Rotel
RSP-1068

Sub-£1000 AV processors are very thin on the ground, so does the RSP-1068 have a clear run, asks Paul Miller

Topping its radical RSP-1098 AV processor [*AVTech*, Nov '03] was always going to be a tough act for Rotel so, by way of commercial good sense, it has decided not to bother trying. Instead, many of the lessons learned in its development have been trickled-down to the replacement for its baby brother, the RSP-1066. This is the £995 RSP-1068, a model that clearly takes its cues from the older RSP-1066 but that beats to the tune of latest Crystal CS494003 Dolby/DTS decoder debued on the RSP-1098. This single-chip solution supports all the standard 7.1 channel formats, including Dolby EX and

> ## Some of the advanced DSP features introduced on Rotel's RSP-1098 have found their way into this RSP-1068

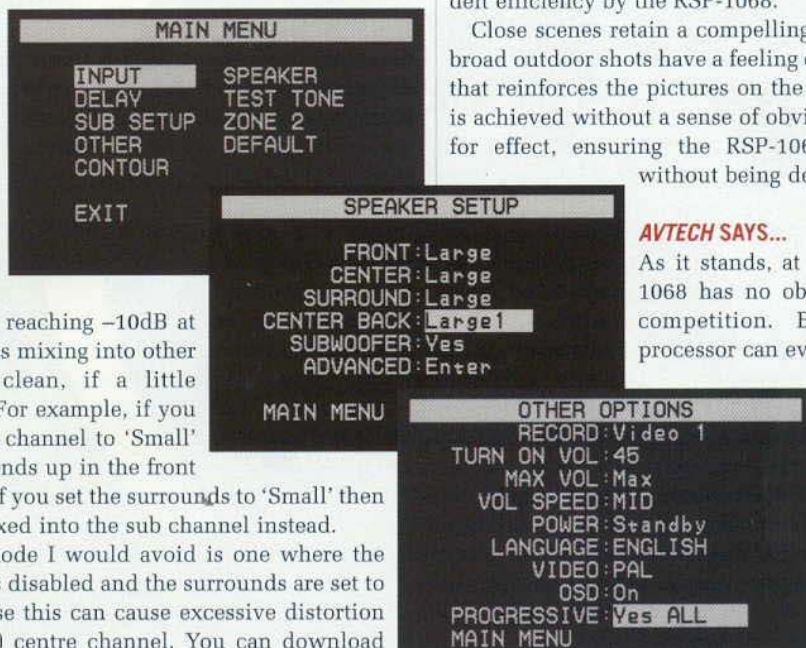DTS ES, but brings added compatability with other standards like DTS 24/96.

In line with the affordability of the RSP-1068, it's fitted with four stereo AK4395 DACs instead of the more advanced CS43122 DACs used in the RSP-1098. Nevertheless, the flexibility of the product has been enhanced with an additional component video input

and a zone 2 composite video output. Similarly, the multichannel analogue inputs have been increased from 7 to 8 channels and assignable 12V triggers are now included to assist in custom install projects.

And, for anyone who has suffered the annoyance of a slight lipsync error with their plasma or display (caused by a delay in the video scaling DSP), Rotel offers a 'Group Delay' of up to 500msec in 5msec increments. A useful feature that addresses other product's shortcomings.

As you might expect, the RSP-1068 passes all the requisite Dolby decode tests with flying colours and even locks onto incoming bitstreams about a second quicker than previous models. It's also worth noting that changes to the speaker configuration (size, delay and level) are executed on-the-fly, making it very much easier to tweak your system setup. Some DVD players and processors still require you to exit the menu before changes to the configuration are implemented, but the RSP-1068 is rather slicker.

Some of the more advanced DSP features introduced on its RSP-1098 have also found their way into this '1068 model. For example, go to the 'Other' menu and you'll discover the 'Slow', 'Mid' and 'Fast' volume speed options that were developed for the '1098, allowing the hysteresis of the volume control to be adapted to your spinning technique! There's also a 'Contour' tone control accessible via the OSD and front panel, permitting a broad but gentle increase (or decrease) in output above and below 1kHz. This is a mild contouring effect of about 3dB/decade, realising a

maximum +6dB boost at 20kHz and +6dB at 20Hz with less group delay than might be experienced from a conventional bass/treble control.

Do note, however, that once you touch the front panel knobs, even returning them both to '0', you'll still have to return to the OSD menu before setting the Defeat function back 'On'. Rotel's bass management has been tweaked to give a steeper LF roll-off to any channels changed from 'Large' to 'Small' in its Speaker setup menu, just as it's now possible to set independent crossover points (which now extend up to 200Hz) to each channel in turn.

Set to a standard 80Hz (the RSP-1068 defaults to 100Hz) and the response of these Small channels starts

Rotel's traditional text-based menu is now more comprehensive than ever

MAIN MENU

INPUT   SPEAKER
DELAY   TEST TONE
SUB SETUP   ZONE 2
OTHER   DEFAULT
CONTOUR

EXIT

SPEAKER SETUP

FRONT : Large
CENTER : Large
SURROUND : Large
CENTER BACK : Large1
SUBWOOFER : Yes
ADVANCED : Enter

MAIN MENU

OTHER OPTIONS

RECORD : Video 1
TURN ON VOL : 45
MAX VOL : Max
VOL SPEED : MID
POWER : Standby
LANGUAGE : ENGLISH
VIDEO : PAL
OSD : On
PROGRESSIVE : Yes ALL
MAIN MENU

rolling away below 200Hz, reaching –10dB at 80Hz. The bass mixing into other channels is clean, if a little inconsistent. For example, if you set the centre channel to 'Small' then its bass ends up in the front channels but if you set the surrounds to 'Small' then the bass is mixed into the sub channel instead.

The only mode I would avoid is one where the sub channel is disabled and the surrounds are set to 'Small' because this can cause excessive distortion on the (Large) centre channel. You can download the full LPCM and Dolby test reports from *www.milleraudioresearch.com/avtech*.

LIGHTS OUT

Its bigger brother, the RSP-1098, has a very distinctive sound and one that suits a grand home cinema down to its roots. There's a hint of warmth, almost a slight bloom to the lower registers that can really lift the stature of the (multichannel) soundfield away from the speakers and firmly into the room itself. The RSP-1068, by contrast, has a slightly leaner presentation but is no less transparent for this difference in emphasis. Similarly, the stormy introduction to *Hellboy* sounds no less articulate or pointed in focus, but it's clear that the most robust effects are being underpinned by the sub rather than the main speakers, regardless of their size. In many systems, this is probably as it should be because it allows for easier room-tuning by subtle changes in the level and positioning of the sub.

More importantly, the sound of the RSP-1068 enjoys a sense of uniformity across all channels that we've experienced from Rotel's other processors and AV receivers in the past. This is vital if a 'believable, three-dimensional soundfield is to be sustained, particularly now that the surround channels are being employed by mixing engineers as rather more than a repository for occasional effects.

The car chase scene from *The Bourne Identity*, for example, has you on the edge of your seat with Rotel's
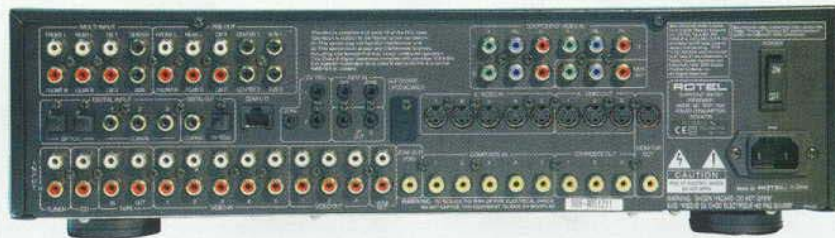
RSP-1068 at the helm because its immersive, 'cloud' of sound places you right in the middle of the action. And 'cloud' should not imply 'cloudy', for the quick changes in ambience that occur as scenes flip from inside the mini to outside on the cold streets are reflected with deft efficiency by the RSP-1068.

Close scenes retain a compelling intimacy while the broad outdoor shots have a feeling of space and airiness that reinforces the pictures on the screen. And all this is achieved without a sense of obviousness or straining for effect, ensuring the RSP-1068 sounds detailed without being demanding.

AVTECH SAYS...

As it stands, at just £995, the RSP-1068 has no obvious or immediate competition. But then, no AV processor can ever truly stand alone. As ideal partners for the RSP-1068, you need look no further than a combination of Rotel's own RB-1080 (left and right) with a three-channel RMB-1095 power amp, bringing the total package in at £3685. If you want more bells, whistles and compatibility with the latest multichannel digital audio/video interconnect standards then you'll

While the rear panel looks little different from its RSP-1066 predecessor, there are hidden upgrades. These include video upconversion from composite/S-video to component, 12V triggers, a full 8-channel multichannel input and a 10-channel multichannel pre-amp output. There are 3 coaxial and 2 optical digital inputs and an RJ45 Comm port for external remote control. The likes of HDMI switching, however, look to be a while away

" **The car chase scene in *The Bourne Identity* has you on the edge of your seat with the RSP-1068 at the helm** "

need to look in the direction of the big, fully-integrated AV receivers from the likes of Denon and Pioneer. But while you are at this fork in the road, never doubt that the Rotel combination represents the very affordable end of what might be described as genuinely 'audiophile' home cinema. ∎

Supplier

B&W UK Sales
01903 221500
www.rotel.com

Hi-Fi News   verdict

If you want to upgrade to a separates-based home cinema system, then Rotel's new RSP-1068 represents the most affordable, performanced-based choice available. For bells and whistles, look elsewhere.