Rotel RSP-1066 Controller and RMB-1075 Multichannel Amplifier

Rotel RSP-1066 Controller

Rotel has built a secure reputation producing audio and video components with a blue-collar sensibility—conservative, even nondescript on the outside, yet challenging all comers where the rubber meets the road, at the performance finish line. For the price of a high-quality audio/video receiver, Rotel offers up its new RSP-1066 controller and RMB-1075 130W, five-channel amplifier. Together, this enticing combination may well be irresistible to those of you who thought you were priced out of the separates market.

RSP-1066 Controller

Even with its heavy pro-style grab handles, the RSP-1066 has the traditional understated Rotel look. The front panel is dominated by a large liquid crystal display, a volume control with an imprecise, rubbery feel, and twin rows of tiny buttons that encourage the user to stick with the remote control. Tip: Go for the new silver faceplate on this controller. It's a knockout.

It only took an hour or so of listening evaluations to tell me that Rotel had really done a job with this one, beginning with the strength of its digital processing. For surround material, there is Crystal Semiconductor's DSP CS49326 processor; for digital conversion, the Asahi Kasei 24-bit/96kHz DAC and 20-bit/64x oversampling ADC. The 1066 auto-detects and decodes Dolby Digital, Dolby Digital EX, DTS-ES (matrix and discrete), HDCD, and MP3. For enhancing two-channel-based material, there's DTS Neo:6, Dolby Pro Logic II, six other music modes, and a seven-channel stereo mode. For some, the only disappointing omission will be the suite of THX enhancements, but their absence is ameliorated by flexible bass management and Cinema EQ.

The back panel offers 6.1-channel inputs and a full *ten* pre-outs, including pairs of center channel, subwoofer, and center-back outputs. Obviously 7.1-channel playback is no impediment to the RSP-1066. Connectivity is excellent: up to eight sources can be hooked up, three analog and five video. For video, composite- and S-video are offered, as well as component-video switching for two sources. All five digital inputs—two optical, three coaxial—are fully assignable. There are a pair of 12V triggers and an RS232 serial port for touch-panel controls or software updates. The controller accepts a standard RJ-45 eight-pin modular plug, and thus can be operated as part of a computer network running third-party audio system software. Zone 2 capability allows an additional stereo system to be controlled from the 1066 via its remote control or a wall-panel controller. Finally the power-management feature adds flexibility for custom installations: The user can select how the unit powers up—either full power or standby mode—and how the remote control organizes these functions.

Rotel's new RR-969 learning remote proved highly useful and logical, for the most part. Capable of replacing up to ten remote controls via its IR emitter/sensor, it has a liquid-crystal readout that's both easy to read and well lit. Its layout is mostly sensible, with two rows of five buttons for ten input devices directly beneath the read-out. The most commonly used controls are positioned in its center and include volume, center/sub/surround trim, OSD (On Screen Display), and navigation arrows. Strangely the DSP button from the front panel of the 1066 was confusingly renamed SUR+ and buried in an obscure location. Maybe it's just me, but I think all controllers should include a "reverse" selector, as well, to shorten the toggle time between surround modes. Still the remote had a good tactile feel and the size and shape of the buttons make it navigable by finger-touch memory.

Beneath a sliding cover, the RR-969 houses a series of smaller, less user-friendly buttons to control four source components that have been programmed into the system. A clever flip-panel has been labeled on opposing sides, so that the DVD and VCR buttons double-up for CD and tuner. Finally EDIT/LEARN and MACRO capabilities are assigned to a bottom row of buttons, along with the always-precious RESET/PRELOAD pen buttons. The remote includes time and alarm settings—to remind the user of a particular program he doesn't want to miss. All components can be assigned custom labels.

The OSD consists of a matter-of-fact series of sub-menus that indicate system status and make for routine

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setup. (No gimmicky icons or splashy colors here.) Notable features include the capability for source inputs to be renamed and assigned to specific processing modes. Speakers can be configured in near-limitless size combinations, and the provided test tones make it a snap to match SPLs. The speaker-delay mode asks the user to make his own rudimentary calculations based upon distances and milliseconds of delay. I would have preferred a greater selection of delay intervals for fine adjustment. Also the left/right front speakers are not adjustable for delay, which means that Rotel has assumed that the center channel will never be positioned closer to the listener than the left/rights. Though that might be a rare scenario, I'd have preferred the greater flexibility.

The bass management, however, more than satisfies. Here Rotel offers adjustable crossover points at 20Hz intervals between 40–120Hz. For system optimization the subwoofer's MAX setting permits speakers to run full-range even if you've directed all low frequencies (not just LFE material) to the sub. No bass peak-level metering was offered, but bass levels can be independently tailored for each surround mode. There's a three-step dynamic-range selector available for Dolby Digital, and Rotel's Cinema EQ rolls off the excessive treble that is common when playing in the home movies mixed for a large theater.

The Sound

My evaluations of the 1066 con-

troller were made primarily with an active loudspeaker system, ATC's C2 multichannel system. I also listened to a great deal of SACD multichannel material using my own ATC SCM20SL monitors as front L/Rs (without a center channel) and Audio Physic's Yara for the surround channels.

Sonically the RSP-1066 controller had a slightly cooler cast overall, with a tinge of forward energy in the mids. Mid- and upper-bass output were solid and defined, though they seemed to attain full bloom only at louder-than-average listening levels. High frequencies were smooth and free of any artificial and fatiguing etching. Vocals were full-bodied, breathy, and airy—male and female singers were imaged three-dimensionally, rather than sounding like kiosk cutouts. With HDCD sources, I was very impressed by the 1066's upper treble extension, smoothness, and dynamic headroom (comparable to some outboard DACs I've listened to). I can also vouch for the sheer quietness of the preamp stage of the RSP-1066, which is attributable no doubt in part to Rotel's high-current, multi-regulated, ultra-low-noise power supply.

At its minimalist best—as a two-channel analog preamp—the RSP-1066 proved an effortlessly good performer. Its prime qualities of sonic neutrality and preternatural quietness trumped all its other attributes. I inadvertently presented the RSP-1066 with an interesting challenge: I had recorded some voice material onto DAT and transferred it to CD-R. Much too late, I realized that I had recorded the material at too low a level; I needed to add more gain, but not at the expense of noise. So I ran the signal from the DAT through the Rotel's preamp inputs, adding as much gain from the 1066 as possible, then straight out the preamp outputs and directly into the line level inputs of the Teac CD-RW machine. Even at *full* gain the Rotel was as quiet as a church mouse.

It wasn't easy isolating sonic weaknesses in the RSP-1066—such was the overall quality of its performance. But by substituting the purest and most minimal signal path device I know

of—the Placette Audio 125-step volume control fed by the Sony DVP-9000ES—and running it directly into the RMB-1075, I discovered a couple areas where the RSP-1066 fell a little short (literally). Soundstage depth was a bit truncated. The 1066's ability to layer the swirling soundfields on the Holly Cole recording of "Train" [*Temptation*; Alert 81026], where various reverberant envelopes appear to overlap and disappear into the blackness at the back of the studio, was less good than that of the Placette, slightly clouded. On Norah Jones' "Turn Me On" [*Come Away With Me*; Blue Note 32088], her piano and the Hammond B3 loom large in the mix, but if one listens closely an accompanying guitar is mirroring the piano in the quietest way. Although it comes close, the RSP-1066 can't match the low-level resolution of this guitar line and the more direct connection with the music that dedicated high-end audio components like the Placette create. In a two-channel, analog-bypass comparison with Anthem's AVM-20 $3199 (TPV 42), which scored high marks in Shane Buettner's recent evaluation, the Rotel seemed a bit darker and less persuasive in terms of imaging and soundstaging. But the results were remarkably close considering the 2x price difference between the Rotel and the Anthem.

Switching Gears

Make no mistake; the Rotel RSP-1066 lit up Dolby Digital and DTS material like lighter fluid on charcoal. *Behind Enemy Lines* is a movie soundtrack guaranteed to Tai-Bo your system like few discs I've listened to. The sound editor makes huge use of the surrounds, yet doesn't distract from the visual imagery with gimmickry. Whether compressing the viewer within the claustrophobic confines of the cockpit of an F-18 fighter or opening up the stage to its maximum width in the breezy, forest sequences in Bosnia, this is an example of a multichannel mix that relaxes the audience one moment and then unnerves it the next. Soundstaging and depth were excellent. There's a sequence

in the forest where the rolling thunder and whipping wind of an approaching storm drifts from deep in the left part of the soundfield towards the center gradually enveloping the stage. The speakers seemingly faded away into invisibility—the mark of a good speaker but also of an accurate controller. This was the magic moment where the "quiet" that I alluded to in the RSP-1066's performance translated into the full-blown three-dimensional world of multichannel sound.

RMB-1075 Amp

RMB-1075 Amplifier

The RMB-1075 is the smaller but chunky sibling to Rotel's mighty RMB-1095. At a still-robust 120Wpc continuous, this amp is hardly a wimp. It's similarly styled to the 1095—in basic black with heat sinks along the front panel flanking the power button and LED indicators—and THX Ultra-certified, a pedigree that guarantees low distortion, high dynamic reserves, superior signal-to-noise ratio, and sufficient power output when driving loudspeakers that present a difficult load. To this same end, the 1075's power supply offers a single beefy 1500VA transformer (Rotel manufactures these in-house) with eight 10,000uF British Slit-Foil caps and twenty output devices rated at 130 watts and 15 amps of current capability. The back panel is neatly laid out with color-coded binding posts; though the RMB-1075 has unbalanced inputs only, its RCA jacks and DB-25 connector are gold-plated. The 1075 is equipped with a 12V trigger for remote on/off operation. It employs thermal protection circuitry that is independent of the audio signal.

Having reviewed Rotel's brutish 385Wpc stereo amp, the RB1090, for our sister journal *The Absolute Sound*, I was anxious to hear how the smaller amp sounded in comparison. Except for a tube-like roundedness and warmth in the bass that tended to soften pitch definition, the 1075 was a close match to its big brother. It was smooth throughout the midband and lower treble and slightly darker and

less transparent on top than the 1090. When I substituted another pair of preamps for the 1066 controller—the Placette Audio and the preamp stage of the Plinius 8200 integrated—the results were more in keeping with my impressions of Rotel's 1090. Bass tightened up significantly and the top end grew more open and extended. Listening to the clarion call of Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* [Minnesota/Oue, Reference Recordings RR-93 HDCD], I heard clear echoes of the 1090: the 1075 plays *big* yet has a delicacy that belies its intimidating power. It seemed to hold onto the bass drum's harmonic structure longer. Soundstaging seemed enhanced. And it separated out the individual blasts from the brass section better. It was not quite as effortless or controlled at the frequency extremes as the 1090, but it was awfully good.

Conclusion

At about $2500 for both the controller and amplifier this duet falls into highly competitive 6.1- and 7.1-channel A/V receiver territory. To flesh the system out into full 7.1 regalia, you'll need to supplement the 1075 with a two-channel amp. Rotel has got you covered, however, offering either the 130W RB-1070 or the 70W RB-1050—both of which will be up to the task of driving the back channels. Alternatively, if stereo listening plays a larger role in your life, you could assign the RMB-1075 to all channels except the front L/Rs and go for the gusto with the two-channel 200W RB-1080. Ultimately, the user needs to

balance the flexibility of a two-box platform with the loss of rack space. But for those who don't want to be held captive by the all-in-one-box approach, Rotel once again proves itself a working class hero.

SPECIFICATIONS

RSP-1066 Controller

Number of channels: 7.1

Decoding formats: Dolby Digital, Dolby Digital EX, DTS-ES (matrix and discrete), HDCD, MP3

Inputs: Three analog; five audio/video (both composite- and S-Video); two component-video; five digital (3 optical; two coax), 6.1 RCA inputs for multi-channel analog sources

Dimensions: 17" x 4 7/8" x 13"

Weight: 16.7 lbs.

Warranty: Five years

Price: $1499

RMB-1075 five-channel power amplifier

Power output: 120Wpc into 8 ohms 20–20kHz <0.03%

Dimensions: 16 15/16" x 7 7/16" x 15 5/8"

Weight: 39.7 lbs.

Warranty: Five years

Price: $999

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Video: Sony 32" XBR-400

Front End: Sony CE222ES, Sony DVP-9000ES

AVR: Marantz 7200 and 8200

Integrated amplifier: Plinius 8200, Thule Spirit IA100

Preamp-Placette Volume control

Amplifier: VTL-ST85

Speakers: ATC-SCM20-SL, Audio Physics Yara

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

ROTEL OF AMERICA
54 Concord Street
North Reading, Massachusetts 01864
(978) 664-3820
www.rotel.com