

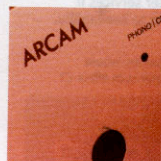


Power boosters

If you want the best stereo performance, only a dedicated hi-fi amp will do, and here we have three of the latest powerhouses. But which of the £300-£400 trio deserves a place in your system?

A CURIOUS BUNCH, we Brits: while the rest of the world is abandoning stereo for all things surround, two-channel amplifiers are still holding up reasonably well here in Blighty. True, the quantities being sold are down, but the average price we're paying is rising, and the amps we have here are in the thick of the action.

It seems that those enthusiasts who are clinging on to purist music systems are spending more, so while there are still amplifiers available for not much more than £100, around £300-£400 is now seen as a sensible budget to dedicate to a quality stereo powerhouse. For this kind of money the performance hike is immediate and dramatic: boosting not just your system's power, but its dynamism, detail and resolution. Read on to discover the price-band leader and its ideal partners.



ARCAM
DIVA A65 PLUS
£350



CREEK
4330MK2
£320



ROTEL
RA-02
£350



Arcam DiVA A65 Plus £350 ★★★★★

FOR

Well put together with handy features; exciting sound with a powerful balance

AGAINST

Slightly lacking in detailed resolution; musical ambience can be a touch flat

VERDICT

An impressive and exhilarating stereo amp that's only topped by the Rotel

AMPLIFIERS ARE WHERE Arcam's story started, and they're still among its core strengths. This 40W-per-channel amp has remote control and five line-ins, one of which can be turned into a phono input by having an Arcam retailer install a circuitboard, while another can be fed straight to the power amp. This is handy should you be using the amp with an external AV processor to give surround sound, as it avoids the juggling of two volume settings every time you switch from music to movies.

The tape loop has a monitoring switch, while preouts allow the A65 to

be used with Arcam's P75 power amp to biamp suitable speakers. Tone and balance controls are provided, though these can be bypassed, and there's a choice of direct speaker connection or a second pair of switched outlets – handy if you're going to take advantage of the headphone socket. Completing the package is the usual Arcam system remote handset.

The DiVA – which cuts a better dash in its silver version – is logically laid-out and built to last: Arcam reacted to lacklustre reviews of the A65 with the Plus model, revisions being aimed at enhanced bass, a wider dynamic range and improved transient response. The result's a better-sounding amp than the rather soggy original, and the changes are reflected in the matching P75 Plus power amp.

The A65 Plus delivers a sound that's some way from the warm, safe balance of past Arcams. Whether driving the price-comparable Quad 11L speakers

or PMC's big £1410 FB1s, it sounds exciting, covering up its slight lack of detail resolution with a powerful balance. Play a simple disc like Holly Cole's *Romantically Helpless* and the Arcam does a good job of placing the singer centre stage, although when compared with the Rotel there's some lack of space and ambience to the sound. It's on safer ground with Hendrix's guitar fireworks on *Electric Ladyland*, which can sound a bit bright and brash with some amps: here the rhythm section is solid and weighty, while that guitar tone is carried well.

However, the rhythmic drive of some music – from Zappa's *Dumb All Over* to big-scale orchestral works – is rather muted by the Arcam's rich bass: the Rotel offers more vitality.

If your CD player is at all rough or hard-sounding this source-flattering Arcam is probably the amp to buy. If it wasn't for the recent arrival of the Rotel, this would be top dog.

Why it's still worth buying a stereo amplifier

QUITE APART FROM being smaller than an AV receiver, these amps are designed purely for music reproduction. Not only do they have a more direct signal path from input to speakers, they also do without all the digital processing, video switching and display technology found in an AV receiver. The video switching can create noise which, along with the extra channels of amplification, puts extra strain on power supplies.

But what if you want to play music and movies? We'd still suggest an amp if you're serious about system quality, using either a budget AV receiver or the likes of the Yamaha DSP-E800 surround processor. You connect your music sources and main left-right speakers to the stereo amp and all the video stuff and extra speakers to the receiver/processor, then feed the front left/right line output of the latter into the former via a line-in. The Arcam makes this simple with its direct AV switching, but it's almost as easy with the other two.



The Arcam is logically laid-out and very well built, an altogether more impressive amplifier than its predecessor, the A65



What does an amplifier need?

The traditional view of the perfect amp is of 'a straight wire with gain' – in other words, it receives a signal at the inputs, makes it louder, and punts it out to the speakers without modification. Of the three amplifiers in this group test, the Creek 4330Mk2 – which is the simplest design – comes closest to this ideal.

However, in the real world, an amplifier needs to act as the control centre for a system, switching sources and routing signals to tape decks and the like. As a result, things tend to get a little more complicated.

But it's worth thinking hard about what you need – and don't need – from your amp, as all those extra switches and controls get in the way of a clear signal path. Do you need a phono stage, for example? And are those tone controls just being used to cover up deficiencies elsewhere in the system? If so, get the system matching correct and you may find you don't even need those.

Creek 4330Mk2 | £320 ★★★★★

FOR

Very high-powered components; simple design and direct signal path

AGAINST

Adds a smoothness to music; can make tracks seem slightly slower

VERDICT

Creek's amp is powerful but can't mix it with the other two products in this test

WITH 21 YEARS of history behind it, Creek remains one of the British hi-fi industry's best-kept secrets. This isn't a brand likely to spend a fortune on promotion, but it's highly regarded among those in the know.

The 4330Mk2 isn't going to win any beauty contests, but the company's philosophy of spending its money inside its products, not on the window-dressing, is clear to see. The amp is simple in design, combining a passive preamp with a high-gain power stage in the quest for the most direct

signal path. Amps usually boost the signal in two stages, but this can lead to extra distortion, so Creek's preamp is little more than source selection and an attenuator – or volume control.

Evidence of this simplification can be seen in its basic facilities: there are no tone controls, no headphone socket, no phono stage and no remote control, though the last two can be added at extra cost. The remote 4330RMk2, for example, is £399.

As it is, you get just volume, source selection – four line-ins and a tape loop with its own monitoring switch – and that's it. Under the lid things are more impressive, starting with the use of a massive 120VA toroidal transformer, which is very big for an amp delivering 40W per channel. This, plus its associated power-supply circuitry, is designed to support serious dynamic ability: it can deliver 370W for very short times into a 10hm load. Other

features include the use of DC coupling from input to output on the power amp, allowing capacitors to be eliminated from the signal path.

With such a direct signal path, the 4330Mk2 should act as a wide-open window on whatever's connected to its inputs, but that's not quite the case. Yes, there's a good sense of musical communication, but the Creek treats all music to a slight polishing process, and while this has benefits when it comes to orchestral weight, this wouldn't be the amp we'd choose for rhythm sections. Whether with rock or contemporary dance tracks, the amp is a little leaden of foot, so tracks seem slower than they do through tighter-sounding amplifiers.

Stick to orchestral works or simply recorded acoustic music and the Creek will delight, but for not much more money, the rivals here turn in a more convincing all-round performance.



The powerful Creek is designed simply, in a bid to avoid unnecessary distortion, but it tends to add a slight sheen to most tracks

Rotel RA-02 | £350 | ★★★★★

FOR

Powerful, fresh and vibrant sound; stylish and solid; great value

AGAINST

Nothing significant for this price

VERDICT

This cracking amp can cut it with rivals in the sub-£500 category – a beauty

ROTEL AMPLIFIERS HAVE been offering excellent value for money for a long time, but even the company's most loyal fans could never claim it has made pretty products.

No such problem with the RA-02 amp, part of an all-new range that's available in silver as well as basic black. The slimline products – the amplifier is just a shade over 7cm tall – have a three-panel fascia treatment that recalls Naim's current 'tritych' styling, but we have to say that in silver the Rotels look even better.

This sense of style and solidity carries through to the controls, which are crisp and precise. While the 40W per channel RA-02 is better equipped than either of its rivals here, the range of facilities has been selected and implemented sensibly.

There's a moving magnet phono stage as standard, and the four line inputs and tape loop will be enough for most users. A tape monitoring switch is provided in addition to the source selector; the tone and balance controls can be bypassed, and switching enables either or both sets of speaker outputs to be used. There are also line-outs for biamping and a system remote handset, though if you don't need the latter the amp can be bought as the RA-01 for £100 less, which really is a steal.

Not that the remote-control version is anything less than one of the best audio bargains of the moment. This is

an amp with a sound much bigger than its dimensions and power rating would suggest, and a fast, transparent and consistently involving presentation of just about any disc.

Even with PMC's FB1 floorstanders, big speakers that revel in an amplifier with grip and power, the Rotel never seemed to be labouring. The way it powered out Zappa licks or the controlled feedback of Hendrix was spine-tingling, as was its close focus on Holly Cole's voice.

This is an amp that comes closer to most in the sub-£500 category. Whether playing a stripped-down demo version of Oasis's *Stop Crying Your Heart Out* or the great orchestral sweep of Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite*, the Rotel has a freshness and vibrancy to its sound that the Arcam hints at and the Creek just can't manage. This is a very special little amplifier.



At just over 7cm tall, the new Rotel RA-02 is a solid and compact little amplifier, but certainly punches well above its weight



Understanding an amp's limits

Let's go back to that 'straight-wire-with-gain' theory again – while it's possible to buy a warm-sounding amp to counter a brash CD player or a bass-light pair of speakers, it's much better to get the overall system-balance correct than engage in Band-Aid patching up of the sound. Yes, a lush amp and a bright CD player will get you back to somewhere near neutral, but you'll lose a lot along the way. Similarly, if you find you need to use your amp with the tone controls cranked up to get some kind of life into the sound, then something is wrong somewhere else in the system.

What an amp can do is make your music louder: if your system sounds hard or compressed at high levels, chances are the amp's struggling. More power is usually the answer, but don't think upping the ante from 30W to 50W will do it – if you really need more level you should be looking at a doubling of amp power to achieve worthwhile gains.

and the winner is...

Rotel RA-02 ★★★★★

WITH QUALITY AMPLIFIERS like the trio in this test, it's easy to see why this is a growing sector of the hi-fi market. Any of these three will bring a welcome boost to a system used to a budget amp, with each having characteristics that will suit different systems.

The slightly less impressive amp of the bunch is the Creek, which suffers an immediate setback by simply looking less classy than the other two: our photographer was heard to wonder whether we'd given him the right amp for this test. But while the compact British amp isn't a style leader, and would

not be our choice for rock or dance music, it still has an appealing way of handling classical and jazz music, and its simplicity makes it an interesting alternative to more conventional designs. What's more, it's possible to configure the Creek to suit your needs, with dealer options such as the high-gain module for the passive preamp, a phono stage, and of course the remote-control option. However, for all that adaptability, and its rugged no-nonsense design, it's up against two tough rivals here.

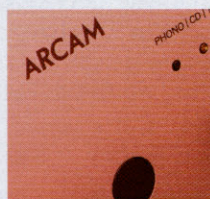
The Arcam DiVA A65 Plus represents a huge leap forward from the original, demonstrating the

company's willingness to respond to criticism. It's more comprehensively equipped than the Creek, with its tone controls, remote and various input and output switching options, and its warm, full bass is partnered with a midband and treble of better insight and snap, making anything you choose to play through it a considerably more interesting listen.

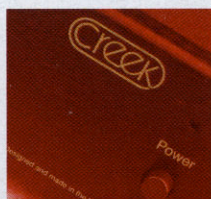
However, it loses out here to the new Rotel. Why? Well the RA-02 simply does a better job of communicating the music, sounds even more powerful, plus has a phono stage as standard. Oh, and it looks sharper, too, which just about seals its victory.

“The Rotel does a better job of communicating the music and sounds even more powerful”

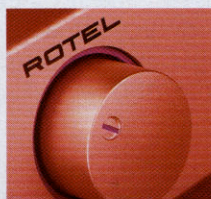
Rotel RA-02



Arcam DiVA A65 Plus



Creek 4330Mk2



Rotel RA-02

TESTWINNER

WHAT'S IT GOT?

Power (RMS/8ohm)	40W	40W	40W
Line inputs	5	4	4
Tape loops	1	1	1
Phono stage	Optional	Optional	mm
Remote control	Yes	£80 opt	Yes
Preouts	Yes	Yes	Yes
Speaker terminals	2prs	1pr	2prs
Headphone socket	Yes	No	Yes
Tone controls	Yes	No	Yes
Tone bypass	Yes	n/a	Yes

→ For a full explanation of technical terms go to our Glossary on page 120

WHAT WE GAVE IT...

Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Facilities	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VERDICT	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★

We tested them with (price-comparable system) | CD player Rotel RCD-02; turntable Rega Planar 2/ Super Bias; speakers Quad 11L (reference system) | CD player Marantz CD-7; speakers PMC FB1; cables Chord Co

Partners for the winner

The ideal equipment to put with the Rotel



CD PLAYER

Rotel RCD-02

£375 (September 2002) ★★★★★

It's a no-brainer, but the matching CD player from the new Rotel range works superbly with the RA-02.

LOUDSPEAKERS

Quad 11L

£379 (August 2002) ★★★★★

Conventional, but classy in real wood, these new Quad speakers sound amazing, too.

