

# ROTEL RC-995/RB-991

**R**otel has always been very careful to adopt a market profile that in many ways embodies the best aspects of Far Eastern mass market and Western specialist. Nowhere is that outlook better embodied than in these two units, which compete head-on in spec terms with British-built equipment, but at a considerably lower price.

The 'Made in China' badge explains most of that (although the power supply capacitors are made in the UK, which is a bit coals-to-Newcastle), but there are areas where costs have been cut in a way that most UK manufacturers would studiously avoid, component quality being a case in point.

Still, it's all relative, and there's nothing remotely crummy about either amp. The casework is nothing special, for instance, but it's perfectly adequate for its task, doesn't bend when you pick the units up, and is well finished and free of sharp corners.

The power amp is arguably the more impressive of the pair, and manages to exude an air of refined muscle. A THX-approved design, it offers 200 Watts per channel (a spec it exceeds in practice) and accordingly contains a large and heavy toroidal transformer and a lot of heatsinks – the front panel heatsink is decorative: the real ones lurk within the case. Discrete bipolar transistors provide the urge. Unbalanced and balanced (XLR) inputs are provided, the balanced ones being unbalanced by an additional op-amp circuit which is likely in many situations to negate the advantage of balanced working.



**"Really deep bass is truly excellent, seeming to go down for ever and confident enough to keep its quality at any volume."**

The RC-995 has corresponding balanced outputs (balanced via yet another op-amp) alongside twin pairs of unbalanced ones. It also has seven inputs, including a phono stage that's switchable for MM or MC gain.

Input switching is via relays rather than switches, and the front-panel knobs in fact operate incremental encoders which control source selection indirectly, making for very user-friendly operation. The remote control is pretty funky, too.

#### SOUND QUALITY

The basic balance of this combo is not wholly unlike that of Musical Fidelity's offering, favouring as it does the mid-to-upper bass regions. However, really deep bass is truly excellent, seeming to go down for ever and confident enough to keep its quality at any

volume level. Again, the only real problem with this bass warmth is that with some music it can seem to slow the pulse, making the drums appear to drag behind the beat, for instance, in jazz or rock. But this is very slight and should be set against the considerable excitement that the great extension can generate.

Listening to well-made classical recordings, it sometimes seemed that stereo imaging, while generally plausible, was just a little forward overall. That can often be caused by brightness in the sound, but it was hard to convince oneself that the treble was anything but neutral. And because the relative positions of instruments in the orchestra were kept accurate, the forward placing soon became a matter of little relevance.

Detail resolution is a little inconsistent. Big, heavy textures – big band, full orchestra, etc – do well with clear rendition of everything that's happening, but small and moderate ensembles aren't always quite so clean. It's more a question of the tone of individual instruments than their separation from each other, and a little investigation showed that this is almost entirely due to the preamp.

In fact, the power amp, with various other partnering preamps (the MF X-P100 seemed a good match), scored very highly indeed

in this regard, combining an excellent grasp of the big picture with a real knack for small details such as isolated taps on a triangle. Evidently the preamp is slightly veiling the sound – particularly via the phono input, which is serviceable but not really up to the line stages where resolution is concerned.

Whatever may be causing that, it's not lack of bandwidth: the RC-995 passes the audio band and at least an octave either side with negligible deviation from flat response and the line stage reaches below 1Hz and above 1MHz with ease. The RB-991 also has a wide response and keeps distortion exceptionally low at all levels and frequencies.

#### CONCLUSION

A few reservations, then, and those mostly about the preamp. However, the price looks very tempting indeed and the power amp is good enough, I think, to warrant a Best Buy tag – just upgrade the pre first! **RB**

#### VERDICT

<b>SOUND</b>	★★★★★
<b>BUILD</b>	★★★★★
<b>VALUE</b>	★★★★★
<b>PRICE</b>	£525/£600

The power amp is top stuff and stunning value; the pre a little less earth-shattering, but highly capable.

#### TWO YEAR GUARANTEE

Gamepath, 28 Heathfield, Stacey Bushes, Milton Keynes, MK12 6HR

(01908) 317707



# CONCLUSIONS

## PRE/POWER AMPS

This may only be a small test group, but in many ways it has turned out to cover a very great many hi-fi angles. We've had the traditional, big manufacturer, gizmo-laden cheapie (Technics), the original hard-nut audiophile with a defiantly individual outlook (Naim), the new independent (Musical Fidelity – not that new, I know, but certainly post-Naim), the middle-grounders (Rotel and NAD) and even a touch of the high-end behemoth (NAD's power amp). That's quite a cross-section, and they've arguably all behaved pretty much to type, too.

With the cheapest sample from Technics, the benefits of the separates approach are not entirely clear. Your money buys quite a lot of integrated amp, and there are some that offer similar output power and numbers of inputs. Manufacturers such as Arcam,

**"This may only be a small test group, but in many ways it has turned out to cover a very great many hi-fi angles."**

Harman/Kardon and Denon all have a good reputation for such creatures, for instance. OK, there's the advantage of this particular system in terms of upgrading to surround, but that's still not a decisive attribute.

Rotel's system is considerably more expensive, but apart from the obvious additions (more than twice the power and an MC phono input) it really does move the game to a different league in terms of sheer sound quality.

Very few integrated amps out there will come close to this combination all round: a few of the better ones will match it for detail resolution, perhaps, but none I

can think of will combine that with similar power delivery. The preamp's a pretty good looking bit of kit, too – and that's an advantage I'm sure many will not overlook when comparing it with some of the large integrated amplifiers out there.

The remaining three systems come in pretty close together in price. Naim's amplifiers are aimed at a certain kind of audiophile – principally, indeed, at existing owners of complete Naim systems. They're fine as far as they go, but just don't fit into the larger scheme of things as neatly as the other two. They also offer considerably less power, about a third:

power rating can be misleading, but a factor of three can certainly be significant.

That said, be sure you have speakers that can actually do something sensible with 200 Watts, and that you do actually listen that loud, if only occasionally!

Musical Fidelity has consistently scored well for its amplifiers, and the trio tested here are no exception. It's not the purest tonal balance ever, but both units show every sign of having real ability to open music up and make it more immediate for the listener.

NAD can do the same, and really the differences between the MF and NAD systems come down to a matter of personal taste as much as hi-fi absolutes (if there really are any of those). Hearing both will give any prospective purchaser food for thought. And on that note, it's over to you!

### THE BEST IN THE TEST



**ROTEL RC-995/RB-991**

The RB-991 power amp is the real star here, with loads of power – and very refined power at that. Really top value, it is only slightly restrained by the RC-995, which slightly lacks detail but copes well with a wide variety of music.



**MUSICAL FIDELITY X-P100/X-A200**

Additional flexibility offered by the only monoblock amps in this group, and a very engaging and listenable sound. Well matched to each other, the Nuvista-derived preamp and overgrown XA-A50 powers could form the heart of a very capable system.



**NAD Silverline S100/S200**

A stunning break with tradition by NAD, these two beauties offer flexibility, sound quality and some serious pride of ownership. Power with subtlety, good imaging and a winning way with the human voice all add up to a fine value package.

### PRE / POWER AMPS COMPARISON TABLE

MAKE	MUSICAL FIDELITY	NAD	NAIM	ROTEL	TECHNICS
MODEL	X-P100/X-A200	SILVERLINE S100/S200	NAC102/NAP180	RC-995/RB-991	SU-C1010/SE-A1010
PRICE	£800/£1,000 (pair)	£600/£1,400	£1,000/£1,122	£525/£600	£299.99/£349.99
SOUND	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
GUARANTEE	5 years	2 years	1 year	2 years	1 year
SIZE (WXHXD, MM) PRE/POWER	230x100x305/160x175x430	450x80x300/450x190x405	435x85x310/435x85x310	440x75x330/440x140x395	430x90x295/430x160x335
WEIGHT PRE/POWER	3.5kg/7.5kg	5kg/28kg	6.5kg/11kg	6kg/18kg	4kg/9kg
RATED POWER	200W	200W	60W	200W	90W
NUMBER OF INPUTS	6	7	6	7	7
PHONO INPUT	MM only	Optional	Optional	MM/MC	MM only