

Rotel RCD1070

New £550 CD player makes the most of music

Andrew Everard welcomes a new

I hate to say 'I told you so', but for some months now I've been banging on about the fact that, far from giving in to the onward march of DVD technology, the CD player is making something of a comeback. And just when I thought I'd seen all the new arrivals due in the last few months of 2001, a surprise came in the form of a product announcement from Rotel's UK distributor Gamepath.

Yes, there was information about a massive AV receiver, an £1800 22-kilo behemoth with every surround mode known to man – well, almost – and 100W per channel, which is due for attention in these pages in the near future, but what really caught my attention was a no-compromise CD player, seemingly with a very sensible price tag.

The RCD1070 may be part of the company's flagship 10 Series, with its massive build and even higher standard of components than you'll find in the 'cooking' 9 Series range, but the price is a long way short of audio's stratosphere: the player costs just £525, which puts it very much in the mainstream of quality CD players.

Not that you'd guess that the machine was so affordable from its styling, which is definitely from the American high-end mould, complete with chunky extensions to the thick metal fascia designed to act as (or at least look like) grab-handles. Nor, indeed, does the feel of the player give the game away: haul it from the box and while the



Designed to fit in above the existing 900-series CD players, and with styling to match, the Rotel RCD1070 delivers a striking performance at a sensible price

5.8kg mass isn't exactly in the back-breaking power amplifier class, it's substantial enough for a CD player. That's thanks in no small part to the use of thick panels for the casework, and of course that fascia, in the quest for rigidity and vibration damping, but there's substance under the skin, too.

Power comes from a custom-designed Rotel toroid transformer, while tweakers will be pleased to see that the mains lead is attached using a standard IEC 'kettle plug', and can thus be replaced with more exotic wire should the blandishments of the accessory companies catch your eye. Rotel has expended considerable time and effort on this player, as is made clear by the use of instrument grade components in crucial areas and a clear, logical signal path to the analogue outputs.

Some rethinking has also been going on: the transport and digital-to-analogue conversion systems here are new to the Rotel stable.

Discs are scanned by a centrally mounted over-scan transport designed for a low level of errors, while the whole mechanism is designed for low resonance to the same end. Meanwhile the crucial number-crunching is in the hands of a multi-level delta/sigma system of 18-bit resolution sourced from Burr-Brown, recent players having used 20-bit systems. The new DAC is also to be found in a new 9 Series Rotel player, the £400 RCD961, and is another example of the company selecting parts, and designing their implementation, by auditioning, and is backed up here with an 8x oversampling digital filter with decoding for High Definition Compatible Digital (HD/CD) discs.

This has long been a crucial part of the Rotel design philosophy, and an area in which UK-based staff are heavily involved, the company believing that measurement can only tell so much of the story. It may seem a low-tech approach,

but it has been a major factor in the design of some very good players and amplifiers in the past, so why change?

Completing the package is a slimline remote control handset, which is functional if not a tactile match for the player itself, an electrical digital output on a standard phono socket, and a 12V trigger input, allowing the player to be turned on and off by suitable equipment, such as Rotel's 10 Series amps and receivers. This last is an increasingly common provision – it's long been popular in the States – with an eye to complex custom-installed or multiroom systems.

Performance

I have to admit that my initial reaction to the Rotel was not even lukewarm, but about as cool as the player was after a journey home in the boot of the car on a November night. Either the player was pretty poor, or it needed some warming

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up and running in for all its performance to be realised, and thankfully the latter proved to be the case. The next morning, after running continuously on random repeat overnight, things had become much better; after a few days' use, the player left me in no doubt it was rather special.

I've been impressed with other products in the current Rotel lineup – the RDV995 DVD-Video player, RSX972 AV receiver and most recently the RA1060 integrated amplifier have been reviewed favourably in these pages in the past 12 months – and this CD player proved no disappointment. The sound is big, bold and powerful, delivering solo piano and orchestral/choral works with equal conviction and musicality.

It's a machine with plenty of power on tap for the dynamics of real music, never sounding as though it's compressing or smearing the attack of a single hammer on strings or a full choir entrance such as that on the famous 'Zadok the Priest' from the recent Hyperion recreation of the Coronation of George II (12/01). The latter is a free-breathing, spaciouly atmospheric recording of the kind that has made Hyperion famous, and the Rotel, used with suitably dynamic amplification and loudspeakers, makes the most of these virtues.

Right from the tolling bell at the opening of the first of the two discs the spine tingles, and when that glorious impact of voices and brass occurs at the end of the 'side' it's hard not to be moved. Playing the whole set through my usual TAG McLaren Audio amplification and Monitor Audio speakers, with the little MJ Acoustics Pro 50 sub-woofer also in harness, was one of

the highlights of the time the Rotel spent in my listening room, so impressive was the sense of natural perspective and ambience. Oh, and purists should look away while I point out that it sounded more dramatic with the TAG processor's Dolby Pro-Logic II Music system engaged, a point to which I've returned on the opening pages of this month's audio section.

Back with the amplification in stereo, the Rotel makes a similarly impressive job of the Belcea Quartet's *Grauphne* Award-winning programme of Debussy, Dutilleul and Ravel (EMI, 4/01). Yes, it gives away a little in timbre and air to the Marantz CD7 I use as a reference player – hardly surprising, given a five-fold price differential, but the vigour and artistry of the playing is still deliciously revealed, to a standard that's a match for any player I've encountered in the sub-£1000 arena. And when one considers some of the illustrious contenders on offer in this market sector, from the likes of British companies such as Arcam, Linn and Roksan, that's praise indeed. This is an essentially neutral player, and what failings it has are, to quote an old audio reviewing chestnut, ones of omission rather than commission. Yes, it may miss out on the finest nuances of a recording – the kind of subtle details unearthed by players of the calibre of the Meridian 588, Musical Fidelity's Nu-Vista 3D and the Marantz – and by comparison with those machines can sound a little thick and constrained in absolute terms. However, it doesn't introduce any colorations of its own to what's being played, and by the standards of its price-competition that makes it really very remarkable.

Another benefit of this neutrality is that the Rotel won't be too fussy about the equipment with which it's partnered, and no cunning system-matching tricks will be needed to get the sound back on an even keel. The RA1060 amplifier, at £600, is an obvious match, and given its showing in these pages would make a vibrant, engrossing combination, but models such as the £500 Cyrus 5 or NAD's remarkable C370, which is just £450, would also work well.

Speaker choice is similarly open, given the balance on offer here: as a budget option in a small room the Mission 780s (£300) would be good, but the Rotel duo in particular would be just as at home driving the likes of PMC's little TB2, which are £700, or Monitor Audio's similarly compact £799 Gold Reference 10s.

In larger spaces, this player would work well with any of the amplifiers mentioned above with floorstanding designs such as the Tannoy Revolution RJs or B&W's DM603s, though I have to admit I'm yet to hear the new S3 iteration of the latter. Or as an alternative you might consider some of the standmount models mentioned in the previous paragraph along with some low-end extension courtesy of an active sub-woofer such as the MJ Acoustics model I've already noted as part of the test system here.

Certainly the Rotel player wasn't outclassed by the amplification and speakers with which I used it, even if some £6000 of system downstream of it did make what few limitations it has more apparent than they would be through price-comparable equipment. This is a very well-judged player, with a finely controlled combination of

Rotel RCD1070
Type CD player
Price £200
Digital-to-analogue conversion Dual-DSD 18-bit equivalent (delta-sigma) with 5x oversampling digital filter and HDCD decoder
Analogue outputs Stereo phono
Digital output Phono electrical
Other connections 12V trigger input, EC mains input
Headphone socket No
Accessories supplied Remote handset
Dimensions (W x H x D) 430 x 90 x 337mm
Made by Rotel Co Ltd, Tokyo, Japan
Distributed by Rotel UK, Garroch Ltd, 26 Heathfoot, Slacks Bushes, Milton Keynes MK12 5HR
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energy and delicacy of touch, and should definitely be on the auditioning list for those contemplating a move beyond the £100-300 CD entry level, but not wanting to spend the price of a secondhand car on the system. As the latest arrival in what is far from CD's last gasp, the RCD1070 has, I think, got its market positioning just right – it's at a sensible price in the modern market, and yet delivers more than one might expect. ☺

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