

Audio Power With Some Serious Authority

By Mike McGann

► There are some home theater enthusiasts who focus solely on the sound and picture created by their systems, which I guess is okay, but I sometimes feel a bit sorry for those folks. For me, half of the fun is the experience, whether it's using refined gear or just showing off how cool it looks.

I have a pretty good sense that the folks at Rotel understand this. Let's face it, most amplifiers are pretty boring looking. While they have an amazing impact on the sonic quality of any system, generally they're not something you point out to your buddies. "Hey, Bob, check out this cool, plain black box. Isn't that green light cool?" So, generally speaking, when I review amps, I don't linger over appearances. An exception to the rule, though, is Rotel's RB-985 MK II amp.

We'll get to the sonic performance of this THX-certified amp later. Like it or not, the appearance of this unit screams power. Two burly heat sinks are mounted on the front (yes, they are functional), the audio equivalent of hood scoops on a street rod.

The back of the unit, while probably not something you'll show off to your buddies, is also very well designed, using color-coded binding posts (some may quibble that they are plastic rather than the more common gold-plated binding posts found in this price range), which make setup a

snap. I'd like to see individual channel level controls, which aren't there, but generally that's something you can control just as well through your pre-amplifier/processor, so it's far from a fatal omission.

Looks are nice, but if an amp can't deliver the goods, that is, serious power and good sound, you'd be better off buying

AVC-1800 pre-pro, which is reviewed elsewhere in this issue. Both amps drove RBH Sound Signature speakers (reviewed in our Summer issue) and a Monitor Authority sub.

While a lot of people equate power to loudness, a better test is dynamic range. The ability of an amp to jump back and forth, between a peak volume, say

the AMC rang out sharp, clear and noticeably louder.

While movie soundtracks were interesting, listening to two-channel audio was a revelation. I heard heaps of detail on Dire Straits' *Love Over Gold*, one of my favorite testing discs.

At first, I thought the issue was the fact that I was using Parasound's fabulous AVC-1800 pre-amp/processor. A quick switch back to the AMC, which has been one of my favorite amps over the last few years, and it was almost like night and day. The AMC seemed to strain a bit and lacked the dynamic range I'd heard just moments ago with the Rotel.

Listening to Queen's *A Night at the Opera* (the second album I ever bought, at age 12, *Abbey Road* having been the first), I felt almost like I was sitting next to Mac "The Knob," the band's famous engineer. I could hear every (relatively) primitive stereo steering trick used. On '39, I could actually hear the slap of fingers on the acoustic bass.

Once upon a time, I didn't think amps were a crucial element to building a great system. Time in the listening room has proven me wrong, and I'm often shocked at the difference between seemingly similar amps.

If you are shopping for a multichannel amp in this price range to build your home theater system around, you have to have this Rotel on your list of top contenders. If you buy without listening to the RB-985 MK II, you'll regret it. **E**



Rotel RB-985 MK II Five-Channel Amplifier

Price: \$999

+ Wonderful dynamic range, great punch, plus it looks cool.

— Lack of channel output controls.

Target user: Anyone who values detail, dynamic range and cool looks.

some nice sculpture. The RB-985 MK II dishes out 110 watts per channel in five channels.

While I generally don't make a big deal about power ratings (not all wattage quotes are arrived at the same way, so it's hard to compare), my initial impression is that the number seems a bit low. Comparing it to my AMC 5N-100 amp, the Rotel seemed to have a lot more power. I used my Denon AVR-3300, strictly as a pre-amp/processor first, before switching to a Parasound

a gunshot, and more constant sounds, say an airliner, and show a big difference shows the real power of an amp. I rolled out one of my favorite dynamic range DVDs, the THX version of *Terminator 2*. Although more than four years old, it remains one of my favorite soundtracks.

Even though I've always been a fan of the AMC for its smooth power and detail, compared to a lot of amps in the same price range, the Rotel just blew me away. Gun shots that seemed a bit dampened on