

Rotel RX-1050 Receiver

Chris Martens



Among hard-core audiophiles, receivers sometimes get treated like Rodney Dangerfield: They don't get no respect. This bias is both unfortunate and understandable. All too often, mass-marketed receivers sound like they have been designed *down* to a price point, not *up* to a high musical standard. Fortunately, the Rotel RX-1050 is made of better stuff, delivering satisfying music for \$799.

The Rotel RX-1050 is versatile, straddling boundaries between traditional product categories. Though primarily a music-oriented stereo receiver, it can also serve as a minimalist two-channel A/V receiver, or even as a two-zone system controller. With so much flexibility, it invites use in three contexts.

First, it begs to be the core of an entry-level high-end music system (complete with phono capabilities). Second, the RX-1050, which provides composite video switching for four video inputs, makes a great vehicle for music enthusiasts branching into home theater without plunging into multichannel. Third, it makes a fine source for secondary music systems. In any application, of course, the success of the RX-1050 will hinge on sound quality, and my bet is that it will succeed. Though Rotel never claims the RX-1050 can equal the performance of its more costly separate components, this receiver gives a solid meas-

ure of high-end sound at a mid-fi price.

From the front, the RX-1050 presents an attractive black anodized faceplate flanked by curved carrying handles. (In addition to the black model, Rotel offers the RX-1050 in a two-tone finish, silver and black.) The control panel is dominated by a large, central input source display and a substantial volume-control knob. On either side are blocks of small pushbuttons to control speaker selection, tuner operations, input selection, etc. A pair of tone-control knobs is also provided. The rear panel features gold-plated RCA input jacks (for phono, CD, tape, and four video inputs), plus two sets of beefy three-way binding posts.

The RX-1050 provides 30 programmable station presets and is easy to use, supporting three tuning modes: tune to the next station center frequency; tune to the next preset; or scan to the next station found. From my rural New York location, I logged 45 stations, 30 with usable sound quality—this is comparable to other high-quality receivers. I believe the RX-1050 could pull in more usable stations if it allowed listeners the option of tuning slightly to either side of assigned station center frequencies (helping to capture “borderline” stations).

The RX-1050's moving-magnet phono section is one of its finest features. Its sound is neutral, open, and clear, with only slight hints of softening at the

frequency extremes. I suspect Rotel could sell this as a stand-alone product. My only criticism is that this phono section deserves switchable gain levels to facilitate use with low-output moving-coil cartridges (an appealing idea, given this phono section's transparent sound).

Now let's talk about sound. First, the RX-1050 needs considerable burn-in time before it will perform at its best. Out of the box, the sound is thin and cold, with overly prominent upper midrange and treble. Given time, though, the RX-1050 will warm up, smooth out, and reward you with more full-bodied sound. What's more, you can help drive the Rotel toward musicality by replacing its pre-out/main-in jumper plugs with a decent pair of interconnect cables. This simple change pays imme-

This receiver gives a solid measure of high-end sound at a mid-fi price.

diated dividends in added bass warmth and increased treble smoothness.

How does the RX-1050 sound after break-in? Well, it retains the fundamentally “yang” sonic personality it started with, but in a smoother, more balanced, and more musically satisfying form. Here “yang” describes an emphasis on strong dynamic contrasts, transparency, and resolution of inner details, with crisply defined treble and energetic bass response. With products that lean toward this end of the spectrum, it's important not to get too much of a good

thing. The pursuit of musical dynamics and details can sometimes lead to edginess and glare. The Rotel, though, strikes a happy compromise; it offers good resolving power, but its potential rough edges are rounded off just enough to keep things musically honest.

In the bass region, the Rotel starts out by providing taut, exciting transients. With break-in, the mid-bass opens up and begins to "breathe," taking on desirable warmth and weight (without looseness). Thus, when you listen to the low percussion on the SACD version of Bernstein's "Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*" [Sony Classical SS 89043], you hear both the incisive "thwack" of drum strikes and the full-bodied "boom" that follows. Moreover, the RX-1050 captures subtle differences in timbre between similarly voiced bass instruments. When Victor Wooten and Marcus Miller trade overlapping bass

guitar solos on Wooten's funky *Live in America* CD [Compass 43223], the Rotel makes it easy to distinguish the signature sounds of their respective instruments. Few receivers balance bass tightness, definition, warmth, and weight as well as the RX-1050 does after full break-in.

In the midrange, the Rotel strives to deliver detail and clarity in abundance. Indeed, the upper midrange initially goes a bit overboard in this area, exaggerating sibilants and string overtones. Burn-in helps considerably, though, smoothing the upper midrange and pulling overtones and highlights back into (near) balance with the body of the midrange. Though traces of upper-midrange prominence remain, the midrange on the whole eases into a more comfortably open sound that proves enjoyable even on extremely closely miked vocal recordings such as Diana Krall's "Peel Me a Grape" [*Love Scenes*;

Impulse 233]. Where at first the Rotel might have etched Krall's sibilants or hard consonants, its post break-in sound is gentler and more nuanced. Midrange details are still presented clearly, yet with more grace.


At the outset, the receiver's treble is extended, though overly bright and "wiry." Once again, break-in works wonders, drawing the treble back into equilibrium with the midrange, removing metallic roughness, and leaving a treble region that is open, airy, and delicate. The Rotel does a great job reproducing the small reverberation cues that give the best recordings such a breathtaking, three-dimensional quality. One such recording is the legendary *Jazz at the Pawnshop* LP [Proprius 7778 79]. This record captures the sound, space, and feel of a jazz nightclub so realistically that you'll want to signal the waiter to bring you a fresh drink. With such

recordings, the value of the Rotel's now properly balanced treble range is instantly apparent.

What of flaws? A few come to mind. First, the Rotel's really low bass is neither strong nor particularly well-defined. Second, its upper midrange forwardness is mitigated, but not fully subdued, by burn-in. Third, the unit plays less loudly than its 100-watts-per-channel power rating would suggest. Nevertheless, these drawbacks seem minor in comparison with the many things the Rotel does well. Remember that this component produces sound that is competitive with entry-level separates, and that it incorporates a fine phono section and solid tuner—all at a price that falls hundreds of dollars below competing alternatives.

Is the RX-1050 right for you? The answer may depend in large part on your speakers. I tried the RX-1050 both with my own Magnepan MG

1.6QRs and with a friend's Vandersteen 2CEs. Though the Rotel did a credible job with both speakers, the very revealing Magnepans tended to highlight the receiver's flaws, while the more forgiving Vandersteens tended to draw out its strengths. As always, an in-home audition is the only sure way to determine if the receiver will be a good fit in your system.

If you are a music lover with high-end tastes and mid-fi budget constraints, Rotel's RX-1050 belongs on your "must evaluate" list. 

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

Rotel of America
54 Concord Street
North Reading, Massachusetts 01864
Phone: (978) 664-3820
www.rotel.com
Price: \$799

EQUIPMENT REPORT

SPECIFICATIONS

Output power: 100 watts/channel (20-20kHz, <0.05% THD, 8 ohms)
Inputs: Phono, CD, Tape, four Video, AM/FM
Tuner Outputs: Preamp Out; Zone 2 Out, three Record Outs (one Tape, two Video); Composite Video Monitor Out
FM Tuner Section: Usable Sensitivity: 14.2dBf 50dB Quieting Sensitivity: 45.3dBf (stereo) Signal to Noise Ratio: 65dBf (stereo) Capture Ratio: 2.0dB Alternate Channel Selectivity: 47dB (+/- 400kHz)
Dimensions: 17 x 4.75 x 14.125 inches
Weight: 22.7 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Parasound Halo P3 Preamplifier and A23 Power Amplifier; Magnepan MG 1.6QR and Vandersteen 2CE loudspeakers; Sony DVP-NS500V DVD/SACD/CD player; Linn Sondek LP12 turntable; Linn Ittok LV-II arm; Madrigal Audio Carnegie One cartridge with Supex SDT-722 transformer; Chang Lightspeed CLS-3200 powerline filter; AudioQuest, MIT and StraightWire audio and speaker interconnects