

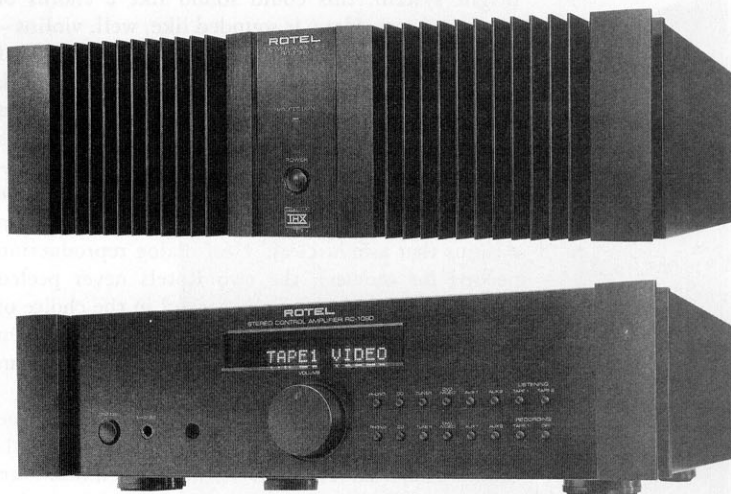
Rotel RC-1090 Stereo Control Amplifier & RB-1080 Power Amplifier

The Rotel RC-1090 preamp and RB-1080 amplifier are solid-state devices aimed at the two-channel audiophile market, but with obvious home-theater roots. Rotel has a complete line-up of home-theater products, and both the RC-1090 and RB-1080 are fully compatible with everything else in that line. Indeed, the RC-1090 preamp is a feature-laden unit that comes close to being all things to all people. I do not have a surround-sound system, so I used it for two-channel operation only – for both CDs and LPs. Confined to this limited setting, its extended functions would be overkill. But so startlingly good is its performance in CD playback, I suspect that, stripped of all circuitry but two-channel functions, it might be a runaway hit, sonically edging out pricier systems. The RB-1080 amp, while not the top of the Rotel line, is no wimp at 200 watts per channel and response down to 15 Hz. In my smallish (14' x 17' x 8') room, I achieved live listening levels with startling accuracy and not just a few goosebumps. These units are dynamic and quiet and smooth – a seductive combination.

Both are equipped for single-ended or balanced connections. They were auditioned using both types, because the only balanced interconnects I have are a 20-foot pair of WireWorld Gold Eclipse, and man, is that stacking the deck, so I also used Vampire AI-2 interconnects. Surprise – the Rotel were almost as happy with the single-ended, modest Vampire wire as they were with the expensive WireWorld Golds.

The Rotel RC 1090 even offers a switchable gain for either moving-coil or moving-magnet cartridge. And a remote control.

As to that: The Rotel RR-969 “Universal Learning Remote Control” will consolidate up to nine devices, but the manual lacks important details and is inaccurate in at least one respect. I was able to set the correct time, but it did not seem to want to “learn” my CD player’s remote – no doubt the fault of the user’s ineptitude. But the labels/functions are not adequately defined and explained. Sample functional scenarios would be helpful. Most of these manuals stop at feature/function, and forget to include *benefit*. Because I don’t know what it’s for, the presence of a “12-volt trigger” failed to impress me. This manual, like most, was written by electrotechno designers *not* for the Irma La Denses of the world. (Let’s just say that beyond volume, source, and mute, I am remote-challenged. I’m not alone.) Finally, the remote is the *only* access to the muting function. This can be cumbersome. Including a control on the front panel of the RC-1090 would be most welcome.



Now, the sound. As I write this, I am sitting in my kitchen/dining area, which separates my listening room (living room, or as I like to call it, my “living stereo” room) with a wall that has an opening at each end. I am listening to a great Chesky CD – Monty Alexander’s *Caribbean Circle* [JD 080] played very loudly, and I could swear I was in a jazz club, except that it’s not dark and there’s no cigarette smoke. Trumpets have a deliciously brassy sound, with a bronzed, honeyed luster. Drums have immediacy and impact. The sound is smooth, transparent, and occasionally startling in tonal accuracy. The entire presentation is so tight and effortless, and moves so flawlessly that I am caught up in the music as much as it is possible to be.

But CDs of this engineering caliber are not the only good sound that comes out of the Rotels. Indeed, I was unable to find anything unlistenable. How much did I try? How about a “supermarket” CD featuring an obscure regional orchestra? I like to think of these as the digital counterparts of the bargain LPs of yesteryear. I bought several “warhorse” compilations with the idea of sending them to that nephew, who wants to learn more classical music, and at 2/\$5, I couldn’t resist giving them a try. Now, I spent four years as a reviewer in the boondocks of southern California, and came to realize that wonderful music is being made everywhere. So I do not scoff at regional orchestras. But I don’t expect them to be recorded well. So the surprising thing here is the sound quality. These CDs are remarkably dry, transparent, and clear, with good soundstaging and tonality. One features the music of Grieg, the two Peer Gynt suites and the piano concerto [Northwestern Radio Orchestra, Tom Holmgren conducting and

Michael Jansons, piano; Front Row Entertainment CD M30306-2]. It doesn't have nth degree of spaciousness and air, but it does have startlingly accurate instrumental tone and timbre – and the correct size of the piano. The perspective is almost from the podium. Marvelous. And it sounds alive and musically immediate through the Rotels.

Another acid test is a Sony Masterworks compilation of Columbia recordings, MFK 48257, *An American Picnic*. This CD contains a charming piece by Vieuxtemps, *Souvenir d'Amérique*, an arrangement of variations on “Yankee Doodle” scored mainly for violins playing in the upper registers. On a really bright system, this could sound like a chorus of demented cats. Here, it sounded like, well, violins – many – with space around and through them. I attribute this to the lack of grain in CD playback (the phono stage is another story). Bass is clean and crisp, with stunning weight and authority. This amp would be a terrific choice for the subs in a bi-amped set-up. While leaning slightly toward the bright side of the spectrum (this may come from designs that aim at clean, clear dialog reproduction needed for movies), the two Rotels never peeled paint. Do, though, be really careful in the choice of speakers to go with them. Anything tipped even slightly toward brightness could send the system over the edge.

And here we come to the very thing that keeps me teetering on the brink of declaring the Rotels a triumph: They lean a bit more toward the clinical than I like. Detail? Yes, in abundance. But if just a bit

more musical richness came through, this combo could be a really serious contender.

Now LPs: The phono stage in this preamp is better than it has any right to be at this price, but it's still no cigar. While the Rotels brought out a forthright performance from the best of LPs, there was no “wow” factor. I do not have a moving-coil cartridge, but with my recently tweaked Sota Star/MMT/Grado “The Reference,” the best – the direct-to-discs, the Cheskys, and the Classic 45 rpms and test pressings – came through in workmanlike fashion. Nothing horrid, but nothing lustrous and musical, either. The Fiedler/Boston Pops renditions of the capriccios of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov [direct-to-disc Crystal Clear CCS 7003] showed a tendency toward overhang on climaxes, and a strangely distant imaging. More ordinary (for lack of a better term) recordings also suffered from this slightly sterile (yet quite detailed) character. Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* [Harvest SMAS 11163] was disappointing in this respect.

Nevertheless, if you are primarily a CD collector with a modest collection of LPs you occasionally enjoy, this is not a serious drawback and you will find the Rotels pleasurable enough for that kind of occasional LP use. For CDs only, you'll be happy.

It's a great time to be an audiophile – really good sound has become accessible. And while you fantasize about the ultimate system, you can enjoy a level of performance that is not only acceptable, but downright soul-fulfilling.

These Rotel units can do that for you.

