

Honesty, Integrity, Value

Rotel's RSX-972 A/V Receiver

Gimmicks are the stuff of marketing, and always have been. As consumers on this commerce-driven planet, we're bombarded by them everyday—rather like living near a mosquito-infested swamp. How refreshing it is then to report on a company that sells its stuff based on honest engineering, the integrity of its ideals, and the inarguably strong value of its product line (as opposed to shuck, jive, and a heaping helping of BS). While I'm certainly not the first to recognize this about Rotel, and this isn't the first time I've felt this way about the company and its equipment, these observations really hit home when I unboxed the RSX-972 A/V receiver, hooked the thing up, and started listening.

One of just two A/V receivers in Rotel's catalog, the RSX-972 (\$1299) delivers 75Wpc into 8 ohms, 20–20kHz, all channels driven. At first glance, those figures may not impress. But unlike the bogus power ratings often found on spec sheets (beware of specs like “at 1kHz” or “one-channel driven”), Rotel's rating is not only honest; it's conservative. Remember what I said about gimmicks? When it comes to amplifiers the numbers game is the oldest one in the book. Fact is, an honest 75W amplifier will drive the vast majority of today's speakers to very loud levels in all but the largest rooms. And even though surround-back channel are all the rage, Rotel has yet to cram more than five channels into one chassis, and the company doesn't apologize for the lack of them, either. But don't be alarmed. Aside from reviewers and those lucky enough to have a dedicated home-theater room, most people are still trying to figure out where they're going to put five loudspeakers plus a subwoofer, let alone more.



Rotel's history of providing excellent performance along with solid engineering and construction at real-world prices continues.

The two Dolbys—Pro Logic and Digital—as well as DTS processing are included, as are jacks for component-video, composite-video, and S-video sources. Oodles of audio connections allow for seven line-level analog and five digital inputs (three coax, two optical), and 5.1-channel inputs for whatever may come down the road, plus a full complement of preamp outputs should you decide that more power is required. And wonder of wonders, the speaker connectors are not only spaced so that they're easy to get to, but five-way binding posts are provided for all channels! Rounding things out are a tuner with 30 presets—and excellent performance, by the way; a Zone 2 output with independent input selection, volume control, and IR repeater; a straightforward onscreen display; and an illuminated learning-style remote control. The latter is a little on the clunky side, not particularly well contoured, and encumbered with a sloppy-fitting lower panel that slides down to reveal

a slew of other controls. In this regard I would call it “average”; most are as bad or worse and few are much better. The owner's manual is certainly better than average; it seems to have been written by and for humans, making for about as simple and pain-free a set-up process as you're likely to encounter.

The front panel is a model of clean industrial design and intelligent layout. Although it borders on the austere, that's definitely preferable to the dizzying lights and confusion typical of much of the mass-market competition. I also like the subtle, powder-blue florescent display, which can be shut off but not dimmed from the remote.

Performance

Fresh out of the box the RSX-972 displayed a musically natural quality. Its overall sound in the stereo mode is warm and slightly soft, but it never seems to lack detail, even at low levels. While familiarizing myself with the unit's manual and operation, I plopped in Gillian Welch's *Revival* CD and couldn't help but notice how “right” this receiver sounds. The song “Paper Wings,” with its slow, jaunty waltz rhythm, reverb-soaked electric guitar, ringing pedal steel, and Welch's silky voice, had just the right balance, plenty of harmonic complexity and texture, and an easy, relaxed presentation. Kent Nagano's disc of Ravel


orchestral music on the Erato label allowed the RSX-972 a chance to show what it could do with complex orchestral music, as it placed the sonorous massed strings in a wide-open soundstage with a more-than-respectable illusion of depth.

The good stuff continues with multichannel music and movies. John Hiatt's "Cry Love," from *The Best of Sessions at West 54th, Volume 2*, is one of the better multichannel mixes I've heard; endowed with lots of ambience and a subtle use of surround, it can, given the right system, make you feel like you're "there." On the Rotel, the soundfield is wide as well as enveloping. Hiatt and his bandmates are spread across the front of the stage, audience applause comes from deep behind them, and the rollicking tune maintains precision and clarity throughout. Okay, the RSX-972 doesn't have the most explosive

dynamics or rapid-fire transient attack, as the Wynton Marsalis track "Back to Basics" (from the *Sessions, Volume 1* DVD) showed me. That's about the only sonic shortcoming I hear with this receiver, which is consistent with its smooth, easy nature. Some prefer a more hard-hitting style, but I'll take the Rotel's approach any day. Besides, even with a smash-mouth movie like *MI:2*, the Rotel has no trouble reproducing hovering helicopters, racing motorcycles, or the crash-and-burn volume of exploding vehicles. These effects are fine and fun, but movies are ultimately about mood and feeling. For that I was impressed by the Rotel's ability to enshroud my room with the chilly atmosphere of foreboding that opens *The Sixth Sense*, or the sexy fun of the Sirens scene in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* In addition, video-switching was first-rate. Comparing this receiver to the refer-

ence-caliber separate A/V controllers on hand for evaluation, I noticed no loss of quality.

Conclusion

Rotel's history of providing excellent performance along with solid engineering and construction at real-world prices continues as the company expands into the home-theater realm. The RSX-972 is a terrific A/V receiver. Though it retails for \$1299, I've been told that careful shoppers can find it for less. Friends, that makes an already excellent value a near steal. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Power output: 75Wpc into 8 ohms
 Number of channels: Five
 Surround-decoding formats: Dolby Digital, DTS, Dolby Pro Logic, Dolby 3 Stereo
 Number and type of video inputs: Five composite, five S-video, two component
 Number and type of audio inputs: Seven line-level analog, 5.1-channel analog, three coax and two optical digital
 Dimensions: 17.5" x 6.25" x 15.75"
 Weight: 33 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Theta Carmen CD/DVD Transport
 Martin-Logan Scenario L/R speakers, Cinema center, and Script surrounds
 Polk PSW-650 powered subwoofer
 Balanced Audio Technology VK-D5 CD player
 Toshiba TW40F80 16:9 rear-projection TV
 MIT MH-750 speaker cables
 MIT MI-330 Proline balanced interconnects
 MIT Terminator 3 digital interconnect cables
 Monster M-1000 Silver S-video cables
 ASC Tube Traps
 Essential Sound Products Power Conditioner/Strip

Transmission Line Evolution

*The
Amygdala*



Cantilevered Kevlar diaphragms

Viscous Gold damped tweeters

q-TSAL, Filter Theory Transmission line loading

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Manufacturer Comment, page 93

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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