

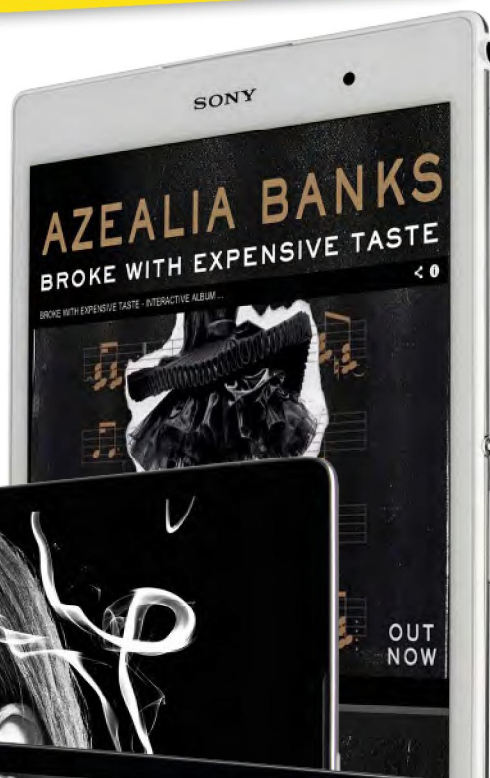
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SOUND AFFECTS

We cut to the heart of hi-fi by testing some of the best stereo amplifiers on the market. Which will come top of the pile?

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The driving force in any hi-fi system, stereo amplifiers are always a hotly contested category in the *What Hi-Fi?* Awards. This year was no different, with 2014 seeing a trio of new winners. The new Rega Elex-R was one of them, dethroning the Naim Nait 5si to claim the name as the best amp £800-1500. Here, we put the two up against each other again to go all twelve rounds. Will the Naim's full star-set remain untouched?

The 2013 and 2014 Award winners are joined by the 2012 amp champ, too - the Cyrus 6a has managed to keep hold of its five stars in every group test it has graced during the past two years, so can it do this same here? And will the previously unseen Creek Audio Evolution 50A shine enough to shake things up? The answers are only a flick of a page away...



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Rega Elex-R

£900

★★★★★



Rega's latest mid-range amp isn't much to look at but it has made quite an entrance: the Elex-R received a glowing five-star review before making off with a 2014 Award as 'Best amplifier £800-£1500'. The question is, does it have the legs to sit pretty at the top for the long run? If this latest revisit is anything to go by, we'd say 'yes'.

It certainly has the workings of a great amp, borrowing from two of Rega's other Award-winning models. It uses its much-loved smaller sibling, the Brio-R (£480), as a base and borrows circuit elements from the brilliant higher-end Elicit-R (£1600). The result? Another exceptional entry, and one that shines in this mid-range price bracket.

The Elex-R doesn't stray from Rega's typical sonic character: fast, agile and as musical as they come at this level, it laps up the rhythmic clapping beat and caffeinated pace of Macklemore and Ryan Lewis' *Can't Hold Us*.

Disciplined enthusiasm

Its up-for-it, hearty delivery has the muscle and drive to charge through any song we throw at it, as well as having the refinement and discipline to keep the presentation smooth and controlled.

The Elex-R's faithful reproduction of music is nothing short of stunning. There's detail on tap, the Rega revealing a level of subtlety that'll pique your

interest whatever the music. It's as happy picking out finer threads of detail in the convoluted sections of Hans Zimmer's *Mountains* from the *Interstellar* soundtrack - often the first to be overlooked by less scrupulous amps - as it is unveiling variation in dense electric guitar notes in Band of Horses' *NW Apt.*

There's an unmatched level of vocal expression. Nina Simone comes through with a newfound sense of rawness and realism in her rendition of *I Put A Spell On You*. The Creek Audio Evolution 50A nears this level of midrange transparency, but the Rega better captures the nuances in Simone's deep, guttural voice - and with greater solidity.

The Elex-R demonstrates authority and scale better than anything we've heard at this price, including the powerhouse Naim Nait 5si (£925). We've always been fans of the Naim's robust delivery, but the Rega takes things even further.

Dynamic performance is equally enthralling. The Rega revels in the ebbs and flows of the jazzy ballad, proving a touch more agile than the Naim. Its far-reaching range never curbs trumpets and horns, allowing them to soar with real enthusiasm.

Tonally the Rega sits on the lean side of neutral, so a little care with matching wouldn't go amiss. Paired with rich, solid-sounding speakers, such as the

Q Acoustic Concept 40s (£1000), or B&W's more neutral 683 S2s (£1100), it feels right at home.

Traditional values

If it's a traditional amp you're after, you can't go wrong with the Elex-R. It has ample connections (although there's no headphone output) and a terrific MM phono stage that's happy making the most of class-leading £1000 turntables.

Build quality is first-rate, but the remote is disappointing: it's functional but insubstantial, and it lacks the solidity of rival handsets.

You know you've got a good amp on your hands when all you can think of to fault is the remote. Performance-wise, the Elex-R takes things to another level. There are good and great amps around the £1000 mark but put any up against it and odds are the Rega will give us a wider window into any piece of music. We wouldn't be surprised if this were still true a year from now.

Rating ★★★★★

FOR Expressive; lively yet organised delivery; hugely revealing; good sense of power and drive; good phono stage; solid build

AGAINST Poor remote

VERDICT A hugely talented amp with the drive, agility and rhythmic precision of a class-leader

Like the best kit, this Rega is modest about its abilities. That plain frontage hides an amplifier of exceptional verve, great authority and scrupulous fidelity.

TEST VERDICT**THE WINNER****Rega Elex-R £900**

★★★★★



Three Award-winners (one current, two previous) and an impressive newcomer – rarely do we have a test with such a wealth of credentials. Yet the Rega Elex-R manages to top them all.

Our newcomer, the Creek, came in as underdog and held its own with four stars. If a system needs an energy boost, the Evolution 50A will give it an espresso hit.

The Cyrus 6a earned four stars, too. For the first time in a test, it's no longer able to compete with the Rega Elex-Rs of the sub-£1000 amp world. Yet it still has a whole lot to shout about.

In terms of Rega-versus-Naim, in our 2014 Awards head-to-head tussle we had a Rega victory. This time around the result is the same. Features-wise the two are

fairly evenly matched: the Naim gets one over on the Rega with a headphone output (and a good one at that), and the Rega responds with an excellent phono stage. No doubt these features will sway some when choosing between them.

But when it comes to performance, it's a little less down to preference. The Elex-R is simply a fantastic performer, outclassing its closest rival with a smidgeon more transparency, dynamism and even the Nait 5si's speciality: power.

Nevertheless, the Nait still has all three qualities in spades, and retains its five-stars. It's a step-up from the Creek and Cyrus for authority, drive and dynamics, and justifies the extra cash. It remains a fine buy at the price.

Facts & figures**Creek Evolution 50A**
£800 ★★★★★

Power output (watts) 55 • DAC no • Line level in 5 • MM phono in 0 • MC phono in 0 • USB in 0 • Tape loops 0 • Pre-amp out no • Speaker outputs 1 • Tone controls no • Headphone out yes • Remote control yes • Finishes 2 • Dimensions 6 x 43 x 8 •

**Cyrus 6a**
£800 ★★★★★

Power output (watts) 40 • DAC no • Line level in 6 • MM phono in 0 • MC phono in 0 • USB in 0 • Tape loops 0 • Pre-amp out 2 • Speaker outputs 2 • Tone controls no • Headphone out yes • Remote control yes • Finishes 2 • Dimensions 7 x 22 x 36 •

**Naim Nait 5si**
£925 ★★★★★

Power output (watts) 60 • DAC no • Line level in 4 • MM phono in 0 • MC phono in 0 • USB in 0 • Tape loops 0 • Pre-amp out 0 • Speaker outputs 0 • Tone controls no • Headphone out yes • Remote control yes • Finishes 1 • Dimensions 7 x 43 x 30 •

**Rega Elex-R**
£900 ★★★★★

Power output (watts) 72 • DAC no • Line level in 4 • MM phono in 1 • MC phono in 0 • USB in 0 • Tape loops 1 • Pre-amp out 1 • Speaker outputs 0 • Tone controls no • Headphone out no • Remote control yes • Finishes 1 • Dimensions: 8 x 43 x 33 •

SYSTEM BUILDER

Perfect partners to bring the best out of the Rega Elex-R

**Speakers****B&W 683 S2 £1150** ★★★★★

If you can accommodate them, these towers will blow you away with their scale and power.

**Turntable****Rega RP6/Exact £1000** ★★★★★

It may have just missed out on an Award this year, but sonically the RP6 is a brilliant match.

**Bluetooth DAC****Arcam miniBlink £90** ★★★★★

A simple and affordable way to stream music to your system.

Total build £3140

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