

Start ME UP



Rotel RA-1520 Integrated Amp and RCD-1520 CD Player

Performance, Features, Value—And, Now, Great Looks

Neil Gader

At this year's Consumer Electronics Show Rotel debuted the 15 Series, an impressive range of components encompassing most segments of the audio, A/V, and custom-installation markets. Beyond its eye-catching appearance and upgraded internals the 15 Series features enhanced software and connectivity and spiffy new remote controls. Intriguing for me was the pair of 15 Series "classic" models—the RCD-1520 CD player and RA-1520 integrated amplifier. They are gorgeous to behold, with a sumptuous combination of brushed and polished metal surfaces, smoothly radiussed front panel end-caps, handsomely engraved faceplates, and a wonderful tactile feel to the gently rounded buttons and knobs.

Even though the glam facelift looks like a million bucks, the electronics beneath the hood hold true to Rotel's traditional values. To improve the breed means holding fast to a philosophy of simplicity and minimalization. For Rotel this translates to rigorous parts selection, refinements of circuit layouts, shorter signal paths, and importantly, critical listening. Rotel insists on winding its own transformers for its power supplies. It uses more expensive metal-film resistors because they sound better. Both the amplifier and CD player have power supply circuits that use a brand of "slit foil" capacitors designed and

manufactured in the U.K. No less than Linn and Meridian use the same brand in many of their much more expensive units.

Amping It Up

The spec sheet on the RA-1520 integrated amplifier says the amp produces a modest sixty watts per channel, but that's a little like describing a jaguar as only a large cat. This may be one of the more conservatively rated solid-state "sixties" I've encountered. Matched with a speaker of reasonable sensitivity (the PSB Imagine B or the more upscale Proac Response D2 come to mind), it's got headroom that just won't quit and low-frequency extension geared to pace and slam. Connectivity is excellent with a set of preamp outputs, a tape loop, and binding posts for two pairs of speakers. And old school vinyl-addicts like myself haven't been forgotten, as Rotel provides a very capable moving-magnet phono input. It's a good one with plenty of gain, and low noise. The front panel includes a 1/8" mini-jack suitable for any pocket MP3-style player (there's a separate headphone mini-jack as well).

Sonically the Rotel RA-1520 hews to familiar Rotel territory beginning with a neutral to warmish tonal balance and an almost lush midrange and upper bass. Its character skews slightly to

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the darker end of the spectrum due to a softer top and a general relaxation of transient attack. As I listened to Norah Jones' quirky "Sinking Soon" on *Not Too Late* [Blue Note] I was rewarded with a smooth upper vocal range, natural unforced harmonics, and a continuity and integration that were consistent with a live performance rather than something manufactured and stitched together. This same track incorporates very-low-level instrumental textures and soundstage positions that are a chore for many amps to retrieve, but the low noise floor of the Rotel made these tough-to-reproduce subtleties a walk in the park. On a challenging orchestral workout like the short but sweet *Fanfare For the Common Man* [Reference Recordings], the Rotel, paired with the tiny but tenacious PMC DB1i compact two-ways, was thrilling, forceful, and solid. Imaging was unwavering, although the Rotel didn't quite allow the volume of air to fill the areas between instrumentalists like some pricier amps. Perhaps it also ultimately lacked a bit of brassy golden bloom in the top end and didn't quite capture the full aggressive rip of the trumpet ensemble, but the sense of a spacious acoustic window and of the rock-solid placement of the players on stage was quite remarkable.

I even put the screws to it with my own reference ATC compact monitors—83dB-sensitive speakers that demand a lot from amplifiers. In dynamics and extension I would've guessed this amp was cranking out more like a hundred watts. Even under these extreme circumstances the Rotel never lost its composure, only putting a small squeeze on dynamics and lightening the impact a bit in the bass. All in all, the RA-1520 is everything I've come to expect from Rotel—performance, features, value, and now a facelift that perhaps some of the aging stars of the high-end would envy.

Rotel RCD-1520 CD Player

If the Rotel integrated hews faithfully to tradition, the RCD-1520 may just be a break-out source component in this price range. It disposes of the motorized CD tray and features a new slot-loading mechanism, which in Rotel's view has not only proven very reliable but has also minimized the need for error correction. The Rotel offers a high-performance Wolfson DAC to handle the conversion duties, digital output for an outboard DAC, an intelligible and comprehensive display, and excellent disc handling. In a curious twist, HDCD-encoded discs are indicated on the display but not actually decoded. The RCD-1520 will, however, handle MP3 or WMA-encoded discs.

Of all the recent recordings I've heard that really show off this player's capabilities, the new disc by Jen Chaplin, *Revisions: The Songs of Stevie Wonder* [Chesky SACD 347], is nothing short of a treasure. In fact the entire disc is simply a terrific artistic and sonic effort from brilliant musicians. (Backing the talented Chaplin are Stephan Crump on bass and Chris Cheek on tenor, baritone, and soprano saxes. Don't be fooled by the lack of a piano or drum kit—this trio is as swinging as it gets.) The opening track, "You Haven't Done Nothin'," was spacious and clean through the RCD-1520, with excellent imaging. The Rotel's



sonics exemplify definition but without the analytic coolness that often afflicts lower cost digital. While the RCD-1520 doesn't have the bloom or air of, say an Esoteric X-05, it's relatively free from high-frequency hash, and its treble easily walks the line between silky smooth and aggressive whenever necessary. The crunchy bass groove that anchors Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" [Epic] was stunning, detailed, and gut-pounding. This player reproduces bass

that is tight, deep and, most importantly, rhythmic. Low-level resolving power was also rewarding. For example, during Cat Stevens' "Sad Lisa" from *Tea For The Tillerman* [Island] the Rotel shed light on a greater and more complex set of tonal colors issuing from the grand piano (which has been processed through a Leslie). This instrument has always been a bit indistinct but not with the RCD-1520—a player capable of sorting out low-level minutiae like few disc players I've reviewed in this range.

Years ago, when Rolls Royce motorcars *never* published horsepower figures, its spokesmen would respond to press inquiries with a knowing smile and the simple statement that the power was deemed "adequate." Rotel is similarly an exemplar of this sort of understatement. Rotel may not have reinvented this segment of the high end, but with the RA-1520 and most notably the RCD-1520 it continues to find more transparency, more performance, more music with each succeeding model line. Could there be anything more "adequate" than that? **TAS**

SPECS & PRICING

RA-1520

Power output: 60Wpc
continuous, both channels
driven

Inputs: Three line-level, one
phono (mm), two tape loops

Outputs: One preamp output,
12V trigger, IR

Dimensions: 17" x 4" x 14.3"

Weight: 17.2 lbs.

Price: \$999

RCD-1520

Inputs: One 12V trigger, RJ-45
computer I/O

Outputs: One pair RCA analog;
one coax digital

Dimensions: 17" x 4" x 12.6"

Weight: 14.3 lbs.

Price: \$999

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TRANSPARENT AUDIO

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(207) 284-1100
transparentcable.com
Price: The Link \$85/1m pr; The
Wave \$200/8 ft. pr.

FOR A LOOK INSIDE TRANSPARENT AUDIO'S FACTORY AND RH'S IMPRESSIONS OF THE LINK AND THE WAVE, SEE HIS BLOG "ROBERT HARLEY VISITS THE TRANSPARENT FACTORY AND DISCOVERS A \$220 'MIRACLE UPGRADE'" ON AVGUIDE.COM.

