

## Rotel RDG-1520

£800 ★★★★★

## Rotel RA-1520

£700 ★★★★★

## B&W 684

£700 ★★★★★

In last year's one-make *Group Test*, Rotel submitted the excellent RA-1520 amplifier with B&W's excellent 684 floorstanders, and then undermined the whole thing with its staunchly average RCD-1520 CD player. Lessons, have been learned, obviously, because this time the company is back with the same amp and speakers, but a brand new source machine. And it's a bit of departure from a humble CD player.

The RDG-1520 ('RDG' stands for 'Rotel Digital Gateway', natch) is a digital media streamer and internet/DAB/FM radio with USB input on the fascia for use with iPods or other, less celebrated, MP3 players. This last lets portable-stored music feel the benefit of the RDG-1520's Wolfson 24-bit/192kHz DAC, while radio-fanciers can store up to 30 of their favourites in the Rotel's pre-sets.

### A musical, exciting amp

The success of the RA-1520 amplifier is even more laudable when you consider the sort of opposition it faces at its £700-ish price-point. There are any number of capable competitors ready to take a bite out of it, but the Rotel's combination of looks (chiselled), specification (ample) and power (considerable) has kept it in contention for well over a year now.

And on the subject of oldies-but-goodies, B&W's beefy 684 floorstanders have been a source of uncomplicated

pleasure around here for well over two years. They're imposing, certainly, but if you've a big room to fill with sound, and a hankering for a speaker that's going to boss you about a bit, these floorstanders could be just the thing.

Set-up is straightforward. The RDG-1520 sounds logical and responsive, and when playing France's luscious FIP radio station via the internet, the system delivers a full-boned and dextrous sound. There's certainly no shortage of low frequency presence or solidity - this amp'n'speakers combo is among most the forthright in this whole test - while the midrange is spacious and detailed enough to grant vocalists plenty of breathing space and expression.

**This Rotel/B&W combination actually sounds like it looks: big, straight-edged and enduring**

The top of the frequency range shines without hardness, integration is convincing and the whole presentation snaps along nicely, with a real sense of purpose and confidence.

### Entertainment is top of the list

All of these positives are reinforced with a switch to an Apple Lossless file of Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers' *Damn The Torpedoes*. The Rotel/B&W team combines ample brawn with considerable agility, and generates a convincing soundstage. There's great texture to individual instruments, unflustered dynamic heft and the kind of rigorous focus and separation that makes even the most complex recordings simple to follow.

This system does particularly good work when it comes to transients, and describes the detail-packed leading edge of individual hits, plucks or what-have-you with alacrity. Wind the volume upwards and the set-up simply gets

louder, its infectiously enthusiastic voice manfully resisting any tendency towards hardness or shoutiness.

If your taste is towards the burly and authoritative, then, you should find much to admire here. The Rotel/B&W combination actually sounds pretty much like it looks: big, straight-edged and enduring. Some systems offer a little more fluency where timing is concerned, and others can extract even more fine detail, but no other set-up can better this one when the talk turns to drive, scale and out-and-out brio.

'Entertainment' is a quality some manufacturers overlook in their quest for fidelity, precision and neutrality, but for B&W and Rotel it's quite obviously near the top of their wish-lists.

### System rating ★★★★★

**FOR** Cast-iron build quality; up-to-the-minute specification; exciting, engaging sound

**AGAINST** Cheerfully gives away a little neutrality in the quest for entertainment

**VERDICT** Bold looks and big sound makes this an authentic option

**TOTAL  
SYSTEM  
PRICE  
£2200**

### BEFORE YOU BUY

The B&W 684s are a lot of speaker for the money, but unless you have a large listening room you're better off trying out some smaller designs

