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Rotel RB-1091 Monoblock Amplifier

A fast, tight, and transparent sound that is hard to resist

Jacob Heilbrunn



T rue or false: The more you spend on an audio system, the better it will sound? I found myself pondering this question after a recent visit to the West Coast where I heard three stellar (and costly) systems in rapid succession. The first featured the Brinkmann Balance turntable and DALI Megaline loudspeaker; the second, the Clearaudio Statement turntable and the Magnepan 20.1 loudspeaker; and the third, the Continuum Caliburn turntable and Avantgarde Trios with two pair of Basshorns. Each system sounded different, of course, but they all had one thing in common: a stupendously dynamic sound that, while it wasn't the same as live, came pretty darn close, at least as near as I could tell. So I returned from my peregrinations wondering if the new Class D Rotel RB-1091 monoblocks powering the Magnepan 1.6 could possibly match up to these heavyweights.

Actually, that's a lie. I didn't wonder about that at all. I knew they wouldn't have the heft, power, and dynamics of topflight amplifiers driving big systems. What I was curious about was whether the Rotels would provide an enjoyable, emotionally satisfying listening experience. They did. I shouldn't have wasted any psychic energy fretting about the Rotels. From the moment I unboxed and plugged them in, they pleasantly surprised me not only with their snazzy looks, but also with their performance. These 500-watt monoblocks excel at producing a fast, tight, and transparent sound that is hard to resist.

My memories of Rotel are rather hazy, but a decade or so ago they looked, if I recall correctly, like clunkers. You know the style: forbidding black faceplate and a hunk of clumsily shaped steel. They sounded that way, too. Not anymore. The new Rotel peers confidently at you. It behaves that way, as well. It doesn't emit much heat. It features a protection circuit that operates instantaneously. (After my active crossover transmitted a static pop, the amplifiers shut down, which is what they're supposed to do.) And it's nice and light, which, believe me, is a wonderful contrast to the 200-pound heavyweight monsters that require two people to haul around.

I was impressed by its speed and clarity

The reason it's so light but fairly powerful is because the Rotel is a switching amplifier built around ICEpower technology. Now, I know that it is heresy in some circles to contemplate the use of a Class D amplifier. The ability of technology to evoke spats and feuds among audiophiles is really something to behold. I try to avoid these internecine disputes and to take a more Catholic view: Forget the type of technology; does it sound good or not? My experience with the Rotel and other switching amplifiers I've heard, including the Bel Canto, is that they produce fine sound with few of the hassles associated with more traditional amplifiers.

Initially, I ran the Rotels on the bass panel of the Magnepan 20.1. I usually run the bass panel off a Marchand XM-44 active crossover, which allows me to bypass the big capacitors and enormous inductors in the passive crossover that drag down its performance. The Rotels performed admirably; while they didn't have the refulgence of the VTL-750s, the Rotels produced a taut and controlled sound. These demure monoblocks had no difficulty powering the bass panels and, consistent with a switching amplifier, produced little heat, a marked contrast to the VTLs, which have a penchant for turning the area around my loudspeakers into a miniature sauna, which is nice in wintertime but daunting during the summer. (Incidentally, given the rising cost of electricity, not to mention preserving the environment, the minimal energy use of the Rotels is nothing to sneeze at.)

Their performance on the bass panel of the big Maggies whetted my appetite to hear them on the 1.6, the kind of loudspeaker they were intended to drive. Once again, I have to confess that I was taken aback. Maybe it's just prejudice, but I was half-expecting a wispy, perhaps inchoate sound. It never happened.

Right off the bat, I was impressed by the speed and clarity of the amplifiers. On *Waltz for Debby* [Analogue Productions SACD], Bill Evans' piano came through with great clarity, and on the song "Who Cares?" the Rotels did an exemplary job of conveying the jauntiness of Cannonball Adderley's alto

Rotel RB-1091 Monoblock Amplifier

ROTEL
MONO POWER AMPLIFIER RB-1091

PROTECTION

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saxophone. This was no tapioca pudding of sound, but crisply enunciated music that swept you away with its vividness.

The Rotel's good resolution also shone to fine effect on another SACD, Telarc's *The Music of Paul Dukas*. The Rotels revealed just how superb the brass section of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra must be; it captured their exuberant, ringing sound on *Fanfare to La Peri*. Once again, the Rotels did a fine job of separating the various brass choirs rather than presenting them as a sodden mass of sound, as a lesser amp might do. You not only heard the full chorus of trumpets or trombones, but also each instrument within it. The power and burnished sound of the brass came through with exemplary fidelity—each time I go to hear a live orchestra, I'm reminded of the warm, resonant sound that professional brass players produce as a matter of course.

The Rotel is a switching amplifier

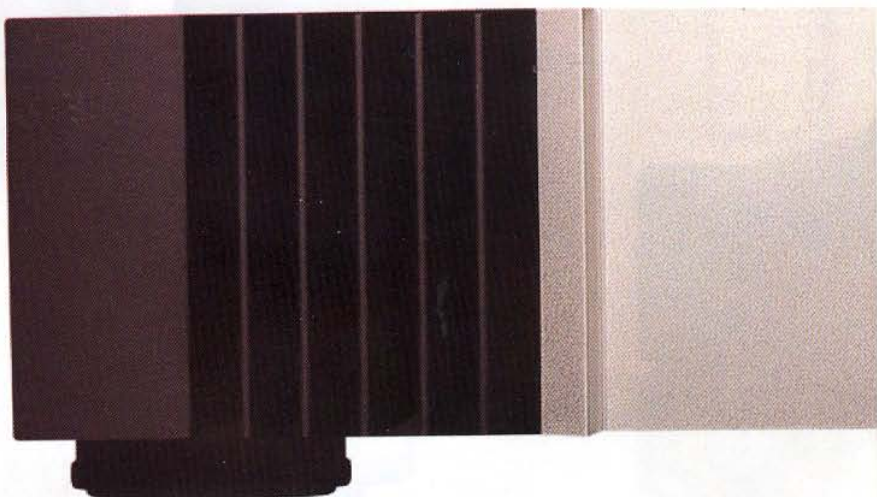
But perhaps the music that really got me was Louis Armstrong's *Satch Plays Fats* [Sony SACD]. Armstrong's work after his legendary performances with the Hot 5 and Hot 7 is, at best, uneven, but this 1955 tribute to Fats Waller ranks among his greatest. On "Blue Turning Grey Over You," Armstrong almost literally overpowers the trumpet with his force of imagination and physical power, conveying a tremendous sense of melancholy. I was left awestruck listening to it. How much of this was the amps and how much Armstrong's astonishing performance, I'm not prepared to say. But the amps captured everything from Armstrong's gravelly voice to the unexpected twists and turns of his trumpet solo.

To be honest, the Rotels didn't really call all that much attention to themselves. They sounded very smooth, period. I never really heard any part of the frequency spectrum dominate another. What stuck out was that

the Rotels possess a transparent, almost silvery sound. In contrast to the Parasound JC-1 monoblocks, which were also powering the Magnepan 1.6, the Rotels sounded faster but lacked some heft. They also didn't have quite as large a soundstage as the Parasounds, but were more precise. Tradeoffs: You like this kind of sound or you don't. Some audiophiles will find it too clean and perhaps lacking some body on the notes. I'm starting to think that this may be an inherent part of switching amplifiers. Is it possible that Class D amps are eliminating a coloration that

more conventional amplifiers share? Will Class D amplifiers, in turn, push designers to eliminate colorations that hadn't seemed intrusive until now?

I don't know the answer to those questions. But it's a little unnerving to think that Rotel is offering performance that would have cost a bundle a decade ago, and that, in some ways, might not even have been achievable. To be sure, as I suggested at the outset, the Rotels will not match up to megabuck systems, and aren't really intended to. Money makes a difference. The more you spend intelligently, the better your system will sound. But how far do you really want to go in chasing audiophile rainbows? Throwing dollars at your system can sometimes produce as much frustration as satisfaction. The Rotels are neutral and nimble amplifiers that will power most loudspeakers, providing sound that is very hard to reproach. If you're looking for an amp that provides more than an entry into the high-end for a reasonable price, the Rotels are well worth considering. **TAS**



Specs & Pricing

ROTEL OF AMERICA

54 Concord Street
North Reading, Massachusetts 01864
(978) 664-3820

Type: Class D Switching Amplifier
Power output: 500 watts into 8 ohms
Inputs: One single-ended (RCA)
Dimensions: 17.25" x 3.75" x 16.25"
Weight: 17.2 lbs.
Price: \$1499 each

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

VPI-HRX turntable and JMW 12.6 tonearm;
Sony SCD-777ES SACD/CD player; EMM Labs
DCC2 preamplifier/DAC and EMM Labs CDSD;
Messenger and Convergent Audio Technology
Mk. 3 preamplifiers; Parasound JC-1 and VTL 750
monoblock amplifiers; Magnepan 20.1 and 1.6
loudspeakers; Jena Labs and Cardas Golden Cross
cables; Shunyata Hydra-6 and PS Audio P-300
power regenerator