



ROTEL: DETAILED AND DYNAMIC

Rotel RCD-02 CD player

PRICE £379

Rotel RA-03 amplifier

PRICE £499

Rotel was the first Japanese company to meet the demands of western hi-fi buyers by harnessing UK design input in its amplifiers. Two decades, many ranges and a home cinema revolution later, Rotel is still aiming at least some of its products at audiophiles on a tight budget.

Neat and relatively compact at 435 x 92 x 342mm (whd), the RA-03 amplifier has a traditional-style fascia with a large central volume control flanked by a complete array of minor controls. The two middle-sized rotary controls on the right are for Source selection (four line-level inputs plus moving-magnet phono) and Tape Monitor, while smaller ones provide balance, treble and bass tone controls (defeatable), and switching for two pairs of speakers.

On the back, along with the in/out socketry and two pairs of good-quality speaker connectors, are an external remote input (allowing the player to respond to commands from a second, external connected IR receiver) an IR Output (for connection to other Rotel products) and two 12V trigger outputs.

Measuring 435 x 73 x 313mm, the RCD-02 CD player is a conventional-looking machine with a basic array of front panel buttons laid out logically below the display, including Track forward and back. The supplied (small) remote handset adds programming, direct track number entry, programming (up to 20 tracks), scan, repeat and random play modes – but of these extra functions only direct entry and random play are also added on the RA-03's system remote. On the rear panel are the usual analogue outputs plus a coaxial digital output socket, an external remote input and a 12V trigger input connection. Both the RA-03 and RCD-02 are available in black or silver finish.

SOUND QUALITY

On the string bass, which opens 'Easy Money', the Rotel combination immediately showed both good weight and realistic detail in the harmonics and string noises. Rickie Lee's voice was natural-sounding if a bit on the bright side, and throughout the track, you could hear lots of detail in the backing instruments. And this time

the opening of 'First We Take Manhattan' sounded truly spectacular, with a punchy, slamming offbeat from the drummer and a full vocal sound. Here the muscular bass really drove the track along, with a big, gutsy sound overall, and a detailed, sparkling top end. As you might expect after that, the Heifetz recording sounded rather overwhelming, but now the orchestra made some sense, thanks partly again to the underpinning of a clean and powerful bass. This Rotel combination is strong in detail and dynamics with an excellent bass quality, and the results can be very impressive indeed.

Assessed with other sources, the energetic RA-03 displayed deep, convincing bass, a spacious soundstage in which instruments could appear from 'inky black' silent backgrounds, a wealth of detail which could sometimes be quite arresting, and clean top-end energy that enlivened percussion sounds.

The RCD-02 CD player had a somewhat more forward sound than the NAD C542 here, the bass being more firmly controlled but tuneful, while there was good detail in backing instruments. And this held true even at moments of great complexity.

Conservatively rated

Describing the RA-03 as a high-current amplifier, Rotel says that the nominal figure of 70W/ch, 20Hz-20kHz, 8 ohms, is a conservative rating. The power supply, based on a Rotel-designed toroidal transformer and high quality DNM Design slit-foil reservoir capacitors, is said to be key to the RA-03's dynamic performance and low-frequency control. As in the successful RA-02 model, the line stage uses short symmetrical signal paths 'for maximum resolution'.

Rotel's established RCD-02 player uses a Burr-Brown PCM1732 18-bit-equivalent multi-level Delta Sigma D/A converter with 8-times oversampling, which also provides HDCD decoding. The 'minimalist' analogue output stage uses carefully selected parts, while the power supply features a Rotel transformer with quick-response reservoir capacitors that the company says make for a 'detailed, revealing, yet non-fatiguing sound'.

Supplier

B&W Loudspeakers UK
01903 221500
www.rotel.co.uk



Amplifier	Dimensions (mm, whd)	Rated power (8 ohms)	Line inputs	Phono (m-m)	12V trigger out
Harman Kardon HK 970	440 x 110 x 332	80W/ch, 20Hz-20kHz	4 + 2 record in/out	yes	yes
NAD C720BEE (receiver)	435 x 147 x 387	50W/ch, 20Hz-20kHz	5* + 1 record in/out	no	yes
Onkyo A-933	275 x 103 x 328	80W/ch, 1kHz	3* + 2 record in/out	yes	no
Rotel RA-03	435 x 92 x 342	70W/ch, 20Hz-20kHz	4 + 1 record in/out	yes	yes (2)

Note: rated power outputs are not specified to uniform distortion limits. * not including 'main in'

CD player	Dimensions	CD Text	CD-R/CD-RW	MP3	DualDisc	12V trigger in
Harman Kardon HD 970	440 x 63 x 332	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
NAD C542	435 x 70 x 285	no	yes	no	yes	yes
Onkyo C-733	275 x 103 x 304	no	yes	no	yes	no
Rotel RCD-02	435 x 73 x 313	no	yes	no	yes	yes

Hi-FiNews verdict

Onkyo's attractive A-933 and C-733 are compact, extremely well built with a genuine luxury feel, and are nice to use. Viewed strictly from an audiophile perspective the combination isn't particularly good value at £900. But these components can produce very good sounds particularly on rock music while fitting perfectly into any modern living environment. A DAB tuner is available to complete the stack.

The NAD combination costs a little less at £730, and of course includes an FM/AM tuner. NAD's musical presentation is open, inviting, and a little softer than the others in this group. If you find it hard to relax into CD sound, the NAD recipe may suit you best. And if you don't need a tuner section, the C320BEE is currently available in many stores at under £200.

With neither the stunning dynamics of the Rotel pair, nor the beguiling quality of the NAD duo, the Harman Kardon HK 970/HD 970 combination still produced a well-balanced, unforced and natural sound that encouraged long-term listening and represents good value for money at £650. Ultimately, the CD player's sound in particular may be too 'quiet' and laid-back, and not overtly detailed enough for some, particularly if you're a rocker, but both products are confidently recommended.

Over the years, Rotel has just quietly gone on pressing the same value-for-money buttons a little harder with each new range. At £900 the RA-03/RCD-02 combination will be difficult to beat – provided your taste is for an exciting, upfront sound. The amplifier comes with

powerful, accurate bass and a hugely dynamic, punchy performance, with excellent detail throughout the range. It has good grip, too. And I think that, given careful system matching, it will produce really excellent results in a wider context. Carefully designed and cunningly voiced, the Rotel RA-03 is the standout component in this whole group. The revival is real! ■

