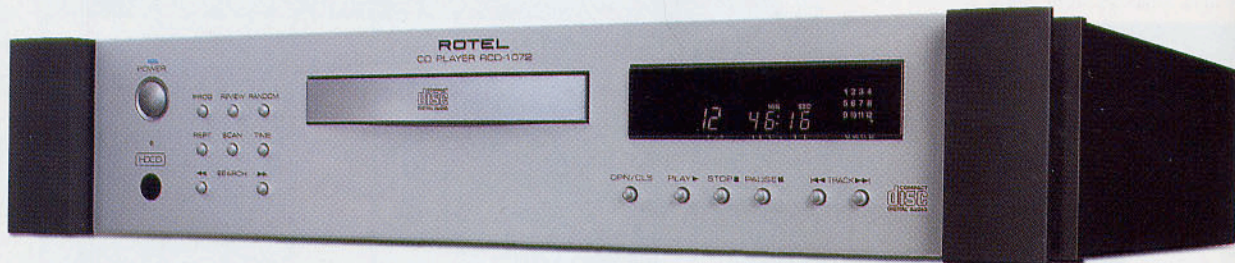


Rotel RCD-1072 CD Player

Alan Taffel



Porsche 911, BMW 2002, Jaguar XKE. What do these storied automobiles have in common, aside from their iconic status? All were products that single-handedly defined the essence of their builder. In the audio world, one equivalent is the Rotel RCD-855. A dozen years ago, it alerted the world that a high-end CD player could be built for under \$500. The 855's introduction produced chagrin among competitors, and euphoria among consumers, who bought it in droves.

Since then, Rotel has applied the 855's successful high-performance/high-value formula to the entire spectrum of audio electronics. And yet, there hasn't been a bona fide successor to the product that started it all. Certainly the company has produced many a fine CD player in the intervening years. But none has coupled landmark performance with affordability quite so convincingly as the original. That situation has now changed. At \$699, Rotel's new RCD-1072 is nearly as attractively priced today (accounting for inflation) as was the RCD-855 in 1991. More importantly, the new player has knock-it-out-of-the-park performance that makes it a real audio event.

It is remarkable that Rotel chose this era of home theater and emerging multichannel sound formats to introduce a flagship stand-alone CD player. After all, today's digital sources are typically combination units of one sort or another. Besides CDs, they also play DVDs, DVD-As, and/or SACDs. Rotel's belief, however, is that the best route to

getting the most out of CDs, at a reasonable price, is a dedicated player.

My own experience bears out the company's position. For instance, the least expensive DVD player I've heard whose CD performance betters this Rotel's is the Arcam DV-27. At roughly \$2500, it is triple the cost of the RCD-1072. Imagine the compromises involved in building *any* combination player for under \$700. For the buying public, now inculcated with the convenience and forward compatibility of such devices, there may be no going back to stand-alone CD players. But I find Rotel's logic undeniable: better that a price-point-driven product do one thing well than many things at a minimum level of competence.

The RCD-1072 certainly looks the part of a flagship. Never mind its modest cost, this is a substantial machine. The thick silver front panel and high-grade switchgear reinforce its quality orientation. Unfortunately, the chintzy remote—devoid of either style or substance, though it works perfectly well—somewhat counters these perceptions. Inside, the 1072 clearly is an extensive update of Rotel's outgoing RCD-1070. The new model uses Burr-Brown delta-sigma DACs with 8x oversampling. (Robert Burn, Rotel's technical director in the UK, led the redesign project, employing new, high-sensitivity test gear that allowed him to greatly reduce digital jitter.)

In keeping with its purist persona, the RCD-1072 lacks unnecessary bells and whistles. However, all the control and program features we've come to

expect on CD players are present. Connectivity is afforded via one analog and one coax digital output. There are also an IR trigger and an external remote input. The only real feature flourish, and a welcome one it is, is HDCD support.

As with all Rotel products, the RCD-1072 benefits from minor setup tweaks. An audiophile power cord is highly recommended for optimal performance. Also, a good set of cones will vanquish an uncharacteristic hard edge to the sound. I used Goldmund cones, which are excellent but pricey; \$50 DH cones work nearly as well.

I won't belabor all the things the RCD-1072 does right: its excellent tonal accuracy, top and bottom extension, ability to create a broad and deep soundstage that conjures the "aura" of the recording space, precise image placement within that space, and ample rhythmic swing. These are important attributes, to be sure, but I'd prefer to concentrate on what's particularly special about this CD player.

The RCD-1072's most salient sonic characteristic is its quietude. It has the lowest noise level of any CD player I've heard at any price. This achievement has major sonic ramifications, nearly all beneficial. As one might expect, listener fatigue is greatly reduced. The 1072 frees the brain from the effort of listening "around" the various distortions inherent in the digital record-playback chain. Instead, it presents an unimpeded path to the music. Several other CD players and DACs seek similar results by rolling-

off high frequencies and glossing over transients. Those techniques do lessen fatigue, but they also color the sound. The 1072, on the other hand, conquers the problem by more honest (and difficult) means: it dramatically reduces those underlying distortions. Thus, detail resolution, tonal complexity, and transient reproduction remain intact.

Indeed, freedom from noise *enhances* these characteristics. Through the RCD-1072, for instance, musical lines and instrumental details stand out as if in bas-relief. Listen to the opening of "Friend of the Devil," from the Grateful Dead tribute album *Deadicated* [Arista]. Most CD players muddle the two guitars into one. If you *try*, you can hear that there actually are two guitars. The Rotel makes this plain. Similarly, the Rotel renders this track's drum line inordinately clear, despite its being de-emphasized in the mix and thus hard to notice.

The Rotel's low noise level bestows equal benefits on tonality and transient response. A revealing example is "The Conversation," from the Michael Wolff Trio's indispensable *2am* [Cabana Boy]. This is essentially a solo piano track (with subdued jazz backup), and the 1072 evokes the instrument with uncanny realism. The track features several fast runs and trills, which create articulation challenges for most components. Yet the RCD-1072 never comes close to blurring two notes together. Instead, it unerringly reproduces the percussive inflection that actuates each note. More, when the pianist decides to emphasize a note, you can really hear, and *feel*, the additional weight bearing down on that key.

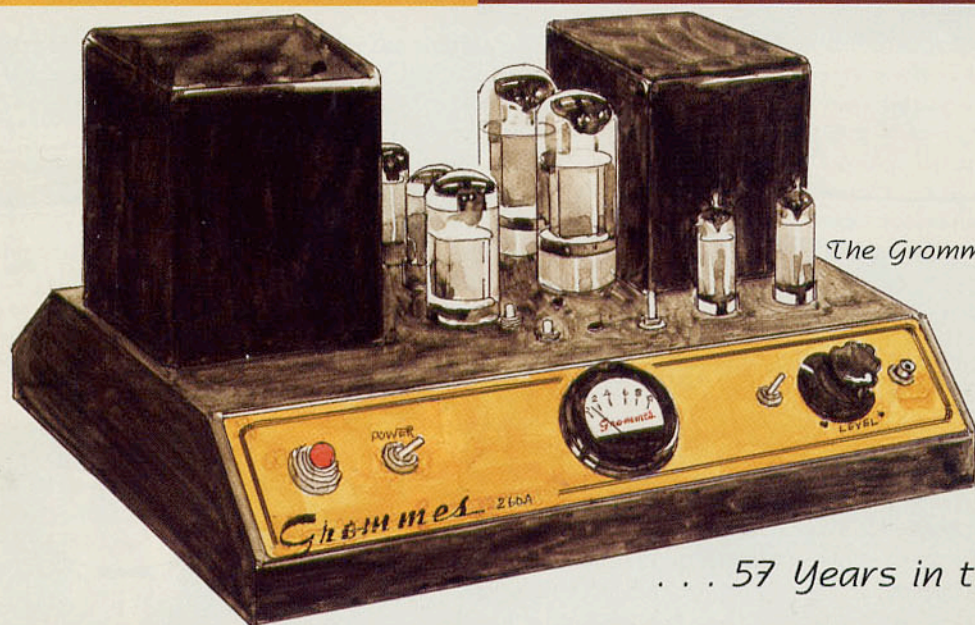
"The Conversation" encompasses the piano's wide frequency expanse—from the tinkling top keys to the *basso profundo* bottom. Through the Rotel, the timbre of each note varies significantly, as it should,

according to its position on the keyboard. Tonality is so precise that each note's timbre is subtly but noticeably different than its neighbor's. This phenomenon, characteristic of real grand pianos, is generally absent on the reproduced instrument. Instead, pianos are frequently presented with a coherence and homogeneity they don't actually possess. Through the Rotel, each note has a unique tonal signature.

The sole drawback I've found to the Rotel's low noise level relates to the air around instruments. With the RCD-1072, empty space is curiously dead. In a real performance, instruments energize the adjacent air, and this effect is audible on good recordings and associated equipment. In contrast, the Rotel depicts a kind of sonic vacuum between and around instruments. My reference CD player, which for all its charms has unquestionably higher distortion than the Rotel, doesn't suffer from this syn-

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drome. Yet I wonder whether this is because the reference unit has higher resolution, or whether that "resolution" is actually distortion being interpreted by my ear-brain as "air." For now, I must allow for the possibility that the Rotel is just accurately depicting an unnatural background silence that is inherent in the CD format. Whatever the underlying explanation, this is one area where the 1072 is less than realistic.

While I'm covering sonic shortcomings, there are naturally a few others. The Rotel's bass is not quite as tight and defined as with the best players, and dynamics, though very good, could be livelier. (They're a little polite.) Also, the RCD-1072 fractionally reduces the spatial scale of recordings. On Telarc's recent CD/SACD of Vaughan Williams' *Sea Symphony*, the hall sounds smaller and more intimate than it should. Likewise, Michael Wolff's grand piano shrinks a

couple of feet through the Rotel. None of these drawbacks interferes significantly with the music, and most of them wouldn't be audible except in direct comparison with far more expensive equipment.

SPECIFICATIONS

Outputs: One stereo single-ended analog pair; one coax digital

Dimensions: 17" x 3 11/16" x 13"

Weight: 12.8 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Goldmund Studietto turntable; Graham 2.2 arm; Clearaudio Insider Gold cartridge; Goldmund Mimesis 36 CD transport; Goldmund Mimesis 12++ DAC; Goldmund Mimesis 22 preamp; Goldmund Mimesis 29.4 and Mimesis 8 amplifiers; Metaphor 1 and 2 speakers; Empirical Design Omniwire I cables; Goldmund cones, ASC Tube Traps, Empirical Design power cords

As soon as a company creates a defining product, the market begins to press for a successor. In the RCD-1072, Rotel has indeed delivered a worthy successor to the RCD-855. Like the earlier model, this CD player pegs a new point at which returns diminish precipitously. You can spend ten times the cost of this machine, and get maybe ten percent more performance. By studiously reducing digital noise artifacts, the RCD-1072 allows music, and the instruments that make it, to emerge in stark glory. **9**

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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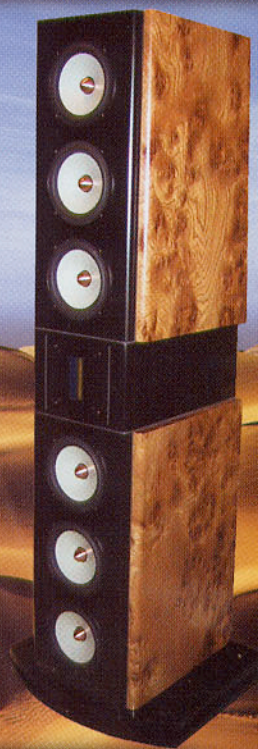
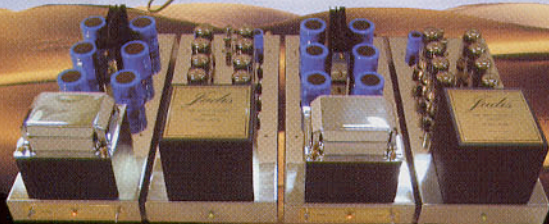
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