



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION

GROUP TEST

WINNER



SPEAKERS
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BASS

TREBLE

TONE
ON/OFF

ROTEL

REMOTE

MODE

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LINE 1

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ROKSAN

Group Test

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

£499 - £650

The amps your music deserves

Step up from a budget amp to these mid-price marvels and you'll soon hear a better-than-ever boost in quality. Go on, why not be tempted?

What's new?

We have new, untested amplifiers from Marantz and NAD. Long-term readers will know those brands have great track records when it comes to stereo amplification, so we have high expectations of these products. We've also included Rotel's new RA-03, which impressed us so much when we reviewed it last issue. As well as that, the latest version of Exposure's 2010 integrated makes a showing. The present class champion, the Roksan Kandy Mk III, also features, as does Cyrus's extremely talented 6vs.

What do you get for your money?

The best of these amplifiers will deliver a top-class stereo performance. They'll reveal more detail than cheaper offerings and are built to a higher standard. Features lists tend to be longer and power output is dramatically increased as manufacturers have more money to play with.

Will it fit into your system?

Yes, provided that your source and speakers are up to the mark. You'll need a source of at least Arcam CD 73T standard to justify spending this much money on an amplifier, and even Cyrus's £1000 CD8x wouldn't be out of the question for the best products here. When it comes to speakers think of something like Epos's £350 M5s as a good place to start, though we don't think that some of the better speakers at around £700-£800 are out of the question.

What are we looking for?

The best sound possible. We're looking for the most honest and revealing amplifier here. It has got to work well with a wide range of sources and drive a broad spread of speakers with ease. After that, build and features are considerations, with cosmetics coming a distant last.

Our star ratings explained

Five stars means that the amplifier is a great all-rounder and excellent value, too. A four-star product is still worth considering, but doesn't deserve a universal recommendation. It might work really well in a particular system. An average performer will get three stars, though under some circumstances it might be what you're after. Lower rated products are disappointing.

THE CONTENDERS

CYRUS 6vs

£600

The Roksan just pipped the Cyrus 6vs to an Award last year, but will that situation change now the Kandy has suffered a price increase?



EXPOSURE 2010S

£599

The Exposure's companion CD player has wowed us with its performance. Can Exposure's matching integrated amplifier do the same?



MARANTZ PM7200 KI

£500

Many a Marantz amplifier has won our stars, praise and Awards in the past: will this latest midrange model impress us as much?



NAD C372

£500

This amplifier's baby brother, the C352CT, is our current amplifier Product of the Year – so how does this new midrange integrated compare to that?



ROKSAN Kandy MkIII

£650

Current winner of our best-in-class Award at this price level, can the Roksan Kandy keep its crown despite strong rivals – and a price hike?



ROTEL RA-03

£499

We raved about this Rotel when we put it through its paces in *First Tests* in last month's issue – so is it good enough to be the new amp champ?



For all our stereo amplifier verdicts, see our *Buyer's Guide* starting on page 91 →

Cyrus 6vs £600

↑ FOR
An insightful and articulate performer, fine build, upgradeable

↓ AGAINST
Sounds a little polite compared to newer rivals

◆ VERDICT
Still a fine choice, but the Cyrus 6vs is no longer one of the very best amplifier buys at this price point



Cyrus packs a lot in to that small chassis, and it's upgradeable

CYRUS'S ENTRY-LEVEL amplifier is a neat little device. Its die-cast casework has been the brand's trademark for well over a decade, and still looks fresh. Unlike most rivals, the 6vs is built upside down, with all the electronics mounted into the casing, leaving the base to act as a lid. This allows the designers to use the outer shell as a heatsink, and helps the electronics by giving them a rock-solid foundation to work from.

The 6vs has six line-level inputs, biwire BFA speaker sockets and a headphone output on its tiny back panel. It can be upgraded, too.

Turn the amp on, and the front panel LED lights up in a predefined pattern. This light show – along with the compact size and low, 40 watt per channel output – might suggest the Cyrus puts style before performance. Not so: the 6vs is – as Cyrus amps have always been – a fast, articulate

performer, delivering a wealth of detail in a cohesive and ordered style. It doesn't have the firepower to deliver *Carmina Burana* with the venom of some here, but in compensation it reveals the interplay of voices and instruments with skill, making the piece easy to follow.

Its understated delivery sounds a little polite in this company, but is rhythmically solid, with almost clinical clarity. Few others in this test

define the leading edge of a note with such precision. The result is that Prince's *Diamond and Pearls* set comes through with verve, and even lesser-quality recordings make sense musically. The Cyrus won't disguise a poor recording, but it won't make an undue fuss about one either.

The 6vs is a superb amp, but – thanks to newer rivals offering more for less money – no longer represents the very best this class has to offer.

Exposure 2010S £599

↑ FOR
An entertaining performer that works well with all music; simple in the nicest possible way

↓ AGAINST
Bass lacks agility; limited features

◆ VERDICT
For good, honest musical fun this Exposure makes a lot of sense. Not the most revealing performer, though



If it's fun you're after, the Exposure amp could be for you

EXPOSURE KIT HAS an attractive 'back to basics' approach that suggests the brand puts performance above flashy cosmetics and features. The 2010S holds true to form. Get it in the black finish and it looks little different to the products the firm made back in the 1980s, and it has some of that old-fashioned feel, too. The controls have a clunky operation, but at least feel sturdy to the touch.

This second generation of 2010 amp has taken a notable step forward in terms of build over its predecessor.

Its casework is thicker, and the whole thing gives off an air of quality the old amp couldn't match. Power has gone up, from 50 watt per channel to 75 watts per side, so this integrated should be able to take a firmer grip on partnering speakers.

The 2010S is a powerful, straight talking amp that trades in some of the refinement and insight of the class leaders for a sizable dose of fun. If you just want to sit back and enjoy music, then this Exposure deserves a serious audition. It might not match

the very best when it comes to unearthing subtleties in a recording like *Carmina Burana*, but it'll leave you in no doubt as to what Orff intended you to feel. Dynamics are unrestrained, and the amp has the reserves to stay in control as the piece becomes more frantic.

Attack and speed are abundant, and this enthusiasm works well across all genres of music. Tori Amos benefits from an explicit and well-projected midrange, which sounds satisfyingly solid, while Prince's

Thunder revels in the Exposure's hard-charging attitude. Our only criticism is that the powerful low end isn't quite as taut as we'd like: fast-moving basslines lose a little momentum. Choose its partnering kit carefully to avoid this becoming a major issue: articulate sources and speakers will yield the best results.

That said, there's still no denying this is a fine amplifier at a sensible price. If you like your music lively, and don't make a habit of analysing recordings, it'll make a good choice.

Marantz PM 7200 KI £500

↑ FOR
Packed with features; a cohesive and refined sound

↓ AGAINST
Timing lacks the precision of the very best – not great for dance-music fans

→ VERDICT
This Marantz is a well-equipped amp with a likeable if soft character – if it suits your musical style, give it a try



'KI': JUST TWO letters, but ones that represent £170 on top of the price of the standard PM 7200, and a host of changes, including a copper-plated chassis and upgraded internal parts.

Marantz clearly feels that plenty of features is the way ahead, so this amp packs all the standard items: tone controls, twin tape loops and two switchable speaker outputs.

More unusual is the small button on the front panel, which enables the

amp to switch from Class AB mode – something most rivals work in – to Class A. Use the PM 7200 KI in this mode and power output drops from an impressive 95 watts per channel to just 25 watts per side, but the sound gains refinement and smoothness. The amp runs hotter, though.

If you like your music relaxing and full-bodied, keep the button pressed in. However, Class A mode doesn't please every time: it robs Prince's set

of some sparkle, and rounds off *Carmina Burana's* dynamic extremes.

In our preferred standard mode, the Marantz wields its considerable muscle with a good deal of finesse. Tori Amos's voice is delivered with great skill, while large-scale classical such as Dvorak's *Symphony No. 9 in E Minor* come through with verve.

However, the PM 7200 KI is a little shy about getting up to dance. It's got all the right moves – authority and

punch are impressive – but not the timing to make everything work in a slick Travolta-like manner. The result is that this amp can't deliver dance music with the same enthusiasm as, say, the Exposure.

Stick to classical or vocal-based music and the PM 7200 KI Signature is right up there with the very best amps at this price. But it just falls short of the all-round excellence that would warrant a five-star rating.

NAD C372 £500

↑ FOR
A powerful amplifier that comes equipped with plenty of features

↓ AGAINST
Lacks detail, dynamics and finesse; takes up loads of rack space

→ VERDICT
The C372 is a real disappointment. We never thought we'd say this about a NAD amp, but this is one to avoid



TAKE AN AWARD-WINNING amp – the £350 NAD C352 – make it bigger and add lots more power. Put the price up to pay for all the extras, and the result is the C372.

Nothing else in this test gets close to producing the NAD's 150 watts per channel, or takes up so much rack space. Judged on paper, this monster has the makings of a winner. It matches the Marantz on the feature front, and can be easily split into separate preamp and power sections when the need to upgrade arises. The

power amplifier can even be bridged, which increases output to a speaker-sizzling 400 watts in mono.

Get the C372 up and running and its power is immediately apparent. It'll drive just about any speaker to headache-inducing level without struggling, and produces a level of authority and scale that even the very best at this price would struggle to match. If you want a party animal, then this is the amp to choose for you, because no other in this *Group Test* can go so loud so easily.

Sadly, that's where the good news ends. In most other sonic areas this beast is left well behind the opposition. If you think that such a powerful amplifier should produce bold dynamics then you'll be disappointed, because this NAD compresses the extremes to produce a safe, unexciting sound.

So you think this amp's mighty muscle translates to taut, powerful basslines? Wrong again, as the C372 delivers flabby low frequencies that are blurred, soft and have all the

precision of a two-year old doing algebra. The level of detail resolution is well below par, too.

If you believe we've been overly hard on the C372, compare the performance of this integrated to its little brother, the Award-winning C352. The junior amp stomps all over big brother in just about every sonic area, and costs far less.

In recent years, NAD has picked up more amp Awards than any other manufacturer. Needless to say the C372 won't be adding to that tally.

Roksan Kandy MkIII £650

↑ FOR
Powerful and dynamic sound; great detail resolution

↓ AGAINST
Price; both frequency extremes mildly flawed

◆ VERDICT
Still a great amplifier, but its ability to win this test has been damaged by repeated price increases



Solid build, sensible feature list, great sound: but £650?

WE'VE BEEN FANS of the Kandy for many years now, and each new generation has sounded better than the last. It's this progression that's kept Roksan at the forefront of this class for so long. But over the years the price has crept up, too. Is the latest rise – from £595 when it won a 2004 Award, to £650 – a step too far?

Once warmed, there's no denying this Roksan is a quality product. The MkIII sounds powerful in a way few

rivals can better. It's not just the 120 watts per channel power output: its scale and authority remain class-leading. Demanding music such as Orff's *Carmina Burana* is delivered with ease and spellbinding composure. Detail levels are high and timing is good enough to do justice to Prince's *Diamonds and Pearls* set. Factor in this amp's solid build and sensible feature list and it's not hard to see why we like it so much.

We've always liked this amp's bass performance, too. It's deep, powerful and has the momentum to charge along when the music demands. Much of the Roksan's ability to reproduce solidity and scale comes from this low-end skill. However, new rivals reveal a heavy-handedness in this area, a lack of agility that blurs the subtle differences between notes. Things aren't perfect at the other end of the frequency spectrum, either,

where the MkIII lacks the purity and harmonic richness of the very best.

Don't get us wrong: these are minor points compared to all it does right, and the Kandy Mk III remains a fine performer, but judged on a performance-per-pound basis, it starts to struggle against cheaper rivals. Roksan's price rises may make business sense, but they rob this amp of a test win, and perhaps even more crucially, that valuable fifth star.

Rotel RA-03 £499

↑ FOR
Superb all-round performer that works well with a wide range of systems and music; top-class build

↓ AGAINST
Functional to a fault

◆ VERDICT
No style king, but it's the best amp at this price point – and it feels like it should cost quite a lot more



Great performance rather than flashy looks: that's Rotel

WELCOME TO THE only five-star product in this *Group Test*. This Rotel is the reason that class champions like the Cyrus 6vs and Roksan Kandy Mk III have dropped stars. Bluntly put, when it comes to performance per pound the RA-03 is king.

Refreshingly, Rotel doesn't claim this amp is innovative – few products deserve such a description – instead, it's relied on good, solid engineering to get results. The amp's electronic circuit is a proven design based on the RA-02, but with serious upgrades

to the power supply and component quality. Features are no more than basic, though build impresses with positive controls and solid casework.

Rotel isn't a flash firm, as you can see from the RA-03's 'styling', and this isn't a flash-sounding amp. The Roksan impresses more quickly due to its powerful bass and authority, while the Marantz will seduce with its refinement. The RA-03 won't do any of that. It just takes the original signal and makes it louder without layering on its own character.

This is a wonderfully self-effacing amp that does almost everything well. Dynamics are far stronger than the relatively low power output of 70 watts per channel would suggest, and the RA-03 grips basslines in a manner that NAD's C372 could only dream of. Timing, midrange clarity and resolution are good enough to please fans of both Amos and Orff.

Stereo imaging deserves a special mention. Not even the Cyrus 6vs – something of a champ in this respect – can better the way this Rotel

amp layers a soundstage or focuses instruments with such precision.

We wouldn't expect any amplifier at this price point to be perfect, and the Rotel isn't. Judged by the very highest standards it could do with more warmth, and so can sound a touch clinical if partnered poorly. However, get it right and nothing else here will serve you better.

Add up all the plus points and the RA-03 emerges as something of a superstar. Give it a listen before you buy anything else in this test.

Group Test

facts & figures

Price range
£499-£650



	CYRUS 6VS	EXPOSURE 2010S
SPECIFICATIONS		
Price	£600	£599
Line level inputs	Six	Five
Phono stage	No	No
Tape loops	One	One
Preamp output	Yes	Yes
Headphone output	Yes	No
Tone controls	No	No
Remote control	Yes	Yes
Power output	40w/channel	75w/channel
HOW THEY RATED		
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★
★ VERDICT	★★★★★	★★★★★



	MARANTZ PM 7200 KI	NAD C372
SPECIFICATIONS		
Price	£500	£500
Line level inputs	Four	Five
Phono stage	Moving magnet	No
Tape loops	Two	Two
Preamp output	No	Yes
Headphone output	Yes	Yes
Tone controls	Yes	Yes
Remote control	Yes	Yes
Power output	95w/channel	150w/channel
HOW THEY RATED		
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★
★ VERDICT	★★★★★	★★★★★



	ROKSAN Kandy MkIII	ROTEL RA-03
SPECIFICATIONS		
Price	£650	£499
Line level inputs	Five	Four
Phono stage	Moving magnet	Moving magnet
Tape loops	One	One
Preamp output	Yes	Yes
Headphone output	Yes	Yes
Tone controls	No	Yes
Remote control	Yes	Yes
Power output	120w/channel	70w/channel
HOW THEY RATED		
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★
★ VERDICT	★★★★★	★★★★★

Group Test

WINNER

STEREO AMPLIFIERS £499-£650

Rotel RA-03

★★★★★ £499



THERE CAN ONLY be one winner and that's the Rotel RA-03. It's the best-sounding amplifier here, despite being the cheapest. Some rivals offer more features, but the RA-03 is well enough equipped to keep most people happy. Its build quality is great, too. If you're after an amp at this price-point, you have to hear it.

All that doesn't mean you should ignore the rest of the contenders in this test. Most have some appeal. The Roksan Kandy MkIII remains a fine amp with a bold presentation that many will love. It's got a great deal of muscle, and can drive just about any price compatible speaker to breaking point. That said, the subtleties aren't forgotten, making this something of a musical chameleon. The Roksan's real problem is its price, and that's gone up recently. Against the Rotel it loses out.

Next up is the Cyrus 6vs. This remains a fine all-rounder and is easily upgradeable, but no longer has the sonic sparkle to get the full star rating. It's still good though, so give it a listen.

The RA-03's dynamic performance and superb build quality would not be out of place on a pricier amp

Both the Marantz PM 7200 KI and Exposure 2010 S are worth considering. The Marantz combines power with refinement while the Exposure gets to the heart of the music better than just about anything else here. However, neither does enough to top the Rotel. And then

“The Rotel is simply the best-sounding amp here, and one of the cheapest – if you're after an amp, you must hear it”

we come to NAD's C372. It's the disappointment of this test, and lags a mile behind the rest when it comes to sound quality. NAD really needs to weave its upgrade magic.

PERFECT PARTNERS

SPEAKERS

Epos M5 £350

★★★★★ February 2005

These are among our favourites. Epos's M5s are supremely musical and will make the most of the RA-03's resolution and timing

INTERCONNECT/SPEAKER CABLE

Chord Cobra 3 £60/m

Carnival Silver Plus £5.50/m

★★★★★ March 2005/Sept 2004

These Chord cables let the Rotel's detail and dynamics shine through



CD PLAYER

Exposure 2010 £600

★★★★★ April 2005

Proving that system-matching isn't just about lumping test-winners together, we've chosen this Exposure, which was just pipped by the Cyrus CD6 in last month's *Group Test*. It's a dynamic and exciting CD player that'll work superbly with the Rotel. Looks match, too.

