

TESTS



Rave for range-topping Rotel

★★★★★
Rotel RA-971 Amplifier

For excellent balance of detail and power for the money; well-built Against Unless you're a turntable owner, nothing Verdict Another cracker from Rotel's revised amp range, this saves you money on the model it replaces and has class-leading sound. Need we say more?

Rotel's line-up of integrated amplifiers now comprises three models – and even this range-topper will leave you a few pennies of change from its modest asking price. Thanks to new production sourcing in China, prices are down across the board compared with the old range, and, even better, sound quality is up. Can't be bad, can it?

This RA-971 is a fully-loaded 70W per channel amp, with only the lack of a phono stage to limit its appeal for some users (Rotel will sell you the off-board RQ970BX phono amp for as an optional extra, or you could consider a device like the little NAD on p25).

But there are four line-ins and two tape loops chosen by separate record and listen switches, while the selector for 'direct' or 'switched' speaker outlets is sensibly next to the headphone

socket. The tone controls are the usual subtle-acting devices found on the company's amps, and are bypassable using a switch where you might expect the balance control to be. Meanwhile the balance adjustment itself is via the volume control, which is a two-pot concentric device: in general terms these sound better than separate volume and balance adjustments, particularly at this price level.

OK, enough description – time to get to the important part. The Rotel sounds great, whether you ask it to cruise through something soulful like Shola Ama's reading of *Someday I'll Find You* (from the *Twentieth Century Blues* set) or The Divine Comedy's manic *I've Been to a Marvellous Party* on the same disc. Bass is big and confident, giving the kind of weight and

slam needed to make the most of today's affordable floorstanding speakers, while the midband and treble deliver plenty of detail without ever sounding ragged or out of control. Play attacking acoustic music like the opener from the *Desperado* soundtrack with its hard-hitting guitars and voices, and the Rotel kicks the notes out in an infectious manner, delivering excitement without strain.

Rock, pop and dance fans will also appreciate the way this amp will drive hard and clean: we had a ball with it banging out *Get It On* from a T Rex hits compilation!

With classical music it gives away a little to the best of the other amps in its price bracket when it comes to air and ambience, but delivers orchestral or chamber music honestly and involingly – especially considering the price – and handles massed musical forces at high levels without becoming muddled.

This is a great amp for the money, and though it may lack the style of some of its price-competition – Rotel aesthetics remain functional – it has the sound to succeed.

INSIDE INFORMATION

Tuned and engineered in the UK, the RA-971 follows an established Rotel pattern, with high current devices and mirror-image PCB layout (for close channel-matching). Internal wiring is interesting, using copper bus-bars in high current areas and short PCB tracks for the input signals, while high-quality components used include a Burr-Brown line stage, and in-house toroidal transformer. Its steel cabinet and chassis is fronted by an aluminium faceplate.