



# ROTEL CALIFORNIA

**Simon Pope hails the launch of an affordable way to experience the sound of HDCD with Rotel's RCD-951 CD player.**

It seems that only yesterday the audio business was hailing the development of California-based Pacific Microsonic's High Definition Compatible Digital system as the possible successor to ordinary 16-bit CDs. While the current industry fervour regarding SACD and DVD-A has knocked HDCD out of the limelight, Rotel have not overlooked its potential. The company has opted to fit the expensive PMD-100 HDCD filter to the new RCD-951.

During the run-up to the arrival of SACD and DVD-Audio, it would be a good idea to remember that there are over 2000 HDCD recordings currently available (for a complete listing: [www.hdcd.com](http://www.hdcd.com)) and, importantly, the performances are good ones by well-known artists and orchestras. The only difficulty is that you won't necessarily find all of them in the high street.

Another point in the Rotel's favour is its price. The first new-format players will be expensive, as HDCD-compatible machines have been up until now due to the cost of the PMD-100. However, the RCD-951 weighs in at a mere £300.

Rotel have stuck to their customary, super-model thin styling for the '951, with fluorescent display to the right and the drawer placed centrally. All the usual

facilities feature, including a calendar-style track number display, 20-track memory, time remaining and two repeat modes.

**SITTING INSIDE** the slim chassis is circuitry configured along the same lines as that used in the more expensive '971. Burr-Brown's PCM-69A convertor sits at the heart of the player. Round the back you'll find a coaxial digital output for external DAC use or digital-to-digital recording.

Setting off with standard CDs, the '951 was immediately impressive. **Bernard Butler's** *Stay* opened in its customary measured fashion, the vocals clear and forward. This gradually built up into a sustained crescendo, the Rotel taking everything in its stride without even a hint of confusion.

With **Bach's** cello suites (Yo-Yo Ma holding the bow), in spite of a touch of bass boom, the Rotel produced results that were smooth, open, devoid of treble harshness and engagingly musical in a way many budget machines conspicuously aren't.

**Bruckner's** Ninth Symphony, played by the Minnesota Orchestra on a Reference Recordings CD, is a very fine disc which benefits from HDCD encoding. With the red LED on its fascia confirming this pedigree, the Rotel came up with some of the best sounds I've encountered from £300 equipment. String tremolos sent a shiver down my spine and chunky brass chords had a refreshing lightness and space to them.

Another performance by the same

orchestra (on the same label) playing **Stravinsky's** *The Rite Of Spring* highlighted the great a sense of spaciousness and subtlety can be achieved with HDCD - I was taken aback by how a 100-piece orchestra could sound both light yet powerful at one and the same time.

**AN EXAMPLE OF** this clarity came at the end of the piece - every crash, bang and wallop of the percussion could be heard along with the breathy nuances from the flutes. As it hurtles towards the conclusion, this piece can often get out of control on your average CD player. No such problems with the '951 in HDCD mode, and the bass looseness on normal CDs all but disappeared too.

As a non-HDCD machine the RCD-951 holds its own against the competition at its price without difficulty. With HDCD discs it starts seriously to rival £500+ players. £300 and a few HDCD purchases can launch you further than you might have imagined towards the goal of convincing reproduction from CD. At this sort of level, HDCD is still a more than viable medium.

**Rotel RCD-951** **£299.99**

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### WORLD VERDICT

Good with ordinary CDs, excellent on HDCD. Construction is very solid too.

Measured Performance see page 119