

## The only way is Essex

Rega's latest integrated is a powerful beast that looks a bit brutal but it has a fun side too, as **Jason Kennedy** discovers

**T**wo years ago Southend's finest manufacturer of audio equipment introduced the Brio-R amplifier, a half-width device that proved you can build an extremely entertaining amplifier for a sensible price in the UK. That component was based on a power amplifier that Rega's designer Terry Bateman had created in an attempt to emulate the rightly much-vaunted qualities of the Leak Stereo 20 valve amplifier. Being a solid-state design it didn't sound like the Stereo 20 I used to use, but it had much of its musicality, which is the essence of a good amplifier.

At this year's Bristol Show Rega introduced a bigger version of this design called Elicit-R, the suffix in both cases indicating the presence of remote control – a relatively new thing to Rega amps. This full-width design has a bigger power amplifier with a specified output of 105W into 80Ohms. This is produced by an emulated Class A driver stage built around a complementary pair of Darlington transistors, the output devices themselves are Class A/B as is usually the case. The preamp circuit is a discrete FET-based design that Bateman feels has a particular synergy with the power amplifier, it's

what he calls a “synergistic feeling (that) goes back to the very early days of playing with audio circuits!”

The Elicit-R is built into a very sturdy steel case with heatsinking flanking either side, it's not the prettiest of amplifiers to be frank, but feels like it's built to last. It also has a wide selection of in and output socketry on the back panel, these include a line or moving magnet phono input, if you don't have a turntable it functions as a line input, a lower noise input according to the spec. There are four other line inputs, a record input and two record outputs – for use with a headphone amp perhaps – preamp out and a direct input that bypasses the preamp. This is useful if you want to incorporate the Elicit-R into a home cinema set-up or simply use it as a power amp.

The front panel confused me by having a button next to the input indicators that appeared to do nothing, then I discovered that if you press the button then rotate the knob it does what you want, press it again to return to volume control. The volume control itself is a stepped attenuator type that offers one decibel steps, a usefully fine graduation that can also be controlled by the remote handset. This in marked contrast to the Brio-R where it's very difficult to

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Rega Elicit-R

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
13kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
432 x 82 x 340mm

**FEATURES**

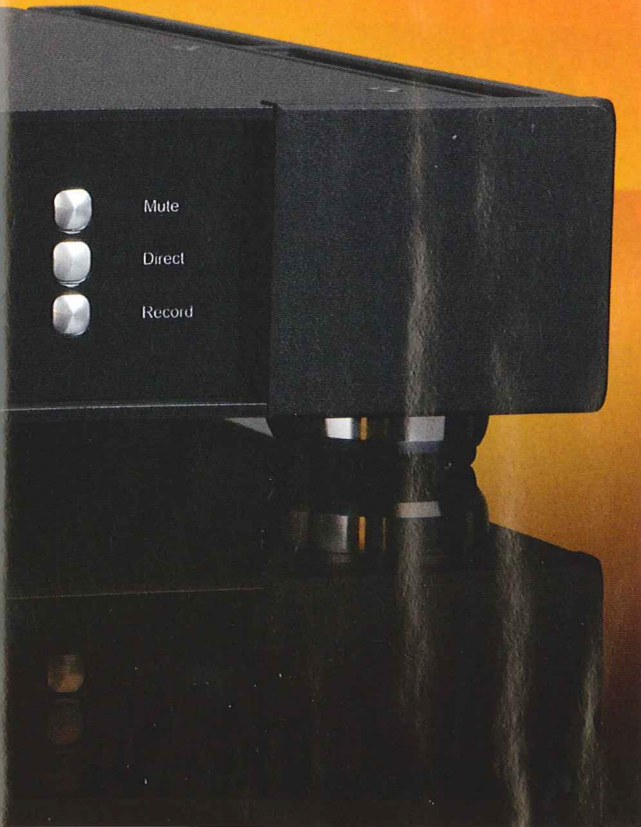
- Quoted power output: 105W/80Ohms, 162W/40Ohms
- Line inputs: 5x RCA, direct, record, MM phono input
- Outputs: 2 x record, pre-amp
- Solaris system remote

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Rega Research

**TELEPHONE**  
01702 333071

**WEBSITE**  
rega.co.uk





### Sound quality

The Elicit-R takes a while to fully warm up, it feels warm to the touch after 30 minutes, but doesn't really start sounding its best until it's been working for another half an hour. Initially it sounds a little bit forward and edgy, but this calms down with use and you can crank it without restraint. It's a powerful amplifier with lots of low-end grip for an integrated at this price, it's not the smoothest around but Regas never are, rather it defines leading edges with precision and verve. If you enjoy transients it's a highly entertaining amp, and I do like a bit of definition in that department. It's what reveals the precise tempo of the music and shows exactly how members of a band are interacting, how what each one plays meshes with the rest of the group. This is easy to do if there's only two or three people playing mellow stuff, the sort of stuff you hear in many a hi-fi demo, but once things begin to get busy, components that are weak in this department begin to come unstuck. Not so the Elicit-R, which remains clear cut under pretty much all circumstances.

I particularly like the way it reveals the power in bass instruments such as the cello in the Alban Berg Quartet, not the most weighty instrument admittedly, but one that underpins the menace in the Beethoven pieces being played. You get all of the texture but not as much of the tonal richness of the instrument as you might with some alternatives. This is not a particularly dry-sounding amp but neither is it particularly fluid, rather it communicates the essence of the composition in a clearly paced and revealing manner. It does so with more finesse than a Brio-R and more power too, but both share the same innate musicality and both are capable of sweeping you up in the

music and carrying your mind to another place. A place where the imagination is sparked and you can begin to understand what the person that made that music is trying to say.

Imaging is quite distinctive on the Elicit-R, for the most part the image is thrown forward of the speakers which is the opposite to what I usually experience, it doesn't stop the system producing 3D images, but does limit their depth quite obviously. I tried bypassing the preamp section by using the direct input to the power amp, controlling volume with the Resolution Audio Cantata DAC and considerably more depth was revealed, as indeed was space in general. Which suggests that this is a

### Detail is not in short supply and there is musical thrill power in abundance

preamp-related characteristic. Some recordings deliver large amounts of space with a standard line input. With the recent Naim Label release Kairos 4tet, it conveys the space in the studio with ease and places the band in the room such that it sounds strong, dynamic and alive. A powerful experience that proves the Elicit-R can deliver the imaging goods when the source is replete with it. Another title from the same label's recent 24/192 high-definition remasters – Laurence Hobgood's *When the Heart Dances* – is less visceral and somewhat easier listening as a result, what it does convey is the quality of musicianship and of composition by delivering music that is hard to ignore for all the right reasons.

I use the Elicit-R with two speakers, the Bowers & Wilkins 802 Diamond and PMC's twenty.22 standmount. ▶

make small volume changes with the remote. The handset is Rega's new Solaris design, a fully festooned system remote that rather confusingly has two sets of input buttons, alongside numerous other CD/DAC related functions and some rather cryptically marked buttons for that added air of mystery.

Once you have realised which buttons operate the amp it's really very straightforward. Most of the time volume is the only important control, but mute, direct and mono come in useful as well.

**The looks might not suit all tastes, but the Rega is built to last**

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 Earthing point for turntables
- 2 Mains inlet
- 3 Speaker cable terminals
- 4 Preamp output
- 5 Direct input
- 6 MM phono input



## Q&A

### Terry Bateman

Rega head of electronic engineering



**JK: What's different between this and previous Rega designs?**

**TB:** The Elicit II had its roots in the Elex, and the reason for using the Brio-r 'type' power amp circuit was twofold; one, the good sonic qualities of the circuit and the second, the fact it's a production-friendly circuit more suited to the Elicit II.

**What are the origins of the Elicit-R?**

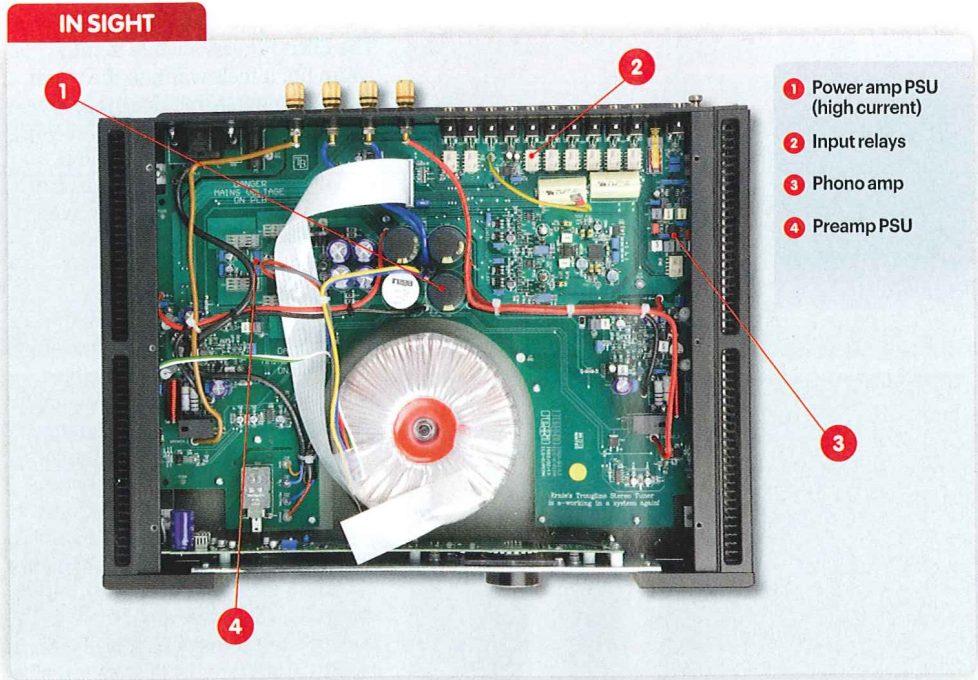
The original 'blueprint' amplifier was made some time ago and I had it in the workshop for a few years before I suggested using it in the Brio-R. The cost of the circuit in the Brio-R is only minor where I replaced high-performance voltage references with simpler devices and simplified the power supply. There were some other minor changes where I used less exotic transistors in the 'front end' and not pushing the performance by using a higher grade of coupling/decoupling capacitors etc.

**If this is the blueprint why did the Brio-R come first?**

It was a simple case of what was needed first, and that was a replacement for the Brio 3. The Brio-R power amp is nearer the original Brio 3 circuit, whereas the Elicit-R is nearer the original Elex/Elicit circuit so the Brio-R circuit had to earn its stripes before we could look at using it in the Elicit-R or similar. But seeing as I'd already done the Stereo 20 comparison using the 'blueprint design' and felt it was good, I was in no doubt about its capability.

**What about the preamp stage?**

I feel there is synergy between the Brio-R 'type' power amp circuit and the discrete FET-based preamp circuit used in the Brio-R and Elicit-R. This feeling goes back to the very early days of playing with audio circuits (I was about 13!) and some circuits just worked better together – it's hard to quantify! Maybe at the age of 13 I was unaffected by the 'theoretical' electronics of the circuit and I was going by sheer instinct? Now I can take some of the instinct and the theoretical electronics and design a product like the Elicit-R, which I was not able to do at 13.



**HOW IT COMPARES**

When it comes to hardcore British integrated amplifiers the name to beat is Naim, at this price it has the Nait XS (£1,525), which has six line inputs and the potential for power supply upgrades but a relatively low 60W per channel rating. I would expect the Nait XS to sound more fluid and smooth than the Elicit-R, but to lack its transparency and low end grip. Roksan's Caspian M2 (£1,695) is an 85W design that's extremely natural and tuneful and will appeal to many music lovers, it also looks nicer than the Rega. Finally, there's Arcam's A38. It lacks the timing precision of the alternatives above, but does offer lots of features, great build and plenty of power.

The bigger 802s show off the amp's low-end power and extension a treat, when Keith Jarrett's foot taps the stage at the beginning of *Pt VII* on his *Testament* live album you can tell it's a big platform. Thankfully he stops fairly soon and concentrates on the keys to totally engaging effect. The piano itself sounds as solid and precise in its character as one expects of a concert grand, a rigid yet reverberant instrument with serious mass. When a pianist of Jarrett's calibre is in the zone a system like this can deliver a totally enthralling result.

The PMC is a more sensibly priced speaker for the amp (£1,970), but provides a similarly gripping sound that while lower on finesse and bass extension does the all important job of showing the character of the music, as well as that most critical quality; timing. You know exactly when things happen, when the stick hits the snare and the plectrum strikes the string, you may not get the full spatial picture nor the quietest of low-level sounds, but detail is not in short supply and there is musical thrill power in abundance.

**Conclusion**

In some respects the finish on the Elicit's metalwork reflects its tonal balance, not super slick but solid, reliable and honest. This is a fast and agile amplifier that doesn't go out of its way to smooth over the cracks in a performance or recording, as a result some might find its presentation a little stark, but far more will revel in the clarity and transient precision of

**A fast and agile amp that doesn't go out of its way to smooth over the cracks**

the sound. It has plenty of driving power and plenty of in – and outputs – allied to a finely graduated volume control and comprehensively equipped remote handset.

I thoroughly enjoy using it and exploring my music collection to discover more of the variety and charm within it. This is precisely what it is designed to do, after all. If you want a luxurious sound or one with inky black silences in the background there are alternatives that will suit your tastes much better, but if you want to get to grips with what your favourite artists are really saying on your favourite tracks then this will get you far closer than most options at this price point ●

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** First class timing; plenty of power; massive musicality

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Finish is a little prosaic; lacks image depth

**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A revealing, precisely timed and musically sophisticated amplifier with plenty of power and socketry

**FEATURES** ★★★★★

**OVERALL** ★★★★★