



Relatively Rotel

A new Rotel amp is always welcome, especially when its parents are so highly respected

PRODUCT Rotel RA-03

TYPE Integrated stereo amplifier

PRICE £499

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43.5x9.2x34.2cm

• Weight: 8kg • Rated power: 70W/channel (continuous into eight ohms) • Five line inputs • Phono (MM) input • Twin speaker outputs (independently switched) • remote control

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For 40 years, Rotel has managed to steer a course between the mass market and the specialist niche, in the process building an enviable reputation as a manufacturer of fine value audio electronics. No company of long history has ever had an unbroken run of successes, but Rotel's score of near misses is an unusually low one. New Rotel products don't come along every day, either, so we were more than usually keen to see this latest addition to the firm's catalogue.

You may have noticed an earlier amplifier, the RA-02, which we welcomed most warmly back in *HFC* 232. It bears a certain family resemblance to the RA-03 tested here. That's not coincidental, for the newcomer combines features both of that amp and of the RB-03 power amp – like the RA-03 a 70-watt model.

In essence, the RA-03 is the RB-03 with a preamp section added, or a RA-02 with a better power amp. Regardless, the RA-03 is nicely specified, with five line inputs and a phono stage (MM only), plus tone and balance controls. There's a remote control, a pair of 'pre out' sockets to allow for bi-amping or control of a remote power amp, plus additional sockets for various remote control and trigger connections.

Looks are smart enough, but the little knobs for tone and speaker switching are perfectly horrid to use, should you ever wish to. Inside, inputs are switched by an integrated circuit, which operates on fairly high voltages to ensure that source components of more than average output are not hideously distorted before they get to the volume control. A couple of integrated circuit op-amps buffer the signal, but the power amplifier part relies entirely on discrete transistors for operation. The transistor line-up includes doubled-up pairs of output devices (bipolar transistors) on a large heatsink, which should ensure that tough loads are driven confidently and reliably.

Power is derived initially from a large toroidal transformer. Interestingly, Rotel has adopted the 'slit foil' technology pioneered by British firm DNM for its power supply capacitors – a

technique that's claimed to improve the speed with which charge can enter and leave the capacitors. All this evidently is part of what Rotel calls its 'Balanced Design Concept': nothing to do with balanced audio signals, but a 'balance' between technology and subjective judgement in the design process. We'd like to think all manufacturers worked that way...

The volume control is a motorised potentiometer and all other switches are regular mechanical types, while two sets of speaker terminals are switched by relays. There is evidence of above-average expenditure on high quality components, with metal film resistors and professional capacitors throughout. It's not the chunkiest or highest-specified amplifier you can get for £500, but it is one of the most impressively built internally.

SOUND QUALITY

With high expectations born equally of Rotel's track record and the current status quo with mid-price amps, we were not disappointed by our early acquaintance with this amplifier. The RA-03 offers a clear and unfussy musical presentation with plenty of gusto and no shortage of subtlety when required. It can fairly belt out the power on heavy stuff (aided by a

maximum sustained output that comfortably exceeds the rating – we got more like 90 watts out of it) and it's not afraid of pianissimo either.

It's not perfect, though. Okay, this is a statement of the obvious – Halcro, Bryston *et al* would look pretty silly if it were. But, its imperfections contrast with those of other amps in its category and ultimately they will decide its fate at the hands and ears of each listener.

A first hint came while playing a spot of orchestral music. We'd been enjoying some full-blooded climaxes, but as the scale reduced somewhat, there seemed to be a touch of coloration in evidence and even some veiling. This was most noticeable at moderate volumes with small to medium-size groups of instruments, a finding repeated in different musical styles. The coloration affected the upper midrange, making it a little 'quacky', while the veiling reduced the precision of stereo imaging and blurred the distinction between instruments.

It's unusual for effects like this to be confined to moderate levels – they tend to worsen at one dynamic extreme or the other. However, careful checking showed that, while music at full-level was still slightly veiled, the overall effect was more convincing. Perhaps the artefacts in question affect mid and high volumes but are considerably more exposed at mid levels due to the lower distortion of almost all loudspeakers under such conditions.

As far as we could tell, volume setting on the RA-03 had little effect on these artefacts. That points the finger at whatever happens to the signal before it reaches the volume control, in this case principally the integrated circuits that select the input and buffer the signal. A brief spell on the test bench appeared to confirm this, with a degree of distortion clearly rising sharply at high frequencies and high levels. Very high-level sources do in fact overload the amp, but that's seldom relevant since almost all of those are generated by esoteric sources such as the £9,500 dCS Elgar digital converter, and that's not the most obvious partner to a £500 amplifier.

Don't be put off by this, however. It's not devastating, and for many it may be a very small issue. At worst, it brings no shame on an amp at this price. So, let's return to the good things – bass for a start. You can really revel in bass with this amp. It has a melodic, firm and extended bottom end that certainly does rhythm when required but (what is rarer) never obscures the



“It has a melodic, firm and extended bottom end that does rhythm when required but never obscures low instrument tuning.”

tuning of low instruments. It doesn't seem bothered about the speakers it's driving either, making the most out of sealed box, bass reflex and panel speakers in turn, and it's not level-dependent. Perhaps it's not got the lowest distortion we've ever seen, particularly into low impedance loads, but a touch of low-order distortion never seemed to hurt bass much.

And then there's the treble. Just occasionally one might wish it to be a little less forthright – that well-loved classic *Kind of Blue*, for instance, showed up a very slight tendency to over-brightness on those close-up trumpet and sax solos. It's not quite as open, either, as the very best around, but there's a decent illusion of space around naturally ambient recordings.


We can't close without commending the phono stage. Given its apparent similarity (on brief inspection) to those tucked into the same corner of so many other integrated amps, it's a surprise to find that it significantly exceeds the performance of most of them. This could be due to the precision components used, could be the careful layout, or because of some intangible tweak Rotel applied – whatever, it's

one of the cleanest-sounding integrated phono stages we've heard in a while. It's sensibly quiet too, albeit not breath-takingly so.

It's not exactly a no-brainer decision between this amp and its hottest rivals – we're thinking particularly of the Exposure 2010 S and Marantz PM7200 KI integrated models included in our recent *Ultimate Group Test* in *HFC 262*. You're unlikely to feel badly let down by any of them, but if you compare the three, you may find some small but decisive differences in matching your own tastes. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT	
SOUND >> 85% [Progress bar]	 <p>PRO Engaging presentation of large-scale music with both gusto and precision, no fear of dynamic extremes. Commendable phono stage.</p> <p>CON At middling levels, a little coloration makes itself felt, along with a slight blurring of stereo images.</p>
FEATURES >> 87% [Progress bar]	
BUILD >> 85% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 88% [Progress bar]	
CONCLUSION	
A fine hi-fi amp at a sensible price, with a slightly different set of compromises – all of them minor – from the competition. It's notably unfussy about partnering equipment and musical tastes, and offers a fine built-in MM phono stage to boot.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 86%	