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North American World Premiere!

Rotel RC-1550 Preamplifier And RB-1552 Power Amplifier

A winning combination at a reasonable price.

Review By Anthony Nicosia

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Founded over forty-five years ago by Tachikawa-San Rotel is still a family run business where his son Bob Tachikawa is now running the day to day operations. They build every product with the fundamental engineering philosophy called the Balanced Design Concept. This philosophy is based on three areas of interests, parts selection, circuit topology and critical evaluation. The company strives to use top quality parts with the thought in mind that where they are placed is equally as important as the quality of the part. Trusting that human hearing will be the ultimate deciding factor Rotel sets up listening sessions during critical stages of production and not just for the final pre-production prototype. It is this holistic approach to product development they believe will separate them from most other manufacturers in the market place today.



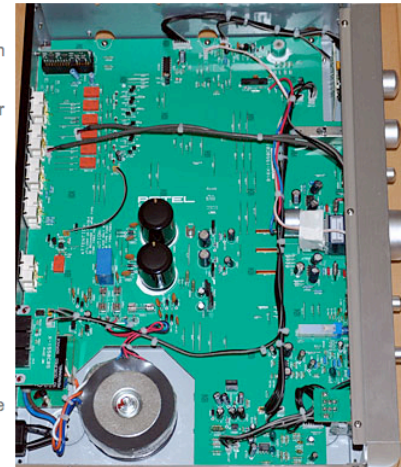
Way before this review was offered to me my own personal experience with a Rotel product dated back over forty years ago to sometime in the 1960's. The first time I was to spend my very own money for some audio equipment I did so by buying a Rotel receiver. Unfortunately I do not remember the exact model but my guess is it was either their very first receiver or a model close to it. Even though the exact model number escapes my memory I do remember this. The salesperson went right to the Rotel component to tell me that this will start me out on the path to good music, and he was right. That Rotel lasted me for about five years until I started on the upgrade path to separate components eventually leading me to where I am today. Did I get rid of the Rotel when I had outgrew it? No way! Instead it found a home in my parents house when my mother decided she would like to have music in her newly built enclosed back porch entertainment area.

So behind the wet bar went my Rotel receiver where it stayed until after she passed in 1995. I remember asking her, long after I had moved from Connecticut to California, if she ever had any problems with the Rotel. She told me it had worked fine with only one very minor problem that my cousin Bobby, who used to have an audio fix-it-shop in Long Island New York, took care of for her. I would like to think that if my parents were around today that Rotel would still be there playing for them. Not so long ago I got very close to buying another Rotel product the RB-1080 power amplifier. I was however sidetracked and bought my Legacy Focus 20/20 speakers instead when a particularly good deal arose from a local dealer who just had to move them for a price I could not resist. My informal audition of the RB-1080 though was quite positive and I was very tempted to buy it as well. Unfortunately financial constraints at that time prevailed and prevented me from buying both the speakers and the amplifier. So when I heard that Steven Rochlin, the publisher for "Enjoy the Music", was looking for a reviewer for a Rotel amplifier and preamplifier I jumped at the chance to again get a Rotel component into my home. I was also very curious to see how far they had progressed from their early infant stages of development until today. You can call me sentimental, or just plain smart, I would like to think this choice was a little of both. So here we are ready to review the Rotel RC1550 Preamplifier and the RB1552 Power Amplifier both separately and then together.

First Up Is The RC-1550 Preamplifier

The RC-1550 looks quite busy on the front panel with plenty of knobs, two input jacks, a light and two buttons. After you read the owners manual and start to play with the various settings I felt them all a joy to have and was grateful for them all being there. Naturally there is the power button and then a tone control button with two knobs one for bass the other treble. If you do not want to adjust for bass and treble then just do not engage the tone control button, but if you do it will slightly alter the sound to help suit your musical selections. Then there are two input jacks, one for headphones and another for a media player as well as a large volume knob dead center and a smaller knob for balance control of left and right channels. To the very far right are the last two knobs, one for selecting the recording input signal while the other is the normal listening inputs. Both corners on the front panel have a rather shiny piece of chrome trim while the front is a brushed aluminum faceplate.

The top and sides of the RC-1550 have a lightly textured gray spectacted coating to them rather than just a flat painted surface. Underneath are four plastic/hard rubber footers which I would replace immediately with something more dedicated, but that's me as I love adding additional anti-vibration devices. For this review though I did not and left the stock feet alone. The remote control was nice and sleek measuring at about nine inches long. This controlled not only the RC-1550 preamplifier but can be used to operate some basic features of some of Rotel's CD or DVD players and even AM/FM tuners. You can use the remote to switch between, Phono, CD, Tuner, Aux 1, Aux 2, Tape 1 and Tape 2 inputs. Inside the RC-1550 you will find a custom made toroidal transformer as well as select grade BHC slit foil capacitors. The BHC capacitors are made in the UK especially for audio applications in a joint effort with the audio research company DNM design.



Moving now to the back of the unit there is a ground screw, various RCA inputs for Phono, CD, Tuner, Aux and for two Tape connections. Then there are two Tape RCA outputs plus two outputs to connect to amplifiers or even to a special signal processor if you choose to do so. The RCA input and output connectors felt a little too close together for me when used with after market interconnects where you have to turn and lock them in place as they tended to slightly rub against each other. There is also connections for hooking the unit up to other components for use of a single remote control via a 12V trigger output. You will also find a two pronged IEC connector on the rear of the unit although for this review I just used the stock cord that came from the factory. Being that I only had a Moving Coil phono cartridge I was not able to test the phono stage of the RC-1550 which is for Moving Magnet designed cartridges. If though you move up in price to their RC-1580 preamplifier you will find a phono stage that accommodates both MM and MC cartridges.



In order to hear the differences each Rotel component would make individually, for those who would prefer buying one or the other, I took turns placing them into my system one at a time. Starting with the RC-1550 preamplifier I connected it to my Monarchy Audio SM-70 Pro power amplifier via a pair of RCA interconnects, since there were no balanced outputs on the RC-1550. I began my critical listening session by pulling out an older CD *Body + Soul* [Time Life Music R794-01 A2 33972] which consisted of twenty-four different performers on two separate CD's. "I've Got Love On My Mind" by Natalie Cole demonstrated the RC-1550's ability to reproduce clearly a female vocal performer. Both the vocal presentation and the piano accompaniment were not the ultimate in detail but their big plus was that they sounded quite smooth and tube like. The soundstaging was good, both left to right as well as front to back, and the image in relationship to height was again very presentable. It of course did not give me a monstrously large soundscape as I have heard from actual tube preamplifier's I had listened to before. However this was also a unit that costs only six hundred ninety-nine dollars and not thousands of dollars.

When Natalie Cole sang the line, "I got love on my mind", the decay on the final syllables was very respectable and I enjoyed its overall presentation. That song has lots of energy and needs a quick paced preamplifier to help keep it moving along which the Rotel was able to do quite nicely. On the Beatles Revolver Cd (CDP 7 464412) with George Harrison singing center stage on the song "Taxman" the RC-1550 let me hear three Beatles each with their distinct accents. Guitar work for McCartney, Lennon and Harrison sounded great and distinguishably as Ringo on drums keep a clearly strong beat throughout. It is hard to pick one song from this CD as all are so very good but "Eleanor Rigby" goes down as another classic from the Beatles. Here the violins were smooth sounding, due to this preamplifier's tube like tendencies, and Paul McCartney's voice coming from the left speaker sounded natural as it hung in the air at the end of each passage. The Rotel really showed its strengths when I played "And Your Bird Can Sing" as John Lennon's voice had a holographic texture to it, as if he were singing directly into a live microphone in front of me. Guitar work from McCartney and Harrison was of

Where the RC-1550 showed some weakness was when listening to R.E.M.'s *Eponymous* [File Under Grain 72434-93457-2-0] CD. It was here with the song "The One I Love" where I noticed the layering of individual singers was not as pronounced as I would have liked to hear, making it difficult to separate them from the band. This was though a difficult passage for many a preamplifier because of the way the song was recorded. I tried using the separate bass and treble controls which did improve the situation slightly but I still felt something was missing. Switching out the Rotel and reinserting my Placette Audio Passive preamplifier back into the mix I noticed an immediate increase in transparency and I could more clearly hear the singers within the band. The Placette though lists for \$1595 or almost \$900 more than the RC-1550. I doubt that someone will be putting the RC-1550 into a cost-no-object system but at its price point it did not disappoint me with its overall results. Rather than being a preamplifier with ultimate resolution it is more forgiving with weaknesses that are more of omission than anything else. What you do get though is a preamplifier with loads of features for both recording and playback, the ability to connect to other equipment using one remote, multiple speaker connection possibilities and all this at a price many consumers will welcome in today's world of spiraling prices for high-end audio equipment.

Naturally there are compromises that are expected in order to meet this price point yet I still found the Rotel to perform well within the sub one thousand dollar range of preamplifiers. If however one would like to move up to a more expensive preamplifier you need not look further than Rotel's own RC-1580. While I have not yet the pleasure to hear it they bill it as "...designed for the hi-fi purist in terms of its minimalist approach and absolute musical fidelity." It sounds tempting and perhaps this is something for a future review. Before leaving the RC-1550 preamplifier I tried one more Cd, this one simply called *Tracy Chapman* [Elektra 9 60774-2]. This was her first CD and it certainly was full of wonderful songs. "Baby Can I Hold You" features six artists playing together and I was curious to see how the RC-1550 would do with the proper layering of individuals within this particular group. Here Tracy Chapman's voice was recorded in a way as to be prominently heard within the song. There were no problems as she and David LaFlamme, playing on electric violin in the background, were both easily recognizably within the six man band.

The Rotel RB-1552 Power Amplifier

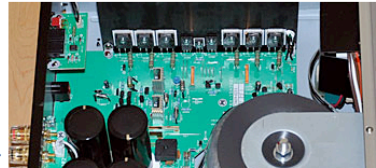
The RB-1552 amplifier has a subdued appearance not calling attention to itself as there are no large external cooling fins surrounding it like those found on some other dedicated power amplifiers. Its large LED display, located dead center on the front panel, only lights up if there is a problem with the amplifier, which my review sample never did. This plus one power on/off button located on the upper left side finishes off the spartan looking front panel. The top of the unit and part of its sides also have cooling slates built into its flat surfaces that while functional again are not overtly noticeable. Cosmetically the unit is like the RC-1550 in that the faceplate is also a brushed aluminum with chrome trim pieces on both the front corners and the top as well as its side panels are covered in a textured gray spectaclad paint. As for the rear of the unit there are RCA inputs for connection to a preamplifier and again a two pronged IEC connector so custom power cords can be an option.



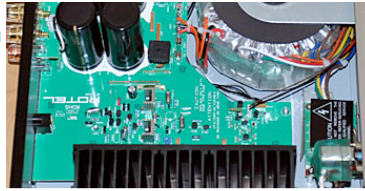
On the back panel there is also a 12V trigger input and output option for connecting to a component with a remote control like the RC-1550 preamplifier. Lastly of course are the loudspeaker connections and this is where you will find two sets not just one. Do be cautious though as the owners manual will warn you that if you connect two sets of speakers in parallel configuration the effective impedance of the amplifier will then be divided in half. If used this way the amplifier would now see a 4 ohm load when driving two pairs of 8 ohm loudspeakers. Depending on your loudspeakers this could be a problem although with most it should be just fine. As always check with your manufacturers to be sure. The RB-1552 amplifier had plenty of room on the back where these two sets of loudspeaker binding posts were located as well as giving plenty of distance between its left and right RCA input connectors. Underneath are five footers, instead of the more common four, which I found was nice as it gave a very stable balance to the amplifier. Two of the stock footers were like those on the RC-1550 while three others were smaller and of a harder plastic variety. I also found some additional ventilation slots underneath, which is good the more the better I believe.



Like its bigger brother, the RB-1582, the RB-1552 is a Class AB design with custom made large toroidal transformers, large power supplies and is made with select grade components. While the RB-1552 puts out less power than the RB-1582's 200 watts (per channel at 8 ohms) it still can produce a whopping 2 x 120 watts per side into the same 8 ohm load. The Rotel RB-1552 review unit easily generating enough music to fill my good sized listening room when driving my Legacy Focus 20/20 loudspeakers. While quite large, weighing one hundred eighty five pounds each, and containing seven drivers per side the Legacy loudspeakers have a sensitivity rating of 96dB/2.83V/m making them highly efficient. To fully appreciate those three twelve inch loudspeaker elements though does take an amplifier with some heft to it and the RB-1552 mated with it very well.



I next replaced the Rotel RC-1550 preamplifier with my Placette Passive unit to use with the RB-1552 power amplifier, again to isolate its performance one Rotel unit from the other. I first started out with an album by Michael Buble called *It's Time* [143 Record/Reprise 48946-2]. Here I thoroughly enjoyed the song "You Don't Know Me". For those of you who have not yet heard Mr Buble I would liken his performance to the style of Frank Sinatra. If you get a chance give him a listen as I doubt you will be disappointed. With this song the layering of Drums, bass, piano and various guitars was well presented. The Rotel not only showed this young Canadian singer's voice as both powerful and strong but also displayed its intricate subtleties as well. There was a feeling of space around his voice producing an open sound and the sense of the effect of a large piano in my room. The resolution heard in the bass was good as I could hear individual strings vibrate if I listened carefully. The guitar solo was sharp adding to the effect of a feeling of being small club in listening to a lounge act live. Right away I knew I was experiencing something special with the RB-1552 and it only got better as time and selections went on. I must say this was quite a bit more than I expected from an amplifier in this price range.



From that same CD I really liked the song "Quando, Quando, Quando" where Mr. Buble does a duet with Nelly Furtado, also born and raised in Canada although from parents of Portuguese decent. Layering of their vocal talents was excellent as was the decay of notes as they sang their duet. Saxophone, flute and percussion all sounded smooth, especially the vocals and saxophone which displayed a true sense of timber. While the RB-1552 sounded good at low levels it did not disappoint as the volume increased. Here it seemed to really flex its muscles displaying further its strong points of which there were many.

I like music samplers and I have a good one in the *New Music Sampler* KFOG 104.5 San Francisco / 97.7 San Jose [2005 SBR Creative Media Inc] CD. Here you get eighteen songs by eighteen different performers. On track three Jem sings "Just A Ride" and the RB-1552 exhibited some strong qualities in its ability to reproduce lower bass responses without breaking up. Jem uses many different electronic sounds within this song which the Rotel seemed again to have no problems finding and clearly separating. Jem, as well as her background singers, came across with just the right amount of texture to their voices and was a pleasure to listen to. For those of us who love the jazz great Herbie Hancock this next song "Stitched Up" is amazing as it also features John Mayer, wow what a talented combination! The Rotel being a musical sounding amplifier, not sterile or shrill, did justice to this performance with Mayer on vocals and Hancock on piano. If you can sit still without wanted to dance or at least break out with a large smile when listening through the Rotel you just might need to change your associated equipment or at least check your pulse for a beat.

This is one transparent amplifier as each performer is placed within their natural spot on stage, where minute details of their individual talent can be easily heard. While the RB-1552 does quite good with the lower bass regions it still comes up shy when compared to more expensive amplifiers and bass was not as full as it can be if one where to spend upwards of two thousand dollars. Remember though it does cost only \$899 and so naturally there are trade-offs as you should not expect everything from such a relatively small outlet of funds. Put the Rotel together though with the likes of Amos Lee singing "Keep It Loose, Keep It Tight" and you will be impressed with its ability to handle vocals as his voice sounded magically alive. I could hear and feel his fingers slide across the guitar strings as he sang thereby enhancing the effect of a live rendition with that blues/folk quality he is very well known for.

Synergy Is Key: Rotel's RC-1550 And RB-1552 Together

The first thing I did when putting these two components together was to hook them up with the factory supplied cable via the 12v trigger connection so I could turn the power amplifier on using the RC-1550's remote control. As my wife would tell you, I can be very lazy. But hey why not after all I would think it would be wasteful not to use it since it was already there. All that needs be to said about this connection was that it worked flawlessly enabling me to turn both units on and off together with one touch of the power button on the remote control without ever a problem. Listening now to The Mormon Tabernacle Choir *The Greatest Hits Of Christmas* [CBS Masterworks MK 37206] CD was a pleasure with this Rotel combination of amplifier and preamplifier. In the song "Carol Of The Bells" the percussion ensemble did a very good replicating the sound of bells ringing. Imagery within the choir and the percussion sections was quite revealing, especially the layering of singers.

Within the CD *The Best Of Nat King Cole* from the song "Send For Me" Mr Cole's voice was magical and deep as always. Here the saxophone, drums, piano and guitar all displayed their natural truth of timbre with a fair amount of detail thrown in as well. When they played together there was no problem differentiating between them or locating their place on the soundstage before me. The backup singers also were quite easy to hear on stage as they stood out from the band. Moving now to Neil Young's *Greatest Hits* CD [Reprise 48935-2] I started out with the song "After The Goldrush". Here I experienced a realistic size and depth to the piano as it played on stage accompanied by Neil Young who sounded great as he hit those high notes. I love horn instruments and here the flugelhorn had a true sense of timbre to it which added greatly to the overall mood of the song. On "Southern Man" the electric guitar rifts were detailed with a good sense of decay at the appropriate time and the left to right effect on the soundstage coupled with the soundscape depth was quite good too. With Neil Young, Danny Whitten and Ralph Molina all singing it was easy to hear them separately performing on stage. Wrapping up the review process I listened to the song "Heart Of Gold" where I could clearly hear the difference as Neil Young switched from playing electric to acoustic guitar. On the song we are also treated to Linda Ronstadt and James Taylor accompanying Neil Young in the background. Hearing Linda Ronstadt's voice added a very nice touch to the song as here the Rotel combination clearly isolated her voice. Having these Rotel products together in my review system certainly tested the limits of what other sub sixteen hundred dollars separates must now contend with as they gave a performance that went beyond their given retail pricing.

In Conclusion

Looking back to the 1960's and my first Rotel receiver it is easy to see the progress that this company has made in expanding its product line while still retaining its relative value compared to today's current audiophile grade components. The RC-1550 preamplifier sports a sound with qualities that are reminiscent of a good tube preamplifier, that I am sure will delight many, while not forgetting to keep it fun by packing it with multi-functional capabilities. Its shortcomings in the retrieval department are more of one due in keeping the price low and are very forgiving being they are more of omission than anything else. As for the RB-1552 power amplifier I was very taken with this products ability to combine power and liquidity in one package and to do it all at such an extremely reasonable price. While not completely at ease within a cost-no-object system I still felt that the RB-1552 was not embarrassed by amplifiers costing far more. This was one amplifier I definitely found to be cost effective and worthy of being associated with components normally found with more expensive amplifiers. Putting the RC-1550 and RB-1552 together I was quite happy with their ability to use only one remote control when hooked up via the 12v trigger. Lazy me loves these kind of toys. With a total combined price of fifteen hundred ninety-eight dollars, I was impressed with all the features and sound quality I received. Together they gave me a nice wide open soundstage, tube like liquidity and plenty of watts to drive even power hungry loudspeakers, all without depleting my sons college fund. Now that is value.

The Listening Environment

The review room is eighteen feet eight inches long by thirteen feet wide with the loudspeakers and equipment kept on the short wall. The cathedral ceiling starts at eight feet and slops upwards to thirteen feet at its peak in the middle spanning across the short length of the room for the full thirteen feet height. The hardwood floor has a nine by six foot oriental rug lying down the long ways facing toward the system placed dead center in between, yet not under, the listener and the review equipment. The room has no doors but there are two openings. One opening is in front of the right Legacy Focus 20/20 loudspeaker to give access to the hallway while the other is behind the listening position and opens to a formal dining area. The room is treated with three floor standing acoustical panels, one behind each loudspeaker and one in between both of them (although I have been known to move them), while all audio equipment is located in a Cherry Synergy Twin S30 Salamander audio rack against and in the middle of the short wall. I have two power conditioners which plug into a PS Audio Power Port receptacle located behind the audio rack. I also use two Blue Circle Audio MKIII Power Line Pillows one on each of two outlets on the long walls next to and behind each loudspeaker. The Legacy's are located about six feet seven inches from the rear wall to their front panel and twenty one inches from the rooms side walls to the middle of each loudspeakers. The loudspeakers are placed twelve feet apart forming a triangle with the listening position that is also angled at twelve feet from loudspeaker to listener. In the corner of each short wall behind the Legacy Focus 20/20 loudspeakers are a pair of Klipsch Klipschorn loudspeakers which are also sometimes used when reviewing audio gear. If the Klipsch loudspeakers are used I then reposition the three acoustical panels to slightly behind the listening position one to the left, the other to the right with the third being placed in the opening leading to the hallway just right of the right loudspeaker.

Review Equipment

Monarchy Audio M33 Preamplifier/DAC combo (used as a DAC for Redbook CDs)

Samsung HD-841 CD/SACD/DVD Audio universal player (used as a transport for Redbook CD playback and alone for SACD/DVD Audio listening)

PS Audio power port receptacle

Acoustic Revive RTP-2 and RTP-4 Series power conditioners

Two Blue Circle Audio Mk III power line conditioners
































Interconnects: Acoustic Revive and Kimber Kable Hero

Loudspeaker cables: Kimber Kable 4TC with matching jumper cables

Legacy Focus 20/20 loudspeakers

Cherry Synergy Twin S30 Salamander audio rack

My ratings: Please take into consideration that the equipment under review is being measured in my room, with my equipment and heard through my ears. As always you should be the final judge as to what works for you in your environment and measured against what traits you value most. The following was how I rated the equipment based on a rating system that does not take in to consideration the cost of the product, until the very last question, "Value For The Money". Before that all products are rated against others in its category, regardless of financial considerations.

	RC-1550 Preamp	RB-1552 Power Amp
Tonality		
Sub-bass (10Hz - 60Hz)		
Mid-bass (80Hz - 200Hz)		
Midrange (200Hz - 3,000Hz)		
High Frequencies (3,000Hz On Up)		
Attack		
Decay		
Inner Resolution		
Soundscape Width Front		
Soundscape Width Rear		
Soundscape Depth Behind Speakers		
Soundscape Extension Into Room		
Imaging		
Fit And Finish		
Self Noise		
Value For The Money		

Specifications

RC-1550 Preamplifier

Frequency Response: 4 Hz to 100 kHz (+0, -3dB)

Phono Input 20 Hz to 20 kHz

IM Distortion @ 1V out

Input Sensitivity and Impedance

Phono (MM) 1.2mV/68k Ohms

Line Level Inputs 150mV @24k Ohms

Phono Overload (MC/MM) 70mV

Output Sensitivity/Impedance 1V/100 Ohms

Tone/Contour Controls

Bass +3,+4dB at 100Hz

Treble +3@ 10kHz in

Signal to Noise Ratio (IHF "A")

Phono (MC/MM) 70dB

Line Level 95dB

Dimensions: 17 x 4 x 13.5 (WxHxD inches)

Shipping Weight 15.8 lbs.

Price \$699

RB-1552 Power Amplifier

Power Output: 120 watts, two channels

THD: < 0.03%

IM Distortion: < 0.03%

Damping Factor: 8 Ohms

Input Sensitivity/Impedance 1.0V/ 33k Ohms

Frequency Response: 4 Hz to 100 kHz

S/N Ratio (IHF A): 120dB

Dimensions: 17 x 5.25 x 13.4 (WxHxD in inches)

Weight: 27 lbs

Price \$899

Company Information

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