This is a product that puts the music first. If you want to analyse the recording, the RP3 will oblige, but it won't be long before you just sit back and enjoy the music. It's what Rega's decks have been doing for years.

Best turntable £800+

Rega RP6/Exact £1000

What if you like the simplicity of the RP3 but want even greater performance? The answer is this RP6/Exact combination. Its visual similarity to the cheaper product might introduce some doubts about value for money. Right up until you start listening.

This is a fast and agile-sounding package that delivers loads of detail without emphasising the fact. There are obvious gains in transparency and definition over the cheaper RP3, though the sonic character of the two decks remains consistent.

In full flow, the RP6 is a magnificently engaging turntable that's as happy charging along to Michael Jackson's *Thriller* as it is delivering large-scale symphonies such as Holst's *Mars*.

The package's wide-ranging dynamics and sure-footed sense of rhythm make it a real treat to listen to. Tonally, things are even enough, and soundstaging is suitably precise.

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Most importantly, this Rega organises the mass of information it digs up into a musically entertaining whole. We've heard rivals that deliver similar amounts of information, but none that does it in such an attractive manner.

There are many engineering differences between the two Rega decks. The RP6's glass platter has a greater concentration of mass towards its rim, which increases inertia (so helping speed stability) without adding too much to the overall weight. Rega engineers have long felt excessive mass spoils sound quality.

Electronic speed change is a plus

Other upgrades include a precision-machined aluminium top plate that sits between the platter and the sub-platter, and the inclusion of an outboard power supply. This outboard supply also gives the RP6 an electronic speed change - something we're always happy to see.

The plinth and arm designs are much the same as the cheaper model, and none the worse for that. Both are well proven designs that have

been gently evolved over decades. You can buy the turntable without Rega's Exact moving magnet cartridge for £800, but we wouldn't. The package works so well that there's little gain by going mix and match.

Put it all together and the RP6/Exact package remains unbeaten at this price level and deserves yet another Best Buy Award.



Power is off-board

The separate power supply (not pictured) controls the speed of the deck electronically. It also makes the sound better.

ACCESSORIES

Don't skimp on those crucial, behind-the-scenes components that can help you get the best out of your system

Quality under the skin

Rivals might look more glamorous, but the 14/4 was designed to be practical more than showy, and it's a design that's paid off.

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Best speaker cable

AudioQuest FLX-SLiP 14/4 £5.80/m

Last year we hailed the AudioQuest FLX-SLiP 14/4 as the new sheriff in town. If winning the Product of the Year Award was the 14/4 stating its intent to rule, then this year shows it returning to its kingdom and brushing off any and all contenders as it continues its reign.

Elaborate metaphors aside, what this AudioQuest speaker cable does is rather simple yet hard to achieve: it reveals the dynamism and finesse inherent in our hi-fi set-up, regardless of the style of music we're playing.

The FLX and SLiP of the slightly cumbersome title refer to the 14/4's alleged flexibility and the ease with which the cable can slip through walls (thanks to its braided cable ends). While we didn't expect to make much use of this in our hi-fi set-up, these qualities are rather helpful, navigating tight corners without much difficulty.

Nothing has changed since last year, so everything we loved about the 14/4 is still there, not least the way it makes our reference system sound enthusiastic, balanced and taut, with deep bass and a rich quality of treble that's unhampered by splashiness or hardness.

Natural and timely

The system's midrange frequencies emerge with a natural tone and we never felt the timing was off, the 14/4 conveying all the punch, agility and tightness inherent in the set-up. Spin Tortoise's debut album and the sound is balanced and well-organised, with all the music's rhythmic grip in evidence, and leading edges rendered with precision and grace.

It all comes together superbly; nothing is stifled here as recordings sound open and clear. The best thing we can say about the AudioQuest FLX-SLiP is that it just gets out of the way and lets you enjoy the music.

Best analogue interconnect

Atlas Element Integra £45/1m

Physically, these interconnects are not as flashy as some but considering they'll be behind your hi-fi kit connecting the musical dots, we don't mind.

With these in our system, the bass was supple and the midrange transparent, a wide soundstage and snappy percussion being stand-out features. They're also not that fussy about partnering equipment.

Cable wiring is often the missing link in taking a good hi-fi system and allowing it to shine. Choose the Element Integra and your speakers will thank you.



Best phono stage

Rega Fono MM Mk2 £200

The MM Mk2 costs twice as much as its Rega stablemate - and last year's winner - the Mini A2D. Connect it to a decent turntable though, and you'll discover a powerful, punchy sound. The wide-open soundstage gets the best from sparse recordings, while that bottom-end power, coupled with great dynamics, ensures that tracks have presence and rhythm. Treble notes are crisp and generous too.

The Mini A2D impressed us, but the weight and scale of the Mk2 justifies the extra outlay. If you want to hear your vinyl at its best, look no further.



Best equipment rack

Atacama Eris Eco 5.0 (4-shelf) £460

Racks don't actively add anything to improve sound. They just control resonances and reduce vibrations, allowing your system to perform at its best. This one's a modular design with 40mm-thick bamboo shelves; our example



had four but you can add more.

We found that whatever we placed on the Eris sounded more agile, detailed and dynamic than any similarly priced alternatives. Bass is better defined too, and there's no shortage of attack to music.

Best speaker stand

Custom Design FS104 Signature £200

Never underestimate the importance of having solid foundations for your hi-fi equipment - speakers need support to reach their true potential.

This is the third consecutive year that the elegant FS104s have won this

Award - we can't find anything else that allows our kit to perform with such control and precision. Once mounted on these, our reference speakers sounded clearer, more agile, punchier and more able to dig out a good amount of fine detail.

