

## Rotel RCD-02/RA-02

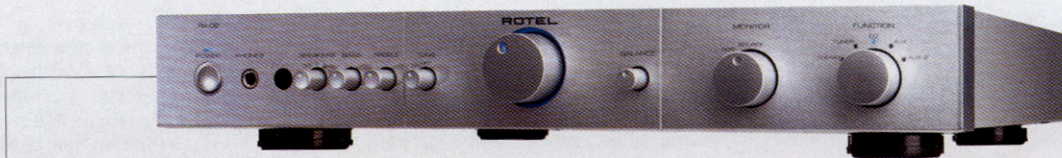
# New CD player and amp have audiophile appeal

Rotel has a new UK distributor and new styling; James Vesey finds the latest products build on an enviable heritage

Silver really is the new black. Or at least the new champagne gold, with a wide range of manufacturers offering a silver/black colour choice on their electronics. No, it's not the greatest breakthrough in the history of home audio, but for Rotel – a company for which brutal black and decade old styling was more or less a badge of audiophile credibility – offering silver as an option is a really big event.

After all, the story for years was that all the money in Rotel products was spent under the skin rather than on flashy cosmetics, a claim also made by close rival NAD, and usually the sound of the products bore this out. Right back to the days of the company's first BitStream CD player – the RCD-965, if memory serves – and an RA-820 amp I once owned, the point was always that Rotels offered more than you'd expect for the money. Players, amps, tuners, preamps and powers all came in that basic black with red LED telltales and the odd moulded trim, and each was built well and sold at a very sensible price. And I can't remember a Rotel going wrong, either during ownership or testing.

So the news a few months ago that long-term distributor Gamepath and Rotel had parted company was a bit of a shock,



Silver finish is the biggest change for Rotel, but the sleek styling and high-quality controls add to the impression of class

especially as the Milton Keynes company had also lost Harman/Kardon, JBL and Infinity in short order as Harman Europe came into existence. For a while it looked like the end of Rotel in the UK, but now B&W Loudspeakers has taken up the brand to sell alongside its own products and the Canadian Classé range of high-end electronics. Even better, it seems the Rotel policy of design, tuning and engineering in the UK and Japan, with manufacture in low-cost facilities – China in the case of the products we have here – will be maintained.

Unbox the £375 RCD-02 CD player and the £350 RA-02 amplifier that are the subjects of this test, and they're not at all what you might expect. Not only are they silver but they're decidedly sleek – just over 7cm tall – and undeniably stylish. By accident or intention the use of vertical styling creases on the fascia gives them an air of the latest Series 5 components from British company Naim, while the exterior fit and finish, and the feel of the controls, is a giant leap from the rather agricultural impression created by Rotels of the past.

In fact these two products are part of a completely new range from the company: there's also a less expensive amplifier, the £250 RA-01, which lacks remote control but is otherwise the same as the RA-02, a £275 AM/FM RDS tuner, the RT-02, and a forthcoming RC/RB-02 preamp/power amplifier combination, at £275 apiece. All save the RA-01 are designed to be operated from a single remote control – the RR-AT2 is provided with the RA-02 amp – while 12V trigger connections allow a complete system to be powered up or set into standby at the touch of a button.

The RCD-02 also comes with its own RR-D94 remote, adding extra track search and programming functions, while the player itself is built around 18-bit digital to analogue conversion from Burr Brown, along with Pacific Microsonics' HDCD decoder/filter, both chosen after extensive listening tests. The transport is the 'overscan' type also found in the company's RCD-1070 player, backed up with proprietary low-jitter digital circuitry, while the power supply is split between digital and analogue sections right

back to the transformer, which has two sets of secondary windings. Analogue outputs are provided on RCA phons, with a similar socket for digital output – there's no optical feed – and the player also has 12V trigger and external remote control inputs.

The 40W per channel RA-02 amplifier strikes a fine balance between user appeal and audiophile design. It has a moving magnet phono stage that's more than good enough for turntables like the more affordable Pro-jects and Regas and their standard cartridges, four line inputs and a single tape loop, these being accessed via a main selector and a separate tape monitoring switch.

Tone and balance controls are provided, but there's a bypass switch to take them out of circuit, and the two sets of speaker outputs can be run together – for example for simpler biwiring – or with one or both sets switched off, maybe for headphone listening. Again the mains lead is a detachable IEC type, and completing the package is an array of 12V trigger and remote connections, plus preamp outputs for bi-amplification of suitable speakers with

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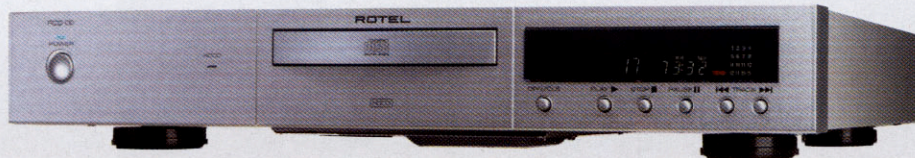
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The looks are reminiscent of Naim's Series 5 products, aided by the CD player's uncluttered fascia

an external power amplifier, or just for adding more power with the RA-02 becoming a preamp.

#### Performance

I can't imagine many listeners hankering after more power than the Rotel amp delivers: it may be 'only' 40W per channel, but it has more than enough oomph to deliver a wide range of musical styles without ever sounding stressed or hard, even when it's run at fairly demanding levels. I used the amp with both Mission 780 standmounted speakers and a pair of big PMC floorstanders, and never did I feel in need of more 'welly', even with large-scale orchestral works.

What's more, the amplifier and the player have the kind of easy-going synergy that means they gel extremely well when used together: cabled up with Chord Company's superb Siren interconnect, which at £80 for a 1m pair is about right for a £725 CD/amp combination, and with Odyssey speaker cable biwiring to the speakers, the Rotels started singing straight from the box, and after a couple of days' use were proving highly addictive.

There's a directness and fluidity to the sound that again invites comparisons with Naim's Series 5 equipment, and while the Rotels sound a little warmer and less hard-hitting than the Salisbury kit, there's definitely the same kind of communication going on.

A favourite recording of the moment is *Stereophile* magazine's *Mosaic* disc, featuring the founder of Musical Fidelity, Antony Michaelson, playing Mozart and Brahms Clarinet Quintets. I heard various CD-Rs of this disc at a number of stages on a variety of systems and the Rotels deliver an open, spacious yet focused view.

The studio is the former sanctuary of a Kansas church, a beautifully apparent acoustic. The instruments sound realistic and have excellent character, and there's a captivating depth to the soundstage. In this 'picture' the performers are located not as two-dimensional cut-outs but as three-dimensional entities, and for a sub-£1000 combination to manage this so well – admittedly with a pair of speakers costing at least as much again in harness – is impressive stuff.

Just as good is the handling of larger musical forces, as shown by the recent Warner disc of Dvorak's *Slavonic Dances* (Chamber Orchestra of Europe/Harnoncourt), where the combination of rhythmic drive and smooth, liquid tonal quality is highly attractive. Again the Rotel combination shows its ability to create a big, impressive soundstage picture with excellent fine detailing – such as the delicate triangle in the Op 46 No 3 polka – and at the same time have power in hand when the orchestra attacks in force.

It's a lovely presentation of a fine recording, with the slight caveat that the amp, in common with most, sounds a little lifeless at very low levels. It's on full song by the time you reach about 10 o'clock on its control, however.

In absolute terms the Rotels are a little soft at the top end, and spending much more on an amplifier and CD player combination will gain presence and atmosphere, especially with voices, and even more weight in the bass. For the money, however, it would seem churlish to criticise what are rather remarkable products. ☺

#### ROTEL RCD-02

**Type** CD player

**Price** £375

**Formats supported** CD, CD-R/RW, HDCD

**Digital to analogue converter/filter** 18-bit 8x oversampling

**Outputs** Analogue stereo, electrical digital

**Inputs** 12V trigger, external remote control, IEC mains

**Accessories supplied** Remote handset, IEC mains lead

**Dimensions** (W x H x D) 435 x 72 x 316mm

#### ROTEL RA-02

**Type** Integrated amplifier

**Price** £350

**Power** 40W per channel  
Inputs Phono (mm), 4 line, tape

**Outputs** Tape, 2 pairs of speakers, preamp, headphones

**Other connections** 12V trigger out and external remote

**Accessories supplied** Remote handset, IEC mains lead

**Dimensions** (W x H x D) 435 x 72 x 316mm

**Distributed by** B&W Loudspeakers, Dale Road, Worthing, West Sussex BN11 2BH

**Tel** 01903 221500

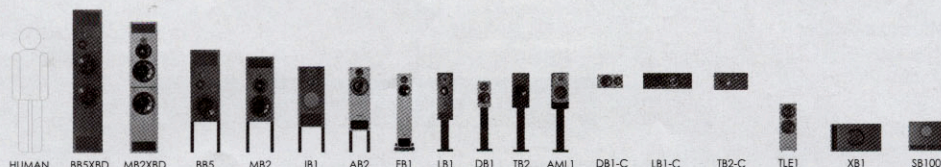
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