

SERIOUSLY



Groovy

The £750 Rotel RCD 991 is their new HDCD compatible, top of the range "statement" CD player. Simon Pope listens with interest.

This isn't Rotel's first attempt at more expensive equipment. They are often considered the manufacturers of good value for money machinery in the budget/mid price bracket. But as they proved with the Michi range they are no mugs when it comes to the higher echelons of audio either.

The RCD 991 is the biggest brother of the 951, of which we reviewed to great acclaim last year. Both of the players benefit from being both HDCD compatible and being solidly built. As far as looks go, with the top of the range 991, Rotel don't go for the esoteric look but instead plump for their attractive functional look with the striking red trim. In this case though the usually slimline effect has been fattened slightly to accommodate for the extra bits and bobs required for the five-segment power supply and other audiophiles goodies.

Apart from the Pacific Microsonics PMD100 chip inside, the other main features of the 991 are the inclusion of a proprietary low-jitter digital circuit, a "wide read" linear mechanism and a "user selectable" dither aid. This is displayed on the front panel in the form of digits from 0-7. 1-6 are increasingly higher levels of ultrasonic noise-shaped dither, which attempt to "smooth out" non-linear errors in D/A converters. The number 7 setting is designed to correct quantisation errors only.

Rotel obviously designed the 991 to be a serious contender in the CD market, so

is the sound seriously good? Starting off with Paul Weller's brilliantly produced (if slightly dated!) Stanley Road the Rotel responded with a confident and controlled reading. The stereo effects that pepper this CD were supremely executed by the 991, showing that stereo imaging is a definite plus. The bopping voodoo rhythms of Walk On Gilded Splinters bounced through the speakers, with the guitars and drum kit cleanly detailed. However, although the 991 is a highly detailed player the sound was smooth and lyrical with especially warm vocals - as opposed to being merely analytical and sterile.

Feeding the next CD into the mechanism - Stravinsky's Rite Of Spring played by the Minnesota Orchestra on Reference Recordings - saw the HDCD LED illuminate and the player produce a sound of outstanding quality at the price. What the best HDCD players and recordings do is create space and depth in the sound stage, and so it was with the RCD 991. Real space between instruments was present (maybe even too much, thanks to the recording) along with an increased sharpness of detail and good orchestral balance. As with the Paul Weller CD the sharp detail was matched by subtlety and a rich tone, this time from the woodwind and strings which kept that woody tone inherent in their 'natural' sound.

The 951 that impressed us last year really excelled with HDCD, whereas the 991 plays your bog-standard hardware

with as much confidence as with HDCD material. With the RCD 951 we found that it set a new level at the price and whilst the 991 may not be our ultimate choice at the price, it's right up there with the best. The only weaknesses are in build aspects (although it's not wafer light it could be a little more solidly constructed) and the slightly flimsy remote control. There's strong competition from the likes of Audio Analogue's Pagannini, and slightly more expensive the Musical Fidelity X-Ray - but neither of these have the bonus of the HDCD chip.

It's a brilliant all-rounder with a reliable sound that feels like it will never tire you out, however long you play it for. If you're in the hunt for a £700-£800 CD player, you could do a heck of a lot worse than the RCD 991. A serious machine that's an excellent buy.

Rotel RCD991 £750

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WORLD VERDICT



Easily one of the best at the price. A confident and musical player that takes some beating

Measured Performance see page 115