

The reason Doug Schroeder believes all readers  
should halt their purchases:

the \$2,400 Rega Saturn CD player

January, 2007



#### Saturn Specifications

**Laser Semiconductor laser:** Wavelength 780nm

**Line Output Maximum Level:**  $\sqrt{2}$ V (load impedance minimum 10k

**Digital Output Maximum Level:**  $\sqrt{2}$ 0.5V (load impedance 75

**Digital Sampling Frequency:** 44.1kHz

**Mains Voltages:** 230V (minimum 190V maximum 250V) @ 50/60Hz, 115V (minimum 95V  
maximum 125V) @ 50/60Hz

**Power Consumption:** 14W

**Dimensions:** 435Wx100Hx270D

**Required Space for operation:** 435Wx180Hx315D

**Mains fuses:** 230V @ 250mA, 115V @ 500mA

**CDP Remote Batteries:** AAA (1.5) x 2

**MSRP:** \$2,400

Manufacturer:

<http://www.rega.co.uk>

Rega Research Ltd.  
119 Park St.  
Westcliff-on-Sea  
Essex, England  
SSO 7PD

U.S. Distributor:

Sound Organisation  
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11140 Petal Street, Suite 350  
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When I first laid eyes on it, I thought, “A CDP with heat sinks? Now that’s radical!” The Rega Saturn is something different, not due to its slightly unconventional looks, but rather its unconventional technology and, dare I say *radically unconventional* sound.

The term “radical” seems a bit strong for the British outfit that has produced a stable of winsome products for vinyl as well as digital. Ask any audiophile for the name of a radical manufacturer of audio equipment and I assure you Rega will not be the first on the lips. However, to my mind, the Saturn borders on the term, *revolutionary* redbook technology.

Let’s get the physical and operational descriptions out of the way, since the Saturn will not win awards for the most innovative looking component. Of course, Rega is not gunning for such awards - they largely kept the now familiar chassis and display of the Planet and Jupiter (the Saturn is available in either silver or black satin metal finish), and fitted it with a similar “USS Enterprise” shaped top loading lid. That lid always has been one of my favorite fantasies melding audiophilia and pop culture, thinking as I insert a disc... “To boldly play where no CD player has played before!”



The power-amp-like fins are not heat sinks. They are stabilization devices to add mass and rigidity, and they fairly shout, “This unit will unleash serious digital signals...” They lend a look of seriousness to the player that is fitting for a high-end component.

Vinyl is Rega’s heritage and while they made respectable CD players, they were not the last word in digital sources. However, as their supplier, Sony, stopped supplying digital transports for them, they were thrown into crisis. Rather than sourcing transports from the East, Rega went a different route and elected to build its own transport. By acquiring a British software company, which had developed a 32 bit program to read Redbook CD’s, both the software and hardware were in place for a radical improvement of Redbook player sound.

What Rega has done in the Saturn strikes me as the marriage of a computer brain with the eye of a CD player. The player is a testament to the fact that we live in an age where data is King. The Saturn will make a believer in fine digital playback out of all but the most hard-boiled vinylphiles.



And if one thinks it through, the inevitable emergence of a CDP superior in every respect to vinyl makes sense. After all, data dominates our reality. Our body's own DNA screams to us that we are mind-numbingly complex biomachines. Yet, all that precision in information, as quantifiable in DNA as bits in the digital realm, yields an *organic* being.

Allow me to make a prediction: A new generation of CDP's will demonstrate that it is not digital data that is cold and harsh sounding, but the lack of proper technology to transmit that data into sound. The more precise the data is mined and transmitted from a CD, the more *organic* sounding the music will be. I predict that as CDP's in the Saturn's strain advance, they will sound better, fuller, more complete than vinyl. In fact, it's happening *now*.

The Saturn certainly does treat the data on a CD differently than the typical player. Upon insertion into the machine, as the display pleasantly indicates "initializing", the laser assembly aligns itself properly to the disc. Processing the data takes longer than with conventional players. But then again, the Saturn is utilizing 20 megabytes of memory to max out playback of the CD. Because of past limitations on the memory in CD players, even 24 bit players could not address the disc with unlimited number crunching authority. But, the Saturn, with its 32 bit processing can handle all the data without compromise.

I recall a demonstration of a computer-based product in which a hard drive recorded a CD, and then the cd was played back from the hard drive as a source. The sound was impressive since all the data from the cd could be exploited. Rega has done similar by upping the memory and processing in a CD player. The result is a purer signal and less influences by error correction. The resultant sound is *much* more natural than one would expect from a player under \$2,500.

There is a very minor price to pay for such processing power, a few seconds of your precious time. Initialization takes several seconds; however, I noticed that in comparison to the Apollo, the Saturn seems quicker. When a disc is inserted, one needs wait up to ten seconds for initialization to complete. For some, such a wait is intolerable; they want to begin mashing buttons the microsecond numbers begin displaying.



Similarly, one does not hear simple bass, midrange and treble with the Saturn but a myriad of smaller flowing realities – not midrange, but the low midrange as well as the higher midrange and that just a bit higher, but not so high as to be treble midrange, as well as about three or four categories in-between. These all blend so seamlessly that you sense the multilayered richness but none stands out obtrusively. The cohesiveness and fluidity of the presentation is wonderful.

I listened to Craig Chaquico's *Acoustic Planet*, track #8, "Center of Courage", a guitar picker's paradise. With the Saturn, I could hear just about how many molecules of skin touched each string. The astounding clarity of the Saturn allows the listener to process at a higher rate, along with the player. As the notes were ferociously plucked, even at each split second it was played, I could clearly sense the force with which the string was pulled.

As a person who once played guitar, I know that when played at such a blistering pace, some notes are inadvertently played more lightly than others. The speed covers up the minor discrepancies. This is natural; as people perform faster, there is more variation from the norm. It is beautiful and interesting to have such resolution that I can hear the subtleties of his fingers – most grabbing each string, but once in a while one grazing a string.

The Saturn has a way of "de-analoguing" older discs. You know, the ones recorded "AAD". They just don't sound as good as "DDD" most of the time. For that reason, I have struggled to play them. They sound older, less precise, less involving. With its delicious blend of processing power and smoothness, the Saturn magically transforms these discs into sounding *far* more like "DDD" recordings. It's amazing how so much



There are thousands of older CD's like Dave Sanborn's *Straight to the Heart* which was recorded in 1984 – 22 years ago! That's ancient for digital. I love the music and recall seeing him in concert in an open air venue amid wicked skies and (unbeknownst to our concert-going group) tornado warnings. The memory was so vivid, but the disc always sounded like an old album being reproduced, an attempt to drag music recorded with older technology into the digital age. However, the Saturn makes it sound like an entirely fresh recording, much more like I'm back at the concert again. The hellish haze of noise is almost completely gone! Sonically it's like someone took one of those Ionic Breeze units to the recording. Hmm...is that an idea for a new tweak?

The effect is not unlike the good old Dolby feature on tape players. I recall when Dolby noise reduction was introduced to the masses.

Wow! What a great way to get rid of the tape hiss! But, alas, there was a drawback, the truncation of the high end. Well, frankly *everything* sounded truncated! However, if one recorded in Dolby C, let's say, and played back in Dolby B or without Dolby, there was improved sound along with noise diminishment.

On a far finer level, of course, Rega has done something similar. Please don't jump to conclusions and think "truncated sound," because there is *nothing* truncated-sounding about the Saturn. Rather, everything is extended wonderfully. One hears the low ring of the acoustic bass note, the subtle shimmering of the gentle tapping on the cymbal. What one realizes with dismay is that the majority of other CDP's they've ever heard trying to process a disc has been truncated! All these years of digital sound and only now are audiophiles in this price range hearing what can be culled from a disc! It is almost impossible to overemphasize how much of an improvement in clarity, impact, and detail the Saturn brings to CD listening.

I found out just how much while listening to George Winston's *All the Seasons of George Winston*, track 5 "Joy", an arrangement of J.S. Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring". Disturbingly, I heard a resonance that sounded like it was one of my speaker drivers rattling every time a certain note was struck. Upon examination, it was found to be the housing of one of my can lights vibrating in the dropped ceiling (you can imagine my relief that it was the ceiling)! I had built the room tightly and no other player had ever made anything rattle in my room. The purity and intensity of the note coming from the Rega was such that, like a wineglass shattering at a certain frequency, it made my light vibrate.

Once I had addressed that issue, I could focus again on my initial impression, which was that the Saturn deftly reproduced the piano solos. Winston uses the pedals to sustain notes frequently, which then blend into a soft background, much the way a light blanket of snow covers the ground. The sound was light, delicate, and *as light as a snowflake*. The delicacy was delicious.

The Saturn can rock with authority too. Usually that's a comment said about speakers; I'm saying it about a *CD player*. The same detail and clarity that so enhances classical music and solos also provides a visceral impact in rock music. Formerly reproduced "thuds" in the low end become notes. Deep, resonant notes. One of the revelations of this player is to discover that a group has used a keyboard to accompany a bass line, but it's never been heard because the resolution and finesse of previous players had never been up to reproducing it.

Case in point, the late seventies and early eighties band Toto (always thought the name was sad, but liked the sound) used keyboard in unison with bass. On their *Toto: Super Hits* album track #7, "Without Your Love", one can hear easily the same note being struck by the pianist as the bass player, and on track #4 the bass plays solo. But, on track #1, "Hold the Line" the bass and keyboard again play in unison but the effect is so subtle that I had never heard it distinctly until the Saturn was in the system. This is but one of many peeks into the complexities of rock music revealed by this player.

Here's an "out there" idea, maybe even radical – one that may rock your world. The Saturn calls for some reconsideration of other component purchases. Rega has made two outstanding sounding players in the Apollo at the \$1,000 price point, and the Saturn at \$2,400. These are comfortable numbers, and here's why. To the economically oppressed and the neophytes a grand is hefty, but probably reachable. However, \$2,400 is out of the question. Conversely, to the well-heeled and long time audio aficionado, a fine player will command a fine price and the Saturn is not outrageous.

additional clarity and precision can be achieved while simultaneously dropping the noise floor to abysmal levels. The result is that by making older discs sound less analogue and more digital, they acquire a sound form closer to high end vinyl. I am well aware that such a statement sounds contradictory, but a listening session with the Saturn will convince you of its accuracy.

I say, "Settle down, Nanoman!" Take a second to rearrange your butt on your chair, blow your nose or something to occupy the time, because it's all going to be *well* worth it. As harried as we are, we take the time to wash our cars, have our shoes shined or clothes dry cleaned, groom ourselves (well, most of us, anyway), so simply consider this essential time to get the superior results this machine will give you. Bypassing this machine because you can't wait a few seconds would be a BIG mistake, maybe not in the scheme of life, but definitely in the scheme of audio.

It should be noted that the Saturn also plays MP3 and WMA files. The manual gives instructions that the recordable disc should be burned at no greater than 8x to guarantee readability of the disc. My test disc played flawlessly and sounded terrific. The Saturn may take a bit longer to initialize to play home made discs, but I did not experience an undue delay when I used this feature. I can assure that the Saturn will bring out the best of such formats. However, this review will focus on the use of the Saturn to play redbook discs.

A puzzling feature of the Saturn is the enigmatic 'silent search' function. When fast forwarding or fast reversing, the unit is completely silent. This gives the listener no clue where they are in the process of searching the disc. One must jump into fast mode, then pop back out again to check the progress. The software and chip set that Rega obtained do not contain that functionality. The rest of the now-familiar "Solar" system remote supplied with both the Apollo and Saturn is straightforward. Aside from being a tad bit large for the necessary functions of the player, it is laid out fairly intuitively and works reliably. \*

Aside from these idiosyncrasies, the Saturn is intuitive. I found that I could fairly, easily look past these things, and all it takes is one half-hour listening session to convince a person that the peculiarities of the machine are negligible compared to what it can do.

And how does it sound? In a word – Glorious! To describe the sound in terms of bass, midrange and treble would be sacrilege. It would be similar to describing a Salvador Dali painting in terms of structure. It's not perfunctorily structured; it flows, bends reality and lures your eyes across the face of the image.

Allow me now to suggest some heresy, something which other manufacturers may not love, but is the truth. These players are worth forfeiting a small part of funds which would otherwise be applied to amplification and speakers. I'm sure I'll get lots of love letters over that statement, especially from the crowd that says the majority of bucks have to be spent on the speakers. These players exemplify the adage that one needs a good source to start off a good listening session. If one is putting together a system of around \$4-5,000 it is advisable to consider the Apollo at the \$1,000 price. I would go so far as to say, cut the speaker and amp costs by \$250 each if needed and get the Apollo. I feel its sonic superiority will outweigh a slight diminishment in the speaker and amp budget.



Even more so the Saturn; if one is considering a system of \$8-10,000 or higher, it would be remiss to not consider the Saturn. (And I do mean “or higher” since this player will not embarrass itself in a system of *any* price). Again, if it took \$500 from other components, say the amp and speakers, to get the Saturn, you would in almost every instance be better off sonically getting the Saturn.

The sound improvement achieved by these CDP's is greater than the equivalent dollar difference in a speaker or amp.

Until now, I never would have made that suggestion, but the results to my ears are undeniable. Hearing what I hear coming from the Saturn, if it had been available years ago and I was aware of its sound, I very likely would have pursued it over some of the speakers and amps I chased to achieve the sound I wanted. Simply put, the advancement in technology Rega has proffered is more important than any current technological differences, considering those pricing variables in speakers and amps, including digital amps.

Of course, you may have found an integrated amp, pre/power combo or speakers that you're drooling over. You may think they are the ticket to ultimate sound. I am telling you that you are wrong. Unless you spend *inordinate* amounts of money on amp and speaker, the Saturn will gain you especially more satisfying results for your dollar.

And now to sooth those souls I have offended. To readers contemplating speaker and amp purchases, I have never heard a CDP which will tease out of fine components such glorious performance! If you chose to not compromise your amp and speaker selections, you will be *well* rewarded. Like a mighty locomotive, the processing power and finesse of the Saturn will pull your whole system along sonically, taking it higher than you thought it could go. Then the madness will set in; you'll be thinking because of the Saturn, “I wonder what those other speakers or amp I love would sound like with this player?”

Allow me to comment about soundstage. I have owned several planars over the years, and love their wide soundstage. Currently, I use Chapman Audio System T-77's, which are dynamic speakers. Understandably there was a loss of some of the sheer size of soundstage moving from planar to dynamic speakers. The Saturn has returned much of that soundstage.

## \* Addendum:

Kindly allow me to cry in my beer for a moment. I was all ready to scoop the world, as I had obtained one of the first Saturns in the U.S. and had worked to write up my review. However, there were operational issues with the Saturn. Yes, it was acting up; occasionally (approx. 1 in 30) when issuing commands by remote, the unit would malfunction, including such things as displaying "Skipping" for two seconds and beginning to *fast* forward when the *track* forward button was depressed. The operational issues were intermittent and neigh unto impossible to isolate.

Once the review was finished I held it, awaiting the arrival of a second unit. I felt that it would not be honest to the audio community (nor my reputation as a reviewer, of course!) to release a review without mention of the issues. Conversely, I would not be fair, as a reviewer of Rega equipment, to publish a review in which a faulty unit might not be representative of most Saturns.

In the mean time, others published and I missed my "first in the U.S. review." So, be it. Let's all say, "Awwww, Poor Doug," together. Thank you, I feel much better!

Seriously, I'm glad I waited; after having received the second unit (Dave Holmes at Audio Emporium in Milwaukee swapped them out readily, and was quite instrumental in helping to isolate the potential problem) the evidence is beginning to amass that the technical issue is not with the player but likely with my remote lighting system causing RF interference. I have taken the Saturn into a different system without RF lighting and found that indeed the remote control works flawlessly. Coupled with the fact that of the 150 or so units sold to date there have been no other operational deficiencies, I conclude the Saturn is "defect free." Those who are having operational difficulties with a remotely controlled component in an environment utilizing remote lighting may want to explore the possibility of RF interference and its effects on the component.

However, the delay had a positive effect, allowing my review agents time to infiltrate the Rega facility and obtain a "spy photo" of the back of the Saturn!

In the end my delay in publishing was due myself! I think I'll go cry in my beer, listen to some music and try to wipe the smile off my face as I enjoy this stellar performer!

## Associated Components:

**Source:** Rega Saturn cdp

**Preamp:** Melody Hi Fi P1688 tube pre; Dussun V8i ss pre stage

**Amp:** Melody Hi Fi S88 monoblocks

**Integrated:** : Pathos Classic One MkII stereo tube hybrids (2) bridged; Eastern Electric M520 tube Hybrid; Dussun V8i solid state

**Speakers:** Chapman Audio Systems T-77; Art and Audio Fusion Technologies "Picture Art System"

**IC's:** MIT AVt MA; Jena Labs Jazz, Tice Audio IC 1A

**Speaker Cables:** MIT AVt MA; Jena Labs Jazz; Tice Audio 416

**Power Cables:** Xindak PF-Gold, Jena Labs Bumblebee

**Power Conditioning:** MIT Z-Stabilizer; Tice Audio Solo

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The instruments do not sound larger; they sound appropriately sized, but the venue is more spacious. The subtle effects and nuances of the room the piece is recorded in have expanded nicely. There are some who sense that their speakers are not sufficiently filling their room. One possible reason for this is that the source may not be giving the speakers the full digital information of the venue. Before jettisoning the speakers, listen to the Saturn. I have not tried the Saturn with planars, however I cannot imagine owners of them being anything but thrilled with the advancement in clarity, extension, and smoothness – and of course, soundstage.

It is fitting that a player with such number-crunching power and yet analogue-like sound is being proffered by a company world-renowned for its turntables. My guess is that Rega knows there is a real possibility the sales of its turntables will be affected by the arrival of the Saturn. I do not wish that for the company, but it seems all too clear on the horizon. This may be no news to them. They will likely be happy to see sales increases in players versus turntables, especially as the audiophile community begins to recognize just what the Saturn can do.

One thing is for sure, those who went digital years ago have been hearing the “Tsk Tsk Tsk” of the vinyl enthusiasts reprimanding them for abandoning their turntables. I was one of those people who just couldn’t stand living in a digital age and having to put up with “snap, crackle, pop” in music. Despite the limitations of digital playback, I preferred to avoid the requisite analogue noise. The Saturn fairly shouts, “No more compromise!” There will always be those who must have vinyl, but now with the Saturn the sans vinyl crowd don’t have to feel, or sound, one bit (or is it byte) less elite.