



Rotel RMB-1095 5-Channel Amplifier

.....



Every component for review produces a defining moment during its period of evaluation. These moments are not always to the product's advantage. But for this considerable amplifier, the moment of truth came during the string ostinatos of the Shostakovich *Eighth Symphony* [LSO/Previn; EMI ASD-2917]. The rich combination of layering, definition, and control illuminated this classic performance afresh. All the individual components of the orchestra were playing as a single living, glorious entity perked, and they held my attention until the final note died away. In the vast lexicon of audio hyperbole, the word "effortless" seems most grievously overused. But here it was, in the goose-bump, jumping flesh: Effortless.

Identity? Well this amp is big, it's black, and it's powerful. It's got more fins than a school of albacore and is better ventilated than Courtney Love's wardrobe. Need a hint? A Krell or a Levenson you say? Nope, the Rotel RMB-1095 five-channel THX Ultra amplifier. Rated at 200 watts per channel, all five channels driven continuously 20 Hz to 20 kHz at 8 ohms. It produces a full kilowatt of output power. Essentially it's a five-channel version of Rotel's popular RB-1090 stereo amp. Like the RB-1090, the RMB-1095's power supply is constructed around a pair of 1.2kVA toroidal transformers and uses the same 22,000-microfarad British-made slit-foil capacitors. The front panel has a small power button and a quintet of LED indicators that illuminate in sequence as the protection circuit actuates during start-up. The back panel houses both gold-plated balanced XLR and single-ended RCA inputs, along with color-coded speaker terminals and the DB25 direct-in connector to a surround processor like Rotel's very own RSP-985. And to aid in the amplifier's ambulating, there are a pair of integral casters beneath the chassis. Good move, Rotel — this heavyweight enters the ring at about 80 pounds in fighting trim.

For those in need of a refresher, THX Ultra certification is identical to the standard THX of yore and exists only to distinguish it from the more recently minted THX Select designation, a specification created for less imposing systems pressed into service in smaller rooms. Fundamentally, amplifiers (this should not be confused with the less stringent standard for the amplifier sections of AV receivers) that meet the current Ultra spec must not only produce a minimum of 100 continuous watts into an 8-ohm load simultaneously across all 5 channels, but it must also be able to meet rigorous low-impedance requirements to guarantee the reserve of the output and dynamics that blockbuster home theater generally demands.

The mid-price products in Rotel's amplifier line-up have generally, in my experience, possessed a neutral to forward bias in the midrange, with a gradual darkening of the non-aggressive treble and softness in the low bass. The RMB-1095 changes all that. The sound here is unrestrained. Effortless and robust in the lower frequencies, from 160 Hz down into the upper 20s, the bass is as close to state of the art as I've heard in my system. Mid- and upper-bass definition is as precise as I've heard in my listening room. Even in my reference system, there's the perception of greater extension than ever before. This is, in part, attributable to the RMB-1095's reserves of power that extract the full specification from a given speaker, especially less efficient ones or those played at loud levels on full-range material. Dynamic contrasts as a result seemed wider and more intimidating.

The Rotel is smooth throughout the middle ranges, finally rolling slightly in the treble, but in such a pleasing manner that the only sensation is one of lack of grain and a subtle darkening of textures. Overall, a pleasingly neutral character with just a hint of lush warmth. This is an ideal balance in the home-theater market, where the highest frequencies in both material and hardware are often reproduced rather aggressively. Rather than add an edge where one is not needed, the Rotel subtly tapers the sonic high-frequency corners.

Vocals and dialog were pristine through the 1095. Whether the whisky-marinated low baritone of Tom Waits from his *Mule Variations* album or the gifted mezzo of Broadway's Audra McDonald, each voice was continuous harmonically and suspended in space by the power of its own gifts rather than by upper harmonic colorations or distortions that cloud or smear the presentation.

NEIL GADER

In the Shostakovich, there is a middle theme during the third movement punctuated with solos of trumpet and snare drum. Both instruments light up the hall with their dynamics and ambient information. On lesser amplifiers, they both can sound recessed, compressed, or both. Transient information can be attenuated. The natural stridency of these instruments can sound dulled and diminished. If I have one light criticism, it was that the Rotel seemed to sweeten them slightly – adding a veil of richness that was less in evidence listening through the moderately more extended Plinius 8150 integrated or the Parasound HCA-3500.

The effortless reserves of power also made themselves known in the way the Rotel made hall sound and sound-stage depth come alive. Each crackle of the snare and blast of the trumpets was followed by a rush of reverberent air from deep on stage out into the audience. It almost had me believing in two-channel surround!

The percussion work of Police drummer Stewart Copeland on the highly regarded *Synchronicity* is as original as any I know. It calls to mind the same excitement that Bobby Colomby generated on Blood Sweat & Tears' self-titled album. Loads of syncopation and nuance, not just the predictable "four on the floor" drive. On this well-recorded album, the Rotel captured the full explosive energy of Copeland's efforts. The dry punch of his kick drum retained the texture of the mallet striking the drum head. The drum doubled with Sting's bass, but was not blurred by the Rotel. Indeed, the Rotel preserved these distinctive and complementary voices. The snap of the high pitch snare and the delicate cymbal accents illustrated the subtlety of transient information on a recording that was all analog and not augmented by the usual paraphernalia of drum triggers, gated effects, and god knows what processing.

After wringing out the 1095 in stereo, I found multi-channel a piece of cake. Whether driving a small Paradigm Monitor Series 5.1 or a moderately sized ATC/Joseph Audio make-shift hybrid, this amp cruised through home-theater territory with ease. Movies benefited from the granite foundation and the overall impression of channel separation it imparted to soundtracks, an area where the Rotel fools one into thinking the amp's a monoblock design (aided no doubt by teaming the 1095 with its surround-processor cousin the RSP-985). Its reserves make short work of heavy-handed sound effects. On the digitally remastered soundtrack of *Das Boot*, the ill-fated U-boat surfaces like a breaching whale to the thunderous explosion of tons of displaced Atlantic ocean. The Rotel filled the room with a most convincing demonstration. The John Eargle-engineered 5-channel *DVD Music Breakthrough* [Delos: DV 7002] has never sounded as smooth and spacious as with this Rotel. The delicate transients and shimmering decay of the triangle in Holst's "Jupiter" stood in vivid contrast to the majesty and omnipotence of the rest of the movement.

The sonic contrast between the 1095 and Rotel's AVR, the RSX-965, which I hold in high esteem, is revealing as well. Yes, there was greater extension at both ends of the frequency bands, but there was also greater textural detail. On the Shostakovich, the RSX-965 draws a clear picture of the players on stage even as it fills them in with color. But the RMB-1095 goes it one better and adds detailed relief to the sonic stage – the dimensionality and sense of distinct individuals plying their trade in unison. Likewise, in the Delos 5-channel recordings, which were clearly more vivid and detailed with this admittedly much more expensive combo (I was still using the Rotel surround-processor, the RSP-985, with the amp).

My general quibble with the Rotel has become almost a standard lament with most amplifiers. The upper frequencies come close but fall just a wing-tip short of taking air. Rare is the amp that produces this ease and openness of extension. The very best have the sonic elasticity of the well-oiled joints and flexible musculature of an acrobat. These amps seem to go in any direction the music instructs them, instantly and without protest. Part of it has to do with replicating transient information or the undistorted clarity of sibilants. The Rotel gives you virtually all the information, but it sounds just a bit tight or constricted in comparison to the very best. Subtle, yes. And you can bet that that subtlety is going to cost you dear.

Overall, if 200 wpc x 5 seems like overkill in your current set-up, consider this: the RMB-1095 is an amp with a future and will suffer the slings and arrows of torturous speaker upgrades and painful format changes. If you prefer the more direct approach of full-range, non-dipolar surrounds and the implicit balance of having identical speakers in every corner, an amplifier that feeds each beast the same amount of raw power is only logical. Of course, there's the issue of price. At only \$400 per individual 200-watt channel, the RMB-1095 is nothing if not a great buy. For a 5.1 system, it's near unbeatable. And last, if you're still a big two-channel fan, allow yourself a treat and give three of those channels the day off once in a while. **★**

Manufacturer Information

ROTEL OF AMERICA

54 Concord St.
North Reading, Massachusetts 01864
Phone: (978) 664-3820; fax: (978) 664-4109
www.rotel.com
Source: Manufacturer loan
Price: \$1,999

Manufacturer's Response

I agree with Neil that the RMB-1095 power amplifier could be a little more open; however Rotel has designed [it to mate with a] wide variety of sources and speakers. It would be easy to add some "air" and we have a sample unit in house that we use to demo with our stock B&Ws, but they are quite tolerant on highs where other speakers are not always so.

Sources can be vicious and I often read letters from customers complaining about a "brittle high end" in a system when it's often the poor choice of using a DVD player as a CD player or bright/metallic tweeters used by some [speaker] manufacturers.

If the world were perfect, then we would control all the chain and that would be interesting – Rotel loudspeakers! Ah yes, been there and done that, albeit 20 years ago, but I don't see Rotel speakers on the radar screen today or tomorrow.

Like the RB-1090, this amplifier is built with real-world parts to deliver real-world performance, and that's exactly what it's going to do... These amps are built like a good V8 engine – they can be driven all day and all night with little or no stress...

MIKE BARTLETT
VICE PRESIDENT & GENERAL MANAGER