

## lab test



# Rotel RCD-955AX CD Player

**R**otel really set the cat among the pigeons in last year's edition of this magazine with its RCD-865BX CD player, which we discovered was one of the real bargains of 1991. It blitzed its opposition in terms of price, value—and especially performance.

So we were more than happy to receive the latest offering from Rotel, the RCD-955AX for review in this year's issue. This new unit replaces the cheaper model of the line-up from last year, the RCD-855AX, although there are obvious similarities.

The RCD-955AX uses Philips' tried, tested and proven 16-bit digital processing circuitry, and Philips' 4-times oversampling filtering for each channel, which places it a little distance from the leading edge of CD player technology now, but its slightly higher-priced sibling, the RCD-965BX, does use Philips' latest PDM (Pulse Density Modulation) technology.

As mentioned, outward appearances have not changed a great deal from the previous year, although this in itself is not such a bad thing, because Rotel has found a simple and effective general design for the front panel. Our sample unit was black with a satin aluminium finish.

The disc tray is positioned (as usual) on the left next to the power switch, with the front piece of the tray protruding quite noticeably out of the panel.

The large display window sits almost in the middle, and when lit doesn't light up like a Christmas tree—instead, it glows quietly, making it quite legible and easy to read, but not a blazing torch.

Below the window are the major function keys, including Stop, Play, Pause, Track Search in either direction and the key for opening and closing the tray.

The right-hand corner of the front

panel houses the minor function keys for programming, random play, repeating the disc, disc scan (in which the first ten seconds of each track is played automatically), and Search, which finds specific passages in tracks. The display window is a comprehensive readout of what is happening at any time. Amongst other displays, it shows the track number, the function being used and the elapsed disc time. An error readout warns users of any mistakes in use (such as incorrectly inserted discs) or any errors in programming.

The RCD-955AX is rather stark in terms of gadgetry compared with the bulk of its competition. Most of its competitors positively bristle with extra keys for all sorts of tricky functions for recording purposes, or to make life easier for those who find using a CD player difficult. Rotel has chosen a very sensible path in offering a player that has had the bulk of its development money spent on improving the sound

rather than adding unnecessary controls.

Nevertheless, the RCD-955AX does come with an infra-red remote control, which can handle all the functions available on the unit, except those of switching power on and off and opening and closing the disc tray.

It is a slim and attractive control, and has buttons large enough to be used without requiring the use of fingernails to push them.

The rear panel houses a pair of fixed-level analogue outputs for connection to an integrated amplifier, and a coaxial digital output for those wanting to use an outboard D/A converter.

The disc tray on our sample unit had been taped securely shut, and two large red transport screws held the transport system securely in position inside. Don't forget to remove these before use, and always re-install them before moving the unit—even if it's only to another room.

## Listening Sessions

Power the Rotel RCD-955AX up and press the open/close button and the tray slides open with a small degree of noise. The tray itself is plastic, and will handle both 80 mm and 120 mm discs. The tray can be closed either by pressing the close button or by pushing the tray lightly. If it is impeded in its path in closing, either by a misaligned disc or another object—such as a reviewer's finger!—it will try to continue to close for five seconds, then halts and returns to its original position. If it encounters an obstruction while it is trying to open, the tray pushes against it for five seconds and then stops in a half-opened position.

Using the unit is simplicity itself, and there are all the functions that a typical

user could possibly want. (Although the unit is made in Taiwan, it was designed in England, and shows typical British restraint.) Our group of listeners considered that its lack of bells and whistles was a bonus in its favour, and relegates many of its competition to minor places because of their unnecessary gadgetry.

The RCD-955AX revealed a rich and lustrous musical nature that was quite charming. The sound-stage was very open and elegant, almost liquid in nature, giving every instrument—regardless of how many there were playing at one time—ample room to develop and find its proper niche in the musical picture. The overall image loped out of the speakers with spontaneity and vigour.

Even the most complex passages could not trip it up in terms of sound-stage positioning. Lynn Harrell's rendition of Dvorak's *Cello Concerto in B Minor* with the Philharmonia Orchestra (Decca 410 144-2) has several passages of very rich and complex massed strings, and can provide some components with a troubled time, but the Rotel lapped it up, and what's more, delivered those string sections full of their timbral beauty, soaring intensity and punch.

And the bass section of the orchestra also received very kind attention. There are a few moments in this Cello Concerto where some units can lose the plot (and the bass line), but the Rotel delivered as we hoped it would—straight and very cleanly. We have heard components with heavier and more pronounced bass responses, which is to a lot of people's taste, but although the Rotel has a lighter, more precise delivery, nothing feels like it is missing, and the image is as tight as a bowstring.

The high frequencies occasionally received a slightly hard edge when there was a lot of information, and

singers periodically delivered a small degree of sibilance which masked fine vocal resolution, but we are really nit-picking here.

The stereo image really shone with this unit. At no time, and with no music, did the image suffer from vagueness or irregularity, or feel cramped in any direction. It was tall, wide—although not exceptionally so—and possessed a greater degree of depth than just about any other unit we have heard in this price range. And it was all precisely positioned.

Indeed it was this precision that kept us going back for more. It was uncannily realistic in its presentation, with a degree of clarity that not only placed each instrument in its own space, but gave them all the air they needed to express their full vitality and lustre.

Percussion instruments received the most benefit from this admirable trait. Bells, triangles, and other light percussive sounds had a vibrancy that sparkled through the image, giving the music a verve and vigour that is just not found very often with budget components. It seemed that the Rotel was desperate to please the listener by offering its own enthusiasm for the music and passing it on.

## Conclusion

Rotel has done it again with the RCD-955AX. It offers a degree of musicality that usually costs much more. It's not perfect, but if it is music you want, and not just buttons and features, rush out and get one of these players now before the distributor realizes that it's asking too little for them. **SBC**

Steve Crowe

**ROTEL** *hifi*

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