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RC-USB
BT

LIVING UP TO THE MONIKER

Rotel's RC-1590 Control Preamplifier

By Mark Marcantonio

Those with more than one or two sources are not always served by modern preamplifiers. In many cases, gone are the onboard phono stage and headphone amplifier sections, yet with the resurgence of both the headphone and turntable, there is a comeback of old-school thinking to be sure. Rotel takes it further, incorporating a DAC and streamer under the hood of their RC-1590 Control Preamplifier. This is a 21st century component, designed from the ground up to keep up with future system expansion!



The RC-1590 offers no fewer than 14 inputs; it accommodates 3 Toslink, 3 Coax, PC-USB, aptX Bluetooth, USB (iPod/Phone), Ethernet, phono, CD, tuner, and auxiliary. Yet with all this flexibility, the RC-1590's front panel remains understated and simple.

Removing the top cover reveals how Rotel's reputation for building top quality gear has made them a quiet legend in the audio world. The RC-1590 combines a tidy component layout with robust mechanical construction, including heavy

duty input connectors. Larger, weightier premium audio cables will not weaken the connections in this preamplifier over time, leading to circuit failure, something often overlooked at this price point.

Plug your pod right in

An Apple certified USB port on the front panel gives you the option to use your iPod/Pod/Phone as an easy-to-access digital source. Whether you have a new or old "iDevice," front panel access makes it easy for

everyone in the family to enjoy your hifi system, whether playing stored favorites, or streaming from a variety of sources.

Cranking the volume on the bass riff opening of R.E.M.'s "Belong" sets the stage for this review. The RC-1590's onboard DAC section provides way more resolution than the iPod's analog outputs; this becomes clearly evident while listening to the separation between lead guitar and vocals. It only takes a few more tracks to hear what you've been missing.

Rotel has always produced solid-state gear that provides a natural tonal balance. The RA-1520 integrated amp and matching RCD-1520 CD player that I reviewed in issue 23 still brings fond memories, and the RC-1590 continues the tradition with upper and lower registers that are neither exaggerated nor limited. George Winston's arrangements in his *Forest* album flow with ease, with no sharpness in the digital version of the opening track "Tamarack Pines" whatsoever.

The smooth output from the multitude of digital inputs is translated into analog via the on-board AKM 32-bit/768kHz DAC chip. While not of the caliber of a more expensive standalone DAC, it covers the bases. And its being all on one chassis makes the need for – and clutter of – an outboard unit unnecessary for someone purchasing a preamplifier at this price point. The RC-1590 is a fantastic anchor for a versatile system, handling PCM and DSD files with equal efficiency. *(continued)*

What's on the menu

The menus for drilling down into each input to set controls is logical and intuitive. Accessing the four horizontal buttons (MENU, +, -, ENTER) under the volume control customizes each source, along with output, including tone bypass, which is "on" in the factory settings. Each can be adjusted temporarily or as a permanent setting. The option of assigning each output as variable or fixed adds additional flexibility.

This receiver also accommodates the increased popularity of Bluetooth streaming, offering the aptX codec to please the Android users as well as the Apple brethren. I notice some compression when listening to non-audio-ophile fare, but not enough to put the phone down and search out a lossless version via a hardwired connection. Again, the balance between performance and functionality that Rotel provides is spot on; just press the BT button and go.

Back to the DAC

Spinning "I Miss You" and "All I Ask" from Adele's 25, the RC-1590 does show the limits of the AKM built-in DAC architecture. Adele's vocals sound two-dimensional and overly processed in comparison to when they're played through my reference Simaudio 300D and Oppo HA-1 DACs, but it took some pretty soaring vocal tracks to reveal the limits of the 1590s onboard capabilities. *(continued)*



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The RC-1590 displays the bit rate of various digital material; the recognition speed is instantaneous. The Linn sampler *24 Bits of Christmas* jazz collection sounds very sensual and smooth via the AKM DAC chip. Tommy Smith's saxophone digs out the soulful melancholy at 24/96 in "Sophisticated Lady." The extra air in Claire Martin's breathy rendition of "Some Children See Him" lifts the vocals into communal experience. Jumping from 96 to 192 is equally rewarding and the RC-1590 gets out of the way of the music handily.

Plugging in the latest generation of the original Apple TV via optical input is a snap, no need

to restart all the equipment in the chain a few times to properly sync. This is a one-and-done effort. Once again, kudos to the Rotel engineers for making sure the digital linkage works without hiccup. PCM information can be decoded up to 24/192. Signal dropouts are non-existent while playing Christmas music courtesy of the Apple TV Music app.

Additional versatility

Amplifier pairing can be done either by XLR or RCA cables. If your budget doesn't allow the purchase of the matching RB-1590, the neutral tonal balance of this pre-amplifier leaves you a plethora of choices, tube or solid state.

For this review I used the RCA out jacks while listening through my Vista Audio integrated tube amplifier, or a borrowed Musical Fidelity M1PWR class D amp. The RC-1590 sounds clean through either unit, though the tubes add a bit extra lushness to a variety of music.

It's the little touches that impress with Rotel gear. In the case of the RC-1590, it's the recognition of providing owner with either a fixed or dynamic IP setting for Ethernet usage. Updating the RC-1590 software is quite straightforward, or plug in the Ethernet cable (if you're not already using it), scan through the display menu and select update. It's that simple.

Spinning several LPs via my Rega RP1/Ortofon Super OM40 table and cartridge, the RC-1590 MM phono section, much like the DAC section, performs just fine by itself. A 2L recording of Living by pianist Jan Gunnar Hoff reveals some nice residual artifacts in the upper mid keys. The bottom sounds a bit flat, as reverberation of bass notes don't project out into my room. On the other hand, the upper registers give no hint of shrillness.

Even the Rotel's remote scores big points. The RR-AX100 remote breaks up the controls into five sections via different shaped buttons, making for easy navigation by sight or touch – even though all the buttons are the same color sans the red OFF in the top left corner. White name, numerals, or symbols are easily identifiable.

Headphone output is solid, with the Rotel catering to the latest phones more easily with a 1/8" mini jack. The KEF M500 on-ear, as well as a vintage pair of budget Sennheisers, match up quite well. Therefore, the RC-1590 will do quite well in either escaping to or from the music if sharing the room.



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that leads to the inevitable feeling audiophiles experience called “upgrade-itis.” Yes, moving up the Vandersteen line always offers more performance and ever greater musical pleasure, as will any other true upgrade to your system. But owning Vandersteens and upgrading **because you love the way your music sounds** is so much better than swapping out your gear because you *can't stand* the way your music sounds.

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REVIEW



Additional Listening

Going all the way back with Rotel to their earliest pieces with black faceplates, the RC-1590 is a welcome treat to revisit, now with the silver livery. Using this preamplifier with the matching RB-1590 amplifier makes for a formidable combination and my review of the power amplifier is almost finished.

Good as you'd expect an all-Rotel combination to sound, as Marc hints, this preamplifier is indeed compatible with other brands equally well. A weekend listening session with Conrad-Johnson, vintage Audio Research, PrimaLuna, Simaudio and Nagra power amplifiers all proved the RC-1590 up to task.

Moving upscale a bit with the phonostage to the VPI Classic 1 and Ortofon 2M Black is impressive; proving to be quiet, dynamic and engaging. Like 'em or lump 'em, (count me in the “like 'em” category) there's a bass and treble control at your disposal, and that can go a long way towards making marginal albums much more palatable.

The Rotel RC-1590 combines great sonics, build and convenience all in a package that is unbeatable for well under two grand. And, you can still get one in black. A perfect recipient of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2016.

— Jeff Dorgay

Rotel RC-1590 Preamplifier
\$1,790

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Speakers Penaudio Cenya, Quad 2812, Graham LS5/9

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