

AV RECEIVERS

ROTEL RSX-1065/RB-1050

# Star of the show

In home theatre parlance, performance is directly related to output power and the decoding quality of the digital multi-channel source signal.

Typical movie soundtracks are a taxing test for the ability of AV receivers and amplifiers to reproduce wideband, dynamically challenging dialogue, music and effects. And the very quality of those sonic elements depends largely on how well the AV receiver or amplifier decodes the incoming digital signal.

If AV components were judged by looks alone, the Rotel RSX-1065 would be considered a serious piece of kit from the outset. While other marques have gone for sleek designs and silver or champagne-hued enclosures, the Rotel looks purposeful to the point of appearing menacing.

That's partly because a good portion of the unit's DIN-sized width on either side is taken up by heat sinking, leaving a fascia that looks tall and narrow compared to normal designs. Add the integrated grab handles, the functional matt charcoal colouring and switchgear exuding a certain industrial chic, and you could call the Rotel the Darth Vader of AV receivers.

I have to admit that I rather like the look, even if the large number of same-sized buttons compromises front panel ergonomics. On the upside, the bright, full-width fluorescent display is clear, legible and informative.

A further boon is the presence of Rotel's RR-969 learning system remote, which makes armchair control of the AV receiver (in conjunction with onscreen menus) a simple affair, while also allowing other system ancillary commands and multi-step macros to be programmed in.

A closer look at the Rotel reveals more than ample connectivity options. No less than five video input sets are provided, of which two provide reciprocal AV outputs for recording purposes.

In audio-only terms, there's a line-level CD input, and a stereo tape loop. The five digital inputs – three coaxial, two Toslink optical – are freely assignable for further system flexibility.

And while on the subject of inputs, a 6.1 input set makes it possible to link either an SACD or DVD-A player to the Rotel, or to connect up an off-board surround sound processor, should this necessary due to the emergence of a future, superior surround sound format.

This being a receiver, rather than AV amplifier,



RSX-1065

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the Rotel comes equipped with an integrated FM Stereo/AM tuner, complete with more presets than you'll ever need. Reception is very much dependent on the signal quality, but can be excellent.

Videophiles will not be surprised about the presence of S-Video in addition to composite video inputs and outputs. But they'll be even more pleased that two of the video inputs are duplicated as component video input sets, and that the monitor output is also available in all three standards.

The Rotel's on-board microprocessors, manufactured by Crystal Semiconductors, can cope with just about every current surround sound format. Thus, they will accept and decode Dolby Digital 5.1 and DTS 5.1 signals, as well as some of the extended, 6-channel versions of the latter: DTS ES, DTS ES Discrete and DTS Neo: 6.

Notable by its absence is the latest, 6-channel Dolby Digital EX format, although this typically has to go hand in hand with THX certification, which the Rotel lacks. But it does come equipped with the much improved Dolby Pro Logic II, in both movie and magic forms, which vastly improves on the older Dolby Pro Logic standard by providing separate left and right surround channels.

The versatility of the Rotel extends beyond connectivity and surround sound formats, however. It can also perform multiroom functions by delivering programme material to a second room. And yes, this second zone can be fed source material different from that being played

in the primary home theatre environment.

The second zone requires the use of an additional power amplifier – as, for that matter, do the extended-channel formats. In the case of the latter, a centre rear channel represents that extra channel, and the experts say that two rear centres is always better than one.

The Rotel RB-1050 stereo power amplifier was included in the system for that very purpose. Bridgeable into mono, it is perfect for the rear centre mode, and will happily drive two speakers employed in this role. And yes, it's also a good choice as the off-board, second zone power amplifier.

Rotel claims that the RB-1050 offers an output of 75 watts RMS per channel, which is more than useful in either multi-room or 7.1 centre rear channel amp role. And since this too is an audiophile-grade design, tonal characteristics, headroom and dynamic range are akin to those expressed by the RSX-1065's own amplification.

Talking of audiophile quality, Rotel's long-time recognition of HDCD, the Pacific Microsonics-developed music enhancement format, is reflected in the fact that the RSX-1065 can decode HDCD from the PCM digital input stream delivered by a CD player or DVD deck, even if the player itself is not HDCD compatible.

Indeed, one gets the feeling that this receiver, while clearly focused on AV performance and functionality, does so while recognising quite specifically that the ability to accurately translate music does still form an important part of

any audio component's expected talents.

It's an impression reinforced by a glance under the covers, where a generously proportioned toroidal power transformer has been shoehorned into a chassis crammed to the brim with electronics. A concern for quality is also reflected in smaller details, such as the gold-plated connectors, sturdy binding posts and the close attention to noise rejection.

The specification sheet reveals that Rotel credits this AV receiver with a 100 watts RMS per channel into all five channels (20 Hz to 20 kHz, 8 ohms, 0.05% THD). In stereo-only mode, that figure increases to 120 watts RMS per channel.

Also notable is that the amplifier design focuses on optimised current delivery, which ensures efficient driving of difficult speaker loads, and also allows the RSX-1065 to cope with the extended dynamics so often associated with home movie soundtracks.

Once all the connections are in place, set-up is a fairly intuitive affair, thanks to the obligatory menu-driven on-screen displays, noise generator and fine-tuning options. The latter include level settings for each channel, individually configurable for each surround mode, thus catering for the differing parameters of DTS and Dolby Digital, for instance.

Delay times, the high-pass filter point of the subwoofer output and various other parameters can also be set, thereby ensuring that the Rotel's performance can be tailored to suite different room and loudspeaker configurations.

In all then, the RSX-1065 mixes robust construction, ample muscle and admirable levels of configurability and versatility to the kind of sonic performance one would more readily expect from a specialist stereo amplifier than delivered by a brutally-styled AV receiver.

As it turns out, that's no idle claim. The Rotel was given a good couple of days to settle in, linked up to the usual Atlantic Technology 170 sub/satellite system. During the review period, both stereo and surround material was assessed, while a pair of B&W 302 bookshelf speakers were roped in as rear centre speakers for 6.1 evaluation purposes.

Admittedly, that's not ideal, since all the speakers in a surround system should be from the same brand (and even range) to ensure consistent voice-matching. However, it still provided a pretty good idea of what can be achieved from a latest-generation, cutting-edge AV receiver.

In conventional 5.1 formats (Dolby Digital and DTS), the Rotel provided a concise, controlled and accurate rendition of the soundtrack. It had no problem getting to grips with vast dynamic swings and punishing bass lines, yet retained an inherent nimbleness and delicacy

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### VERDICT

Incisive, thrilling performance from an AV amplification package that mixes ample muscle with great multi-channel decoding. Comprehensive facilities further boost appeal.

### PRICE

RSX-1065 .....R36 500  
RB-1050 .....R7 600

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that did even the finest highs and most subtle details absolute justice.

Staging and imaging were completely believable, providing a true, all-surrounding sonic performance underscored by the visuals, and contributing to a thoroughly involving movie experience. Of particular note was the precise rendition of cross-channel effects, the smooth integration of an impressively broad tonal range, and the sheer pace and grunt of the performance.

Both 5.1 digital surround sound formats were performed with the kind of zest, attention to detail and sonic integrity that this medium demands. More interesting were the various 'extended' formats, especially since finding 6.1 software is virtually impossible.

The simulated and matrixed modes offered by DTS sounded pretty good, nonetheless, and certainly reinforced a sense of being in the centre of events. By comparison, the DSP modes on offer did very little to augment, and much to distract one from the original.

However, the Rotel was equally adept at making the most of stereo material, and mainstream audio fans with a love of music will be pleased to hear that this is one of the very few AV receivers that can actually do stereo music justice.

Again, it's the unit's ability to muster the energy without losing sight of the subtleties that sets it apart from other designs. Excellent focus, loads of pace, a penchant for the finer details and a honest but accessible tonal approach are all virtues that form the basis of a good-sounding amplifier.

In the final analysis, there is not much one can criticise the Rotel for. It certainly covers all the important bases from a features point of view, and also provides an in-built upgrade path to ensure that what was an investment does not deteriorate into a liability.

Technically, it's about as bullet-proof as they come – and that's perhaps why one expects it to sound a little brutal, with musicality not an agenda item.

That the Rotel delivers on all fronts, and should have little problem pleasing music and movie fans alike, is fact. But it also offers the impetus, the technology and the overall credibility to entertain and enthral its audience, while the asking price reflects both good value and an investment.

**Deon Schoeman**

