

Rega Aethos Integrated Amp Review

*What does a Ford Cortina have to do with this amp?
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Introduction - what is the Rega Aethos?

The Rega Aethos is an integrated amplifier. More importantly, it is an integrated amplifier that has been eagerly awaited for some time. In the last three years, Rega has released three turntables, Planars [6](#), [8](#) and [10](#), that can legitimately stake a claim to being close to or the benchmark at their respective price points. What Rega couldn't do as easily was sell you an amp to go with them. The range has three relatively affordable amps (including the excellent [Brio](#)) and then a significant gap until you get to the flagship Osiris (which, by the by, is also outstanding).

The Aethos fills this gap. Arriving a pound under three grand, it pitches into a keenly contested space for integrated amplifiers and one where a variety of specifications are in competition with one another. We've looked at some strong

candidates already (and more are due) so the Aethos has its work cut out to excel. Nevertheless, given how good some of the other Rega products we have looked at have been, you wouldn't bet against it. Time then to see what the Rega can do and where that Cortina fits into all of this...

Specification and Design



In the position that Rega found themselves in when starting developing the Aethos; where they had a design at £1,700 and a design at £6,400 and a need to plug the space in the middle, there are three main options. You can take the more affordable amp and develop it further, you can take the more expensive amp and prune it back, removing features and components until it reaches the new price point or you can build something completely new that will, eventually, lead to replacements for what sits above and below too.

The third option can be discounted in this case because Rega has done something new relatively recently - more of which in a bit. These leaves the first two options and Rega has taken the decision to base much of the nuts and bolts of the design of the Aethos on the Elicit R. The thinking behind the process can be neatly summarised in the development name that was issued to the Aethos (like many things, very few Hi-Fi products begin development with the name they end up being given) was 1600E.

This is a reference to a Ford Cortina and not just any Cortina either. When the MkII was launched, the 1600E was the one you wanted. It had all the bells and whistles and represented the ultimate expression of the Cortina. So, if the Elicit can be seen to be a nice 1500 Deluxe, the Aethos is the same thing but with more power and some extra bells and whistles although, perhaps mercifully, Rega has omitted the twin foglights and vinyl roof.



This means that the Aethos takes the same amp circuit and it sees a small rise in headline power output from 105 watts to 125 watts but the changes behind that number are more significant. The number of output devices has doubled (from two to four) and with this comes the means to completely double up the output stage. The result of this is not simply that there is more power but the ability to drive more complex and demanding loads at the same time.

The volume control also comes across from the Elicit and this is the area of relatively recent innovation I referred to earlier. The volume is a combined feedback and passive volume system that changes both the input and feedback level to adjust the volume on the amp. Rega says that this helps to improve the level consistency between channels and reduces noise and input overload at the same time. In technical terms, the system works beautifully. The volume is completely free of imbalance and impressively linear at the same time. The caveat is that while the rate at which it gets louder is linear, that rate is pretty steep. Nothing that has turned up for testing in the recent clutch of reviews has needed sustained input past 10 O'Clock on the volume. Combined with a relatively large movement from a single press of the volume control and it means that a little care is needed in use.

The Aethos is relatively unusual in 2020 in that it is an amplifier and not most of the constituent parts of a system. As such, the Aethos is fitted with five RCA line inputs, a tape loop (that neatly features parallel outputs so you can drive a headphone amp and record at the same time), a power amp in and preamp out. This is partnered with a headphone amp running into a 6.35mm jack connection. One minor gripe of the design is that there is no direct input access for these inputs - you have to cycle through them (although this can be done in both directions). It's

far from the end of the world but it is something to be aware of if you plan to have multiple sources.



What is absent from the spec is a phono stage. At first glance, this might seem a decision that borders on the bizarre as there is a ready supply of Rega turntables that make use of such a feature. It is precisely because of this though that the Aethos is line only. The Planer 8 and 10, the primary matches for the Aethos, and even most Planar 6s are fitted with moving coil cartridges which are much more of an engineering challenge to fit in a fairly compact chassis alongside a hulking great amplifier section. This is compounded by the Aethos being pretty much 'full' so there are few options as to where to place it. Rega continues to make three suitable moving coil phono stages that will work alongside the Aethos, and the Aria, the most likely candidate of the lot, recently gained a facelift to match the styling of the Aethos. The power supply of the Planar 10 is already a match.

That styling is a major plus point too. The Aethos is one of those products that becomes cleverer the longer you look at it. The side idents to the top plate serve to expose more of the heatsink but they also do a fine job of reducing the perceived bulk of the amp. The black with red detailing looks excellent and the design manages to be visibly a Rega product but one that is absolutely bang up to date at the same time.

It is also superbly built. The thick metal sections that make up the casework and the hefty power supply conspire to create an amplifier that weighs over 17 kilos (and because the Aethos isn't that large, it feels exceptionally dense). Three grand is a bit of a break point in pricing terms, after which things should have a feel of the high end to them. The Rega manages this in spades. Being hyper critical, I don't think the supplied remote feels quite as smart but it works well and it's easy to use.

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How was the Aethos tested?

The Rega has seen test time with a wide selection of equipment. In all cases, it has been connected to an IsoTek Evo 3 Sigmas Mains conditioner and placed in a Quadraspire QAVX rack. It has been used with the Chord Electronics Hugo Mscaler and TT2 receiving a signal from an [SMS-200 Neo](#) running as a [Roon](#) Endpoint from a Roon Nucleus and an [LG 55B7 OLED](#). It has also been used with a [Chord Qutest](#) and T+A DAC8. Analogue has included the Planar 10 running with a few different cartridges and into a Cyrus Phono Signature and a Michell Gyrodec and SME M2-9 arm running into both the Cyrus and an AVID Pellar. Speakers have included the [Focal Kanta 1](#), [Kudos Titan 505](#), [Neat Ministra](#) and [PMC twenty5 21i](#). Material has included FLAC, AIFF, DSD, on demand services both audio and video and some vinyl.



I have been in possession of the Aethos sample for a fair amount of time and my attitude towards it - always fundamentally positive - has refined over that time. It might best be summarised by saying that the Aethos is generally superb but, with the right partnering equipment employed, genuine greatness can be achieved.

With the standard test partner of the Focal Kanta No1, this is a case in point. The Aethos is able to grip the Kanta and deliver a presentation of Circa Waves' *Jaqueline O* that is big, powerful and assured. The rousing chorus is delivered with plenty of welly and the result is effortlessly engaging. The Aethos also manages to deliver an

excellent bass response without ever feeling slow or having that brief but uncomfortable overhang as the driver isn't *quite* where it should be. That output stage might sound a little on the complex side but it does exert fabulous control over the speakers themselves.

Where this combination falls fractionally short of perfection is the top end. With a higher listening level and recordings that aren't perfect, the Aethos and the Kanta No1 together become very slightly too much of a good thing. Across the selection of sources here, the combination was a little harder than the [Cambridge Audio Edge A](#) resident alongside (and that, once the cost of the digital section has been stripped out, is nearer a price equivalent). Where the Edge and Focal gel brilliantly, the Aethos is not always as assured. In a more limited but still noticeable way, this is still apparent with the Neat Ministra.

As yet another demonstration of the nature of product synergy, the story with both the PMC twenty5 21i and Kudos Titan 505 is different and the Aethos really shows what it can do. The same big and composed presentation and the consistent ability to deliver even very complex passages of music with an unflappable sense of order is still here and the Rega exerts a grip on both of these speakers that is deeply impressive. The change is that these speakers lend a fractional sweetness to the Aethos that has you wanting to listen at length and make use of that prodigious headroom. It's the difference between sitting there and thinking "this is a bloody good amp" and sitting there and uttering a single word. Four letters. Rhymes with duck.



What has really appealed over time is that this ability to deliver dynamically never impinges on the delicacy required to let smaller scale music sound arresting. The Aethos was my partner for the final call on the [50 Albums for Lockdown Listening](#) piece and you can thank the even handedness it demonstrated with everything as to the (relative) breadth of the material it includes. Put simply, there's been nothing I've tried on the Aethos that hasn't sounded very good indeed.

If you are the happy owner of a Planar 8 or 10 though, the synergy that these devices show together - even via the third party presence of the Cyrus phono stage - is exceptional. What really shines through is the effortless ability to engage the listener. It would be wrong to say it 'sounds better with vinyl' - that's far too sweeping a statement to have any worth. Used in a manner that Rega clearly hopes you will though, it's phenomenal. The combination of Planar 10 and Aethos is an audio scallop and pancetta moment; individually they're great but cumulatively even better.

As a final ribbon to an already fairly enticing bow, the headphone amp arrangement of the Aethos is one of the best I've encountered at the price. It has plenty of headroom and delivers a sweet and generally refined presentation that should gel nicely with a wide selection of headphones. The basic musicality is consistently impressive and the presentation is sufficiently forgiving that extended listening sessions are consistently enjoyable.



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Verdict

Pros

- Powerful, even handed and hugely engaging sound
- Very well made
- Superb headphone amp

Cons

- Truly great performance needs care with speaker matching
- No direct input selection
- Remote a bit of a button fest

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There's no point trying to sum up the Aethos without making reference to the two Naim integrated designs that have passed through that it nearly sits between. It's a mark of the evolving nature of brands that I can say with absolute sincerity that the Naim designs are actually slightly easier to get the best from and will do so from a selection of speakers that is larger than the ones that shine with the Aethos. Slightly unusually, they have phono stages where the Aethos does not which might be useful for some people too.

The Aethos has too many virtues to ignore though. It delivers more power and if you are able to match it with a modicum of attention, it has a level of performance that is absolutely outstanding for an amp at this price point. The ease that it partners with the Kudos Titan - a speaker that is more than twice as expensive - suggests that it could form the basis of a system that involves rather more expensive components and it will more than hold its own. The choice between Aethos and [Supernait 3](#) was something that a few dealers had mentioned that, prior to lockdown, customers were coming down on either side of the fence on and I can see why. This is a very fine amp indeed and one that joins the ranks of the Highly Recommended.