

# Shared Value(s)



**Dominic Todd tries a brilliantly balanced mid-priced system featuring two brands that share the same distributor – Rotel electronics and B&W loudspeakers...**

One of the joys of hi-fi separates is being able to mix n' match. Get it right and the overall sound quality can easily transcend the ability of the individual components. Get it wrong, however, and, as many readers will attest, the results can be disappointing to say the least. With this in mind, it's no wonder that many music lovers go for, what should be, the safe route of buying a matched system. Whilst it's not always the case, with most companies you can guarantee a degree of synergy by buying from the same brand.

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Components are often developed and tested together and therefore usually work at their best when partnered with matching ancillaries.

Rotel have long promoted their concept of 'balanced design', and whilst most Rotel products are tolerant enough to work with a wide variety of other components, a CD and amplifier should be at their best when partnered. Rotel is actually distributed by B&W in this country, so it came as no surprise that they recommended B&W speakers to complement the Rotel duo. Whilst they are a different brand entirely,

commonly distributed brands often have a synergy of their own. In the first instance, many distributors are already aware of brands that fit their sonic profile and will choose accordingly. Secondly, after brands have been coupled for some time, you'll often find development work carried out cross-brand. The latest Mordaunt Short speakers, for example, were developed with distribution partner, Marantz, supplying the electronics.

At the heart of this particular mid-range system lies Rotel's excellent RA-03 amplifier. Reviewed in the August 2005 issue, this five

globe amp' has already proved its mettle. Based on the well-respected RA-02, the RA-03 features a number of upgrades aimed at the audiophile. Rotel's own design of toroidal power transformer helps

produce a respectable 90 watts power output, and there is typical attention to detail throughout the power supply. Copper bus bars are used in high current stages, DNM have designed the slit foil capacitors and there's separate signal and power earthing. Meanwhile, at the output side of things, Burr Brown op-amps claim and, as we shall see, do, offer improved transparency and resolution. Without going over the top, pretty much every feature needed is supplied. Crucial to any matched system is a supplied remote control that will also control the

basic functions of the CD player. This, the Rotel amp' has.

In this case, that CD player happens to be Rotel's well established RCD-02. Like the amp' the RCD-02 shows evidence of being well engineered and solidly built, if not exactly adventurous in the use of new techniques. At the heart of the CD lies a Burr Brown IC that provides resolution claimed to equal 18-bit. HDCD decoding is also part and parcel of the chip. The transport mechanism is a Sony design, and the rest of the circuitry shows careful choice of good quality components. As with the amp', the power supply is to Rotel's own design, although this time it's a frame type and not a toroidal design. Again, all the basics are there featurewise, including a coaxial digital output, track programming and random playback. Amazingly there are still some manufacturers who use different casing styles for differing products. Fortunately, as you can see, this is not the case here, with the two components perfectly complimenting one another aesthetically.

The aesthetics of the supplied B&W 602S3's finish may not be everyone's taste, but most will agree that this is a handsome large loudspeaker. Like the CD player, the 602S3's have been about for some time now, but also like the CD they are still highly respected. A 180mm (7") woven Kevlar bass cones mates up with a, carefully damped, metal dome tweeter. As with the Rotel electronics, the key is in the detail. The front baffle, for example, is double skinned with the outer,

polypropylene, casing being specially moulded to reduce diffractions and sharpen the imaging. The front mounted bass port features a tapered tube with surfacing detail first developed for the 800-series. Like the electronics, the build quality is good with the very professional finish you'd expect from a company of B&W's stature. Indeed, for long term durability there are few names at this end of the market that command such respect.

## SOUND QUALITY

With the system all in place, I began by listening to Tipper's 'Just As The Sun Went Down'. Almost immediately I was struck by the system's superb detail and its control. Ambient effects were superbly staged and projected. Each individual note had a crafted and complete quality often missing from equipment at this price range. Equally impressive was the layering of sound, which also revealed levels of detail again unusual at this level. The 602 S3's weren't quite as bassy as I remember, but then I was auditioning them on different stands [see **TWEAKING**] and, of course, with different components. Nonetheless, whilst I would have liked a tad more weight to the sound, the taut and tuneful bass was beyond reproach.

Josh One's 'Grey Skies' revealed a very slight boxiness to the low end. Whilst powerful enough in the lower mid-range it did lack extension at really low levels. Otherwise it was, once again, all good news. Vocals were reproduced with exceptional transparency, and the openness and spaciousness of sound was quite striking. Perhaps even more importantly than this was the manner in which the system tunelessly strung the rhythms along. It showed great dexterity in handling even the most complex arrangement of rhythm. No doubt, in part, thanks to the height of the 'speaker once on its

dedicated stand, the soundstage had plenty of height. Yet, this must have been more than a consequence of its physical height, as the 'arc' of sound was still there with the 'speakers placed on lower stands, too.

Moving on to The Divine Comedy's 'Bad Ambassador', I found Hannon's vocals placed well forward of the rest of the mix, yet not intrusively so. Like the other instruments, the initial guitar introductions showed fine realism. Whilst the 'speakers may not have had quite the weight of equivalently priced floorstanders, they had enough in reserve for powerful dynamics: Plenty, in fact, to build the tension and emotion necessary to get a kick from a song such as this. Also pleasing to hear was the system's ability to handle high volumes without apparent compression or clipping. That having been said, I was always aware of the tweeters metal construction, although the Rotels' did appear to have something of a calming effect, especially with the soaring strings. Key to the systems appeal was, once again, its ability to involve the listener.

Neither was Involvement lacking in Tracey Chapman's 'Mountains O' Things'. The Rotel/ B&W system managed to pull off a superb balancing act in making Chapman's vocals sound smooth and sibilant free yet still soulful and full of character, colour and texture. The system was equally good at projecting the vocals well forward of the rest of the mix – highlighting them without being overblown. Whilst the percussion lay behind Chapman's vocals it was still reproduced with precision, great timing and, again, not in an overblown or relentless way.

An interesting quality that appeared with The Cardigans' 'Erase and Rewind' was that old Rotel characteristic of being able to pluck

notes out of a seemingly inky blackness of pure silence. Of course, there is still some background noise but, in comparison to most rivals, noise levels are extremely low and testament to the high levels of engineering quality. When I'd reviewed the amplifier individually, I'd criticised its lack of edge or rawness. This time, however, it was not a criticism that I could level at the system. No doubt the 'speakers helped, but the excellent attack shown by the percussion was greatly above my expectations. The pulsing bass was also present, if not quite possessing the final degree of solidity needed to be utterly convincing. The well-projected vocals were forward but managed to stay on the right side of the mark, managing to still be arresting, just as they should with this song. Once again, this systems faithfulness to the original artist is one of its most impressive qualities.

The final disc, as usual, was a Classical one. Chabrier's, Suite Pastorale, isn't always as tame as it sounds, with plenty of scope to catch out napping components. Yet, the Rotel/B&W combo was one system that refused to be caught out. The metal tweeter gave delicate percussion a super level of decay and detail, yet it did also allow the strings to be not quite as smoothly portrayed as some may like. Certainly the Rotels are as smooth as they come, so if you were to find the string balance a little bright, then it is to the loudspeakers you should look. Otherwise, instrumental timbre was excellent. Other speakers may have had an advantage in terms of refinement, but when it comes to dynamic contrast and sheer cohesion they wouldn't get a look in. Dynamic, hard-hitting, yet fluent and tolerably refined when needed. Just as with the other musical genres, this particular system made a pretty impressive case for itself. Yet even the best can often be improved...



## CONCLUSION

I'd expected this system to perform well and, by and large, it exceeded expectations. Once wired up with the DNM cables and using the Atacama stands, I found the whole system just gelled. For an all in price of less than £1,400 it's difficult to see how you'd get more musical pleasure for your money. In terms of projection, timbre, layering, and timing this particular system leads the field at this price point. Bass, whilst not possessing the ultimate extension of larger floorstanders is at least tuneful and still powerful enough to convey large scale dynamic swings. The treble

## TWEAKING

As we've seen this is an extremely well balanced and involving system.

Yet there are ways in which it can be tuned.

Along with the 'speakers, B&W sent a pair of STAV20 stands. These, flat-packed, stands seemed reasonable enough, with twin columns and decent rigidity. Try to find any information on them though and you'll struggle. B&W don't seem too keen on promoting them in the UK as they're not on their website, or indeed even on a UK Google search! I found them for sale on a Danish site for about £50, which I guess would mean they'd sell for £40-£50 in the UK. With the 602s being a larger design, I found they worked best when spiked to the top plate. As is usually the case, the stands and 'speakers gave of their best when the stands were filled - I used my usual mixture of sand, lead shot and polystyrene chips (which helps prevent the sand from settling and solidifying). Used as such the bass response had a little more extension and weight, yet the 'speakers still weren't performing to their full potential.

Usually, I'd recommend the Partington Super Dreadnoughts, but at 24" they're simply too high. Next best, and a stand that I know works well with the 602S3 is the #75 Atacama SE5. This is a descendant of the highly regarded SE24, but in a more contemporary silver finish and, more importantly, a more suitable 20" in height. Used with the SE5, you'll find the 602S3s to be less boxy and even more open sounding than with B&W's own stands. Again, use top spikes and fill the stands (about three quarters) with sand/lead shot to get the best results. One final point worth remembering with stands is that, when you're sitting down, the 'speakers treble unit should be at ear height. With both these 20" stands I found the 602's right at the limit of acceptability. My listening position is quite high, so it wasn't so much of a problem, but if you listen from a lower point, such as a futon, then you'll need to consider a lower stand still. Again, turning to Atacama I found the SL400 to suit the design perfectly. It's 400mm (15.8") tall and, thanks to four columns, is extremely rigid. Like the SE5 it retails for around £90, although if you shop around you should be able to knock a bit off this.

Both Rotel's feature an IEC, or kettle type, mains connection; so upgrading the mains cable is easy. I have to say, though, that my experience with mains cables is that it's only the more expensive cables that make a significant difference. With this particular system, therefore, I'd say that the money is best spent elsewhere, like with the interconnect. Generally I use DNM Reson cables and found both interconnect and 'speaker cables suited the system down to the ground. Remembering that the amp uses DNM capacitors, the DNM cables make further sense, as this promotes a greater level of system synergy. Use these cables and you'll make the most of the systems excellent levels of transparency and resolution. A few pointers, though. Without doubt, the better DNM interconnect is the one with Eichmann Bullet plugs. At £75 it's not cheap, but you can put the money saved on mains cables towards it. The 'speaker cable is, at £7.50 per metre, just as great a bargain as it's always been. My advice though, would be to buy it untermated. It's very easy to strip and offers a perfectly good connection without plugs. This gives you a further saving in order to put towards an extra length for bi wiring. As it's a solid core cable, try and keep cable lengths as short as possible - under 3m per side if you can.



performance managed to get the balance between detail and refinement pretty much spot on. Yes, you could occasionally tell that the B&W's used a metal dome tweeter but, thanks to the refinement of the Rotels, any potential peakiness was balanced out. Perhaps most importantly of all, the Rotel/ B&W system performed just as well with all types of music. From Trance to Classical, this combo will always give of its best - which is a rather more rare quality than you might imagine.

Sonic compatibility is, of course, just one of the reasons, for buying a system. The other is aesthetics and whilst this will be of less importance to most readers here, it's still a relevant aspect. Whilst the Rotel combo isn't as neat as the Arcam Solo it doesn't exactly look ugly, and it will sound at least as good for less money (although a DAB radio's not included). The B&W's are a fine visual match, too. Whatever your views on how it look, though, just take a listen and I challenge you not to be won over. This is a case of the whole being more than the sum of the parts, even when the parts are already top notch. For less than £1,400 it's one system that I can recommend without reservation - and as regular readers will know, that's a very rare occurrence indeed!

ROTEL RCD 02	£399
ROTEL RA 03	£499
Rotel UK	
☎ +44 (0) 1903 221 500	
www.rotel.com	

B&W 602S3	£300
B&W	
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