

Rotel's new integrated is anything but ordinary

It may seem anonymous at first, but Alvin Gold finds the Rotel RA-972 amplifier rather special

On one level, not much needs be said about the latest Rotel amplifier, the RA-972. It delivers 60 or 70 Watts/channel (depending on which piece of paper you read), has six line inputs, including two tape circuits, and it doesn't cater for vinyl junkies, though there is probably some mileage to be had from an outboard RIAA step-up.

It slots imperceptibly into a Rotel line-up whose styling and features have become ossified over the years, and its feature count is equally prosaic: limited range tone controls with a bypass switch, and two independent loudspeaker circuits, which can be used independently or together – definitely a plus point for some, though any loudspeaker switching inevitably means another trade-off against sound quality.

Preamp outputs, which are these days increasingly common, allow a second power amplifier to be used in a bi-amplified system, while the one mildly unusual feature, probably included in deference to US market requirements, is a 12V trigger which can be used to switch a remote device, which may well be that second power amplifier. You also get a headphone socket and a system remote control.

But the Rotel assuredly is different, and it takes no more than a fairly brief audition to tell that this is an altogether superior amplifier in a range that already has the measure of much of the competition. Given an appropriate running-in period, and a good half hour or so before each listening session, the Rotel was an unusually fine accompaniment to a range of quality ancillaries, which at the most extreme and exotic end of the spectrum included a Naim Audio CD5 CD player, Magnum Dynalab MD102 FM tuner and a pair of JMLab Mezzo Utopia speakers.

Performance

The treble here is extremely open and free from grain, quite remarkably so for an amplifier in its price area, especially given the high level of harmonic and upper harmonic detail present in the output. This helps make the most of subtle differences between similar instruments, and to unravel the potentially cloying complexity of orchestral string sections. At the other end of the spectrum, the



The RA-972 has an unusually strong bass reach and depth

Rotel is unusually open. Its bass reach and depth is greater than any other similarly priced amplifier I can think of; and indeed this was the quality I noticed first when the Rotel was fired up in anger.

Other Rotel qualities include a warm, lively, open feel, and strong instrumental articulation. The RA-972 is also a thoroughly consistent performer, retaining its clarity and presence at low and high volumes alike, scarcely changing in sound as the volume level changes. In practice, there's enough power for most speakers, compact or floorstanding, and it's unlikely that the Rotel will run out of steam, even in large rooms.

Lying behind the special touch of magic that this newcomer delivers appears to be a new reservoir capacitor developed by Denis Morecroft, previously known for the Slit Foil capacitor (used in many other Rotel products and elsewhere) and for solid core cables, as well as his signature DNM amplifiers. Denis's prime interest has always been in extracting the most detail from recordings with the least conges-

tion and muddle, and he has never been slow to undertake fundamental research into component behaviour and interactions in this cause. The T-Network capacitor premièred here is a radical new construction with two sets of in and output connections, with the output taps positioned to minimise plate inductance. Technical highlights, power supply reservoir caps aside, include a toroidal power transformer, a channel symmetric layout, a Burr Brown IC line stage, and independent record and listen selectors, which normally imply a slightly simpler internal layout.

In short, the RA-972 is great stuff: an excellent all-rounder with unusually high resolution, good audio manners and a subjectively well-extended bandwidth, the wide open bottom end helping to generate both rich and varied tonal colours and very strong dynamics. Highly recommended. ©



A preamp output is one of the features

Rotel RA-972

Type Integrated stereo amplifier

Price £400

Weight 6.5kg

Dimensions

(W x H x D) 440 x 92 x 347mm

Accessories Remote control

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