

hardware review

## Rega Brio Mk7 takes budget amplifier standards to a new high

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### Rega Brio Mk7 integrated amplifier

I have to admit to being surprised when Rega announced a seventh generation Brio, this amplifier has been in their range for quite some time but I didn't realise that there had been so many versions. The last Brio I reviewed was in 2017 when it was called just Brio, it succeeded the Brio-R which was based on a design that Rega's Terry Bateman had found in the early '90s. But that was not the first Brio which originally saw the light of production in the previous decade and took a wide but shallow form with a cast alloy chassis distinguished by heavy heat sinking.

The Brio Mk7 is another transitional amplifier, it marks the handover from Terry to Ashton Wagner in the electronic engineering department at Rega, Terry still had a hand in its design but it was Ashton's project. The Brio Mk7 differs from its predecessors by virtue of the inclusion of a DAC, all the earlier versions were analogue only so this is a marked change. Inputs are limited to coaxial and optical making it suitable for CD players, TVs etc but not obviously designed for streamers which are sometimes restricted to USB output. Many streamers do have coaxial output but most are a little bit pricey to find themselves next to an amp like this. There are exceptions of course, one of the most popular being the Wiim Ultra which offers coax and optical digital outputs, so it looks like Rega have done their homework.

They don't specify which chip is used in the DAC merely that it is a Rega creation and runs at up to 24-bits and 192kHz. What they do say is that the PCB has been re-laid out and that the amp has higher spec components than its predecessor. There is also an extra power supply in order to isolate high and low signal level parts of the circuit, which part this new supply is for is not detailed. Practical upgrades include an auto standby function that turns the unit off after an hour of non use, thermal cut out to avoid damage should things get a bit too toasty inside, and short circuit protection which is not apparently in the signal path. Notably the power rating is exactly as per the previous Brio.

The casework on the Brio Mk7 is less extravagant than its predecessor and clearly in the same mould as Rega's entry level lo amp, this amp is larger however and offers higher power, with 50W available into eight Ohm loads and 73W on tap for six Ohm speakers. Few if any other brands give a six Ohm figure, most opt for four where the output is usually higher, but six Ohms is more typical of budget loudspeaker impedances and thus more relevant. Input wise it offers three pairs of RCA phonos for analogue line sources (CD players, tape decks, phono stages etc) and a phono input for moving magnet cartridges of the sort found on Rega's more affordable turntables. Finally we have the two digital inputs. The speaker cable terminals are metal which should ensure durability.



There's a minijack headphone output on the front of the Brio Mk7 alongside the input selector and power button, the amp doesn't cater to Bluetooth signals and avoids letting RF noise into the circuitry by doing so. Ultimately it is designed for best sound quality at the price and this is not something that Bluetooth is capable of delivering, it is a convenience rather than a quality connection. A remote handset is supplied which includes controls for Rega CD players and power switches for both amp and the system as a whole.

### Sound quality

I had the magnificent Dali Epikore 9 speakers in the system when the Brio Mk7 arrived so decided to see how it would fare with these revealing yet generously balanced £30k beauties. What hit me in the first few bars is that this Rega knows how to boogie, it times superbly. This does not come as a surprise, pretty well every Rega product I have tried delivers this all





important quality, but with a revealing speaker and an analogue signal signal from a streamer, that is not always a given. What was also apparent is that the Brio Mk7 is a more refined beast than its predecessor, with a subjectively more even and calm balance.

Rega amps of yore have always been tremendously engaging and enjoyable but they aren't necessarily relaxed and have a degree of leading-edge enthusiasm that doesn't suit all loudspeakers and tastes. It is an exciting balance but not necessarily one you could enjoy at high levels through inappropriately revealing loudspeakers. The Brio Mk7 seems to have countered this and sounds remarkably sophisticated and grown up by comparison, yet it retains the excellent sense of timing that has always distinguished the brand.

It is surprisingly powerful too, latterly I paired it with some of PMC's new prophecy loudspeakers, these are reasonably but not particularly sensitive at around 88dB but do have a fairly benign load. The Brio Mk7 managed to drive the prophecy5 to decent levels without breaking a sweat, remaining composed and coherent throughout. You get a bigger, more relaxed picture with a more powerful amp but there is little complain about here. What I did notice is that this Rega is very good at detail, it pulls out texture and leading edges with ease and this reveals plenty about the music being played.

The Brio Mk7 has more drive and musical coherence than the sub £1,000 integrated amps that I am familiar with but some may prefer a smoother presentation still. This Brio is more refined than its predecessors but retains a power to engage which makes listening an exciting experience. Of particular note is the depth and solidity of the bass, this really extends well and on Bob Marley's *Natural Mystic* revealed the lovely burr of the bass guitar and the heavy bass notes of mystical origin that appear almost randomly in the first minute or so. With Nils Frahm's forthcoming *Night* album, which is essentially a set of piano nocturnes albeit not in the classical style, the Brio Mk7 manages to take you straight to the heart of the musical matter. This is subtle music that's pregnant with atmosphere and in some systems could easily become a pleasant ambient sound, here however I was totally absorbed in the performance.

This amplifier is also very good at reproducing a sense of space given the right material and speakers which are up to the job, I found this both with some older PMC twenty.22 bookshelf speakers as well as the latest models. If there's some 'air' on the record the Brio Mk7 will let you know about it, and this gives images the space to open up and inhabit the room.

### Playing records

In an effort to get a handle on the phono stage I put a Rega Nd5 cartridge on a P2 turntable and slipped a slab of vinyl onto the felt mat, the result was an earthy, bodacious sound with plenty of detail and separation. The brilliance of the performance was easy to appreciate and the bass was impressively solid via PMC prophecy7 speakers. Voices are also well handled especially that of Laura Marling, and the dubbed up groove of Scientist's *Step It Up* was particularly enjoyable thanks to decent bass weight and the way that turntable and amp bring out the spring in the rhythm.

I also tried the digital input using a Saturn-R CD player as the source connected by coaxial cable, here the results are clean and refined if a little lacking in space if not timeliness.

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Switching the same source to an analogue input results in a more open and relaxed result but this CD player is a £2,000 unit in current Mk3 form so one would expect that it should outperform the converter in a budget integrated like the Brio Mk7.

### Conclusion

The Rega Brio has always been a strong contender in the affordable amplifier stakes and in its seventh iteration the Brio retains this advantage. You might find a smoother sounding amp and you will undoubtedly find one with more bells and whistles but I would challenge anyone to build something that has the authority and musical coherence that the Brio Mk7 displays for the same price. The box may not look very fancy but it's solid in both construction and sound, and is capable of delivering top flight musical engagement in surprisingly revealing systems. If you are looking for an amplifier that will keep you entertained no matter what music you play this is the strongest option on the sub £1,000 market right now.



### Specifications

*Type: Integrated amplifier with built-in phono stage, DAC and headphone amp*

*Analogue inputs: MM phono, 3 line-level RCA's*

*Digital inputs: coax RCA, optical Toslink*

*Analogue outputs: none*

*Phono input impedance: 47kOhms*

*Headphone Loads: 32 – 300 Ohms*

*Supported bit/sample rates: up to 24bit/192kHz*

*Power Output: 50W/8 Ohms, 73W/4 Ohms*

*Dimensions (HxWxD): 79 x 216 x 365mm*

*Weight: 4.9kg*