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Start ME UP



Rotel RCD-1570 CD Player, RC-1570 Preamplifier, and RB-1552 Mk II Power Amplifier

Rotel Returns to its Roots

Alan Taffel

Once upon a time, the audio forces of America, Britain, and Japan combined to create a company called Rotel. And it was good. Long before others, Rotel demonstrated that high-end sound need not come at a high-end price. First came a now-legendary CD player costing a mere \$400 that outperformed units ten times its price. Following that, the company birthed electronics of all stripes: amplifiers both power- and pre-, as well as splendid DACs. Rarely did Rotel set a foot astray.

Then, quite suddenly, a change occurred. Rotel devotees noticed that new products were less often stereo and more often of an unfamiliar (and unwanted) breed called “home theater.” If that wasn’t disconcerting enough, the company’s lauded Class AB amps were mostly relegated to Class MIA, replaced by wan-sounding units aptly dubbed Class D. “Where,” the faithful cried, “is the Rotel *d’antan*?”

Well, the wait was long, but our old friend appears to be back.

START ME UP



Just take a look at this shiny new stack—there isn't a home-theater or Class D model in it. Ah, but does it live up to Rotel's "giant killer" reputation from the days of yore? Let us see.

Rotel's new stack consists of three components that— aesthetically and functionally—were obviously designed to be deployed in tandem. First in line is the Wolfson DAC-powered RCD-1570 CD player. This slot-loaded player has both single-ended and balanced analog outs, as well as a digital output. The latter feature somewhat future-proofs the player, as it can still be used as a CD transport in the event its owner buys a higher-end outboard DAC (maybe the RDD-1580). There are also RS-232C and Rotel Link connections for external control.

Next in line is the RC-1570 stereo preamplifier, a fully featured unit with four analog inputs, an additional balanced analog in, and even a moving-magnet phonostage. But that's not all: The RC-1570 is equally adept with digital sources, for which there are two coax and two optical inputs, plus two USB inputs (one on the front panel and one on the back). For these, the preamp is graced with the same Wolfson DAC as the CD player, and supports resolutions up to 192/24. With all these inputs and the built-in DAC, the RC-1570 can serve neatly as a versatile control point for a modern audio system.

Finally, meet the RB-1552 Mk II 120Wpc Class AB stereo power amplifier. The amp boasts the sort of holistic design and careful parts selection that have distinguished Rotel's best amps through the ages. Capacitors, for example, are of the slit-foil variety. Further, the unit is essentially a dual-monoblock design, with separate left and right rectification. The RB-1552 Mk II accepts both single-ended and balanced connections

(the balanced sound way better). In keeping with the versatility theme, the amp has two sets of stereo amps for driving two sets of speakers. And for those whose speakers require a little more oomph, such as Maggie owners, Rotel makes a more powerful (\$600 more expensive) 200Wpc version, the RB-1582 Mk II.

Stacked, these components look purposeful (especially in black), yet elegant (especially in silver) in the reassuring form-follows-function Rotel manner. Their looks will raise the pulse of any Rotel aficionado. Pricewise, too, this gear certainly promises a return to the Rotel of old. Each component is a mere \$999. In today's audio world, that's a major bargain—assuming the Rotel stack truly delivers high-end sound.

The sonic question for components in this price range is *not* whether they can produce a fool-you facsimile of the real thing. Unfortunately, barring a technological revolution, they can't. The more pertinent question, then, is whether they get enough sonic elements right—and whether those strengths are not overly compromised by the inevitable trade-offs—to convey music engagingly. "Engaging" is a word we high-enders use as shorthand for the cumulative effect of a multitude of sonic factors, but I believe that chief among these are the elements that most directly impact musical expressivity. Specifically, I look for good timing, tonality, and dynamics.

Timing not only gives music forward motion; its subtle variations contribute greatly to emotional expression. Proper tonality has myriad benefits. Composers carefully choose their orchestration to convey emotional content through instrumental colors. The contrast between those colors is essential to enabling listeners to follow interleaving melodic lines. And obviously the

SPECS & PRICING

RCD-1570 CD Player

Outputs: One pair RCA; one pair XLR; one coax digital RCA
Dimensions: 17" x 4" x 12 5/8"
Weight: 14.7 lbs.
Price: \$999

RC-1570 Preamplifier/DAC

Inputs: Four RCA; one mm phono RCA; one XLR; two coax digital; two optical; two USB
S/N ratio: 110dB (line); 80dB (phono)
Frequency response: 10Hz-95kHz +/-3dB
Dimensions: 17" x 4" x 12 5/8"
Weight: 16 lbs.
Price: \$999

RB-1552 Mk II Stereo Power Amplifier

Power output: 120Wpc into 8 ohms
S/N ratio: >120dB
Frequency response: 4Hz-100kHz
Inputs: One pair balanced (XLR); one pair single-ended (RCA)
Outputs: Two pairs per channel of binding posts
Power consumption: 400W
Dimensions: 17" x 5.25" x 13.4"
Weight: 31.6 lbs.
Price: \$999

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tonal inflections of, say, a singer's voice is a primary conveyor of emotional intent. Finally, without dynamics we would lose the subtle sweep that defines a melodic line, as well as the grand sweep of an orchestral movement or entire piece.

Of course, there are many other sonic attributes that we associate with high-end sound, like resolution, speed, spatiality, imaging, and frequency extension. There is no doubt that these add to the engagement factor—but engagement can occur without them. In contrast, the troika of timing, tonality, and dynamics is essential.

I hope I do not appear to be “dumbing down” my standards for affordable gear. The essential sonic elements I have described are not easy to come by! I regularly hear products—even expensive ones—that fail in one or more of these areas. So finding affordable gear that gets them all right is a find indeed. The new Rotel stack, I am happy to report, gets them all right.

Listen, for instance, to the Praga CD of Dvorák *Serenades from Bohemia*. If the timing isn't just so, these octets stall faster than a Jag XKE. If the timbres aren't spot on, instrumental lines become blurred, and if micro-dynamics aren't fully captured, the interplay between musicians and the *lilt* of the music is lost. But through the Rotel stack, all of these elements are fully present. Strings are properly rich, bass is weighty, and the piano possesses a lovely round tone. Microdynamics and tiny tempo variations come through clearly, allowing the listener to hear the give and take among the players. Strings may be a touch more strident than would be ideal, but that is a small trade-off—and small trade-offs

are precisely what we hope for in affordable components.

This is all great news, but there is icing on this cake because the Rotel stack makes very few apologies even in *non-essential* categories. Point the laser to Mary Guathier's “Falling Out of Love” from *Mercy Now* and you will be amazed at not only the grittiness of her voice, but also the broad soundstage, well-placed images, and the rock-solid bass—all of which suck you right into her slithery world. Similarly, on the terrific Analogue Productions hybrid disc of Dave Brubeck's *Time Out*, the Rotels not only get the infectious timing and tonal characteristics of the instruments right; their tinkling top piano notes are also airily unrestrained. Again, this last element is not essential to fully digging the music here, but it goes a long way toward hinting at that “real” quality we high-enders seek.

The sound only gets better with high-resolution digital sources. With such material, the RC-1570 exhibits a level of purity that is a skosh higher than it attains when handling the RCD-1570's analog output. With high-res digital sources, instruments and singers step farther forward from a quieter background, adding to the drama of the listening experience. Apparently, Rotel has not lost its touch with DACs.

Modestly priced audio products may not be able to produce the “absolute sound,” but the best of them can fully deliver the heart of the high end. Rotel's 1570/1552 stack falls decisively into this category, forming an incredibly affordable, versatile system that conveys all the music you could want—and more—with very few trade-offs. Rotel is back, my friends. And it is good. **tas**