

BY MIKE MCGANN

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Rotel RSX-972 Receiver

Nothing less than a temperamental genius

Looks can be deceiving. A quick look at Rotel's new RSX 972 receiver, either at the unit itself, or a quick perusal of the spec sheet might make you wonder why you'd find this unit interesting, say in comparison to some mass market-brand receivers. After all, those other brands are lots cheaper, and they basically all do the same thing. Of course, one might also take the same look at a high-end Buick and say, an old Austin-Healey 3000 and make the same foolish judgement.

If you pick it up, and then pick up one of those other receivers that one finds at Best Circuit, you immediately notice something: heft, 33 pounds worth. And not just heft for heft's sake, but rather the

kind that makes for serious audio grunt when you need it. Rotel uses things like oversized transformers to make sure there's enough juice in the amps, no matter what you throw at it.

Of course, at \$1,299, you might find your pocket a lot lighter, too. But again, looks can be deceiving. While it has the form factor of smaller, run-of-the-mill receivers (and fits better in a lot of racks) the RSX 972 packs the power of many of the big box receivers, what I call the dreadnought class, costing twice as much or more. So, the closer you look at this latest offering from Rotel, the more interesting it becomes.

You might, or might not, frankly, be disappointed to learn that Rotel is not embracing 6.1, 7.1, 10.2 or anything else beyond good old fashioned 5.1-channel



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audio, in Dolby Digital or DTS. One sensible nod to the future are the seamless 5.1-channel inputs, making this receiver a good match for a DVD-Audio or SACD player. The more commonplace inputs and outputs are impressive as well, with five digital inputs, three coaxial and two optical, plus seven analog inputs, including five matched to video sources. As for video inputs, there is an excellent selection, with five S-Video and five composite video inputs, plus a pair of component inputs. All can be switched to the component or S-Video output with a caveat: the on-screen menu doesn't work in any output other than composite.

That meant, as I found out, I needed to connect all my inputs via composite first, to calibrate the inputs, and only then was I able to switch to either S-Video or component. That strikes me as an unneeded hassle, although the folks at Rotel say they are working on a fix, largely to accommodate the U.S. market which, unlike Europe, is a lot more interested in S-video and component.

Of course, as many receivers in this class do, the 972 supports a second zone in analog stereo, with an additional two-channel amplifier and speakers. The second will work with various IR repeater systems—again a nice touch.

While from across the room the RSX-972 looks pretty run-of-the-mill, a closer inspection shows the understated good looks that have generally marked Rotel gear. The large centered knob and switches have a heft to them and they have a precise feel often missing from inexpensive gear. Packed in with the RSX-972 is Rotel's RR-969 10-function, backlit remote. Generally speaking, it's a nice remote, with an LCD panel at the top, which has a clock and alarm and sleep functions, all of which are nice touches. It is a bit difficult to use at first, with a series of flip-up panels for different operations of various devices. While less intuitive than some remotes, it does a nice job once you get the hang of it, comparable to home theater system controllers selling for \$200 or more.

I have the same basic complaint about the on-screen menu system. While not the worst I've seen by any means, it's more complicated than it should be, and again takes a bit of time to get the hang of using. It goes without saying that it should work in video modes other than composite.

Of course, what complaints I have about the RSX-972 will fade from the user experience after a week or so. What remains is the sound. Rotel cites 75 watts-per-channel 20 to 20k Hz, into 8 Ohms, all channels driven with less than 0.09 percent total harmonic distortion, or 100 watts per channel at 1kHz, with less than 1 percent total harmonic distortion. While the first standard is the most honest, in my opinion, other audio gear manufacturers tend to play fast and loose with how they measure power output, either by clipping the test frequency or by not driving all channels at once.

What does this mean to the average gear buyer? Basically, that Rotel's very solid 75 watts-per-channel claim is equivalent power to some company's claims of 100 or 120 watts-per-channel, because the tests are different. I have a couple of alleged 100 watt-per-channel receivers around the house, and there's no question that the Rotel's amplifiers are far more powerful and ballsy.

Of course, not just my ear confirmed it, but my handy SPL meter did as well. I set up another, now discontinued, model by a semi-famous Japanese maker that was in about the same price range for quick A/B dynamic range test. Using Terminator 2, I set up both receivers to 85 dB using test tones. Dynamic range is an amp or receiver's ability to reproduce the difference between sound events on a soundtrack, say normal dialogue and explosion. While the dialogue should hover at about 85 dB, the explosions generally should be a lot louder, as loud as 105 dB in a well-mixed soundtrack. Poor current handling will cause an amp to compress this difference, since it requires a sudden jump in power output to cope with the volume boost.

While the Japanese receiver in question (which I generally use with a separate amp, I'm so unimpressed with its onboard amp) stayed in a pretty tight 85 dB ▶

Rotel RSX 972 Receiver \$1,299

- 100 Watts-per-channel at 1k Hz, less than 1% THD
- Five S-Video and composite inputs; two component inputs
- RR 969 10-unit master remote
- Multi-zone control for analog audio sources.

PROS
Outstanding dynamic range, truly stellar audio performance in all modes.

CONS
Annoying to set up, lack of on-screen menus in S-video and component, stiff learning curve on user interface.

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No matter how loud I listened to music, whether from a CD or DVD-Audio, the amps never seemed strained.



to 93 dB range, explosions and all, the Rotel managed a vastly better 85 to 102 dB range in the same scene. This better reproduction gives the scene much more of the gut-wrenching impact intended by the film's director.

Okay, dynamic range is important, but without detail and soundstage, it's only of limited value. Again, here the Rotel shines. Dialogue was clear and sharp and sound effects in the surrounds were well defined.

The same held true for listening to music. Detail was exceptional, and soundstage was deep and true. No matter how loud I listened to music, whether from a CD or DVD-Audio, the amps never seemed strained. If anything, the amps are a little warm, and best matched with stiff accurate speakers.

While I was happy with the Rotel matched to RBH Sound Signature series in home theater mode, I found it a bit too warm. A quick switch to my old Monitor Audio 703s, which are much brighter speakers, was more to my taste without sacrificing anything in movie mode. Detail was almost startling, with more than enough mid and upper bass to make my old, cold sterile Monitors sound rich and warm, without becoming

too fuzzy. In most real world settings, usually a bit too bright, this Rotel should fit the bill.

Make no mistake, the RSX-972 is nothing short of a stellar performer when it comes to audio reproduction. The only caution is the unit's somewhat balky user interface and setup. Once you come to terms with it, or get your local audio installer to come do the setup, there's a whole lot less to gripe about.

Typically British, these flaws can either be seen as amazingly annoying, in which case you might be better off buying a less spectacular but easier to live with mainstream product, or something that lends character to it, much like the shaky Lucas electrical systems in old British cars, like my Austin-Healey. Some people will fall head-over-heels for this receiver, while others may not feel it's worth the hassle. That, of course, is why some people drive Buicks and some people drive Austin-Healeys.

As for myself, as I wave at my Austin-Healey as it sits on a flatbed truck, headed off for what seems like its weekly visit to the British car doctor, I know the answer. Mean, hey, how long is a week, anyway? ■

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