

Rotel RCD/RA-1520 (£695/£695)

The first CD player/amp combo to emerge from Rotel in a few years is the lynchpin of a broad range of hi-fi and AV components. Does it still have the midas touch?

Review: Richard Stevenson **Lab:** Paul Miller

Following hot on the speaker terminals of the 15 Series AV components, the RCD-1520/RA-1520 duo is the entry point of Rotel's much anticipated new 15 Series hi-fi components. Much anticipated because if, like me, you were weaned on hi-fi through the 1980s then a Rotel CD player and amp combination was the audio equivalent of Farley's Rusk and warm milk: tasty, satisfying and perfect for when you got back from the pub on a Friday night.

The new kit has certainly evolved from the austere black casework of the products I used to annoy the neighbours with back-in-the-day. The 15 Series silver livery, rounded corner caps and deeply engraved fascia with blue power indicators is a sumptuous execution of modern style. The general build quality inside and out is amazing for what is a relatively bijou budget. What's more, the new slot-loading CD mechanism is a joy to use and the amplifier remote replicates most of the CD functions – a notable omission on some other Japanese integrated amps of late.

NOT BEST SERVED COLD

My warm and fluffy fondness for the sheer Rotel-ness of it all came quickly off the rails though. I won't bore you with the gory sonic details because the issue was resolved by a few calls to Rotel; this duo was an early sample and had, by various planes, trains and automobiles, arrived at *chez* Stevenson with barely a couple of hours run time notched up.

Fast forward several days of running at high volume, some interconnect cabling changes (to which the duo is particularly sensitive) and all was well with the world again. Of note, both units are not at their best from stone cold

RIGHT: In common with many new amplifiers, the RA-1520 features a 3.5mm 'Media Player' input socket which over-rides the Aux line input. Bass and treble controls can be defeated while the volume knob is motorised for IR control

and, also like me, require a decent warm up period to get going.

KILLER PUNCH

And when they do get going, they really get going. This duo has muscle and character by the bucket-load and is certainly not shy of turning a quiet night at home into a party. The amp has an enviable reserve of power and comprehensively sees off its similarly priced rivals for dynamic drive and high volume ability.

With efficient (90dB/W) speakers the RA-1520 powered 90dB in room with its central volume knob barely at the 9 o'clock position. It continued happily beyond midnight, often quite literally, without showing a hint of strain.

A big low frequency punch defines the sound with superb attack and a serious penchant for drum and bass. While no flat-neutral performer, the pairing has a gorgeous mid-bass that is both fast and weighty along with a well extended but never edgy top end.

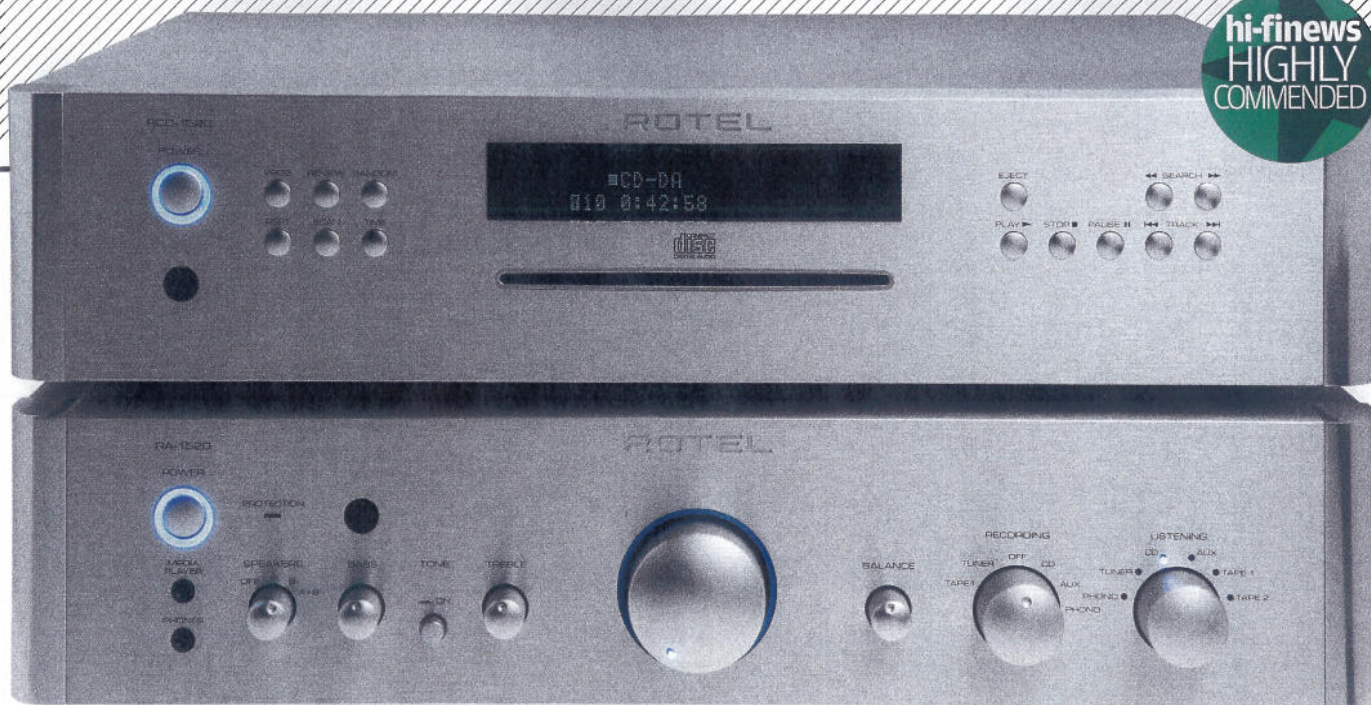
American singer/songwriter Phranc was a staple of my folk-music listening when I first owned Rotel products and the 15 Series offers much of the appeal with her 1985 debut solo album, *Folksinger*. Despite being a relatively early AAD transfer to CD the album retains its intense acoustic flavour and overall warm sound through the 1520 pairing. The distinct character of her voice and obvious LA accent are neatly

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crafted, as is the slightly nasal edge to her high notes; presented probably far more accurately than the artist would have liked. The pace and tempo are spot-on with faster songs like 'Liar Liar' and the rich tones of her acoustic guitar making for a neat and cohesive whole.

In fact the Rotel duo excels at delivering music in this unified way,





so what you are hearing is the sum of the parts rather than the parts themselves. It is just so easy to lose yourself in the music, taping your feet, singing along and searching for 'just one more' CD to listen to before the night is over. Conversely, there is not the analytical dissection of music that many audiophiles crave. This is not a duo that creates a soundstage 10ft wider than your room and then places instruments in their own space with military precision. Phranc and her guitar may be locked firmly centre stage but this simply serves to further fuel the intensity and drama of the album.

A single play of 'Carolyn' reveals the deep love behind the song and the system's ability to get to the heart of the music makes even Phranc's more cringe-worthy tracks, such as 'Female Mudwrestling', eminently listenable.

Final vindication of the Rotel's more integrated musical stance comes with the CD's cover of Dylan's 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll'. The combo

allows Phranc to eke out every last drop of the songs anti-establishment sentiment along with the abject disgust and deep sarcasm that infuses the lyrics. Her voice raises admirably to the frequent tempo changes and the slowing final verse is delivered with marvellous gravitas and emotion. Like many of Dylan's songs, they are so much better when sung by someone else.

THAT'S A RAP

The very appealing attack and weight in the bass region gave me a touch of the vapours and I found myself inserting Eminem's new CD, *Relapse*. This is a disc with an aggressive streak a mile wide and bass about as big and fast as it gets. Blimey! Given a handful of volume the Rotel amp turns into an adrenaline crazed rap superstar that would embarrass quite a few serious pre-power combos for sheer grunt and pace. Each beat of the moody

ABOVE: Rotel's latest CD player is the first in its range to feature a slot-loading drive instead of a traditional draw-based mechanism

'Stay Wide Awake' threatens to remove plaster from the ceiling and makes you bob around the room (arms folded in rap pose) like 50-Cent. Of course, it took about two tracks at this volume before the missus entered the room waving the red card. Backing the Rotel's happy wheel below the 10 o'clock position leaves the combo sounding relatively sedate compared to its blisteringly energetic high-volume presentation.

With more audiophile-friendly material this volume-dependent balance

'A big low frequency punch defines the sound with superb attack and a penchant for drum and bass'

remains noticeable but far less obvious. The duo slips comfortably into *The Very Best of Charles Mingus*, easily finding the alacrity and sweet sculptural rhythms that define this jazz legend. 'Wham Bam Thank You Ma'am' is delivered with real passion and authority, despite its modest 1961 recording roots. The Rotel puts you right there at Atlantic Studios with the fluid tenor sax soaring into the room and Doug Watkins' lightning upright bass offering superb tautness and timing.

You can hear the rich tapestry of sounds that make up every pluck of the strings, from the pick-up that deadens the previous note to the instrument's natural resonant decay. This was music recorded before 'digital mucking about' became the norm and this is a system that lets every ounce of that raw quality shine through. ☺

BALANCED DESIGN CONCEPT

Rotel has been in business for over 45 years and the 15 Series is a culmination of what the company refers to as its Balanced Design Concept philosophy. No, not an insistence on balanced circuitry and XLR connections, but a design strategy that encompasses a holistic approach to parts selection, circuit topology and critical evaluation by ear. Components are selected by auditioning and chosen for both their sound and long term reliability – just check out eBay to see the really old Rotel kit still going strong.

Placing these parts is equally important so Rotel employs symmetrical circuits with star grounding to ensure each channel is identical. The final stage involves auditioning and fine tuning the sound to ensure that product pleases the ear rather than meet the demands of a specification sheet [see Lab Report]. In essence the Balanced Design Concept is about delivering fundamental music entertainment rather than just an exercise in engineering. Given the musical nature of the 15 Series there is clearly more than just marketing rhetoric to Rotel's Balanced Design Concept.

CD PLAYER & AMPLIFIER

ROTEL RCD-1520/RA-1520 (£695 ea)



ABOVE: Single-ended analogue and digital outputs on the CD player (top) join phono, three line and two tape inputs on the amp. Switched A/B speaker sockets are fitted

Throughout the CD the sax is allowed to scale gracefully with the track, offering both warmth in the mid-band and admirable projection at the top. On many tracks the instrument is recorded on the limit of the original master tape's saturation levels and the Rotel system treats this with an impressively even hand. You can certainly hear the tell-tale compression at peak but the issue is neither highlighted nor exacerbated. As this is often the case with Japanese CD/amps in this price range it is clear where the UK-based tuning has paid off.

FIGHTING SHY

Switching back to my reference system for comparison, the Rotel does fight shy of really deep bass. The very lowest registers of the Watkin's upright bass notes on the Mingus CD are simply overshadowed by the energy in the mid-bass. This leads to a punchy yet seemingly poorly extended LF response.

With standmount speakers the lack of really deep bass is unlikely to be an issue and the Rotel simply offers spectacularly tactile and well textured bass. Yet connected to my large floorstanding speakers I did miss the near sub-sonic lower reaches of the Mingus CD and the visceral deep-bass of the Eminem disc. Then again, given the Rotel's predilection for high SPLs, I suspect the neighbours didn't.

The more I listened to the 1520 duo the more I came to appreciate its very tidy and articulate top end. There is ample extension and perhaps a little lift

towards the upper reaches that keeps the system sounding lively without slipping into sibilance or acidity. At low levels the treble is a little too sleepy and restrained for me but the volume knob seems to control not only sound pressure but energy and excitement levels as well. I suspect this trait will polarise opinion of the system as a whole. Those with a dedicated music room or understanding neighbours are certainly going to 'get it' more than those married to a fully paid-up member of the noise abatement society.

From the first disc I knew this wasn't going to be a classically 'hi-fi' lean and detailed amplifier/CD combination but neither was the first Rotel system I fell in love with back in my youth. After a long weekend of intense listening and classic albums, I for one have warmed to a Rotel system's strong character and sheer enthusiasm for music. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The entry level 15-series system is a long way from being text-book neutral but offers a sound that is rich, energetic and eminently entertaining. With character by the bucket load, from the volume dependent balance to a mid-bass kick that will loosen your fillings, it has the ability to really get to the heart of an impressive variety of music genres. Timing, musicality, solid build and great looks – I can live with that.

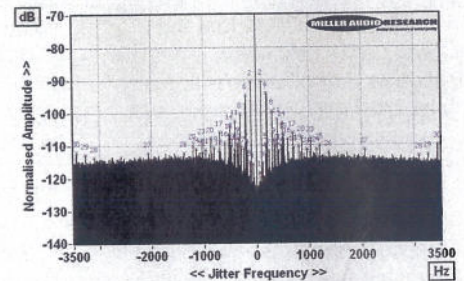
Sound Quality: 80%



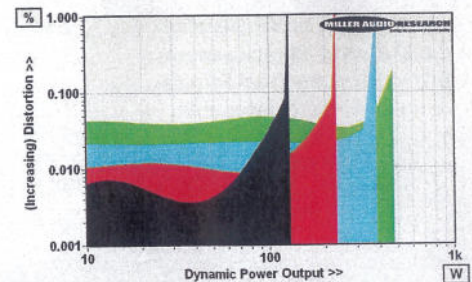
The RA-1520 amplifier is from Rotel's tried-and-tested Class AB cookbook and performs like a little trojan. Its 60W specification is trowned in practice with figures closer to 90W/8ohm and 140W/4ohm. The sheer gutsy nature of this little amp is better revealed by its dynamic output [see graph 2, below] which increases from 130W/8ohm to 230W, 385W and 475W into 4, 2 and 1ohm loads. Speakers outside of this amp's price bracket, and with tough loads, will still be driven with solid results. The A-wtd S/N ratio is perfectly average at 84dB (re. 0dBW), the response suitably extended (-1.5dB/100kHz) and the output impedance usefully low at 0.03ohm but while distortion is very low at 0.0007-0.0015% through bass and midrange it does increase substantially at higher frequencies (0.22% at 20kHz). Subjectively, it's not the peak distortion that matters but how this figure changes across the audio range.

Nevertheless, if this two-part chain has a weak link, then the CD player is the more likely candidate. Jitter is very high at >2000psec of supply-related effects [see graph 1, below], of a type and level that typically correlates with an overly-warm or fat-sounding bass. Perhaps this was heard during the player's 'tweaking' and perhaps this explains why its response is engineered with a gentle bass roll-off below 100Hz, reaching -1dB/20Hz. Better, in my view, to have removed the jitter.

Distortion falls to a minimum of 0.0004% at -10dBFs with some slight increase at its maximum 2.29V output. The 107dB S/N ratio, <-80dB crosstalk and 100ohm output impedance are all fine. Readers may view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for Rotel's RCD-1520 and RA-1520 by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: High resolution jitter spectrum. Power supply induced sidebands are marked in pairs



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	92W / 140W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	130W / 232W / 385W / 475W
Digital jitter (CD)	2430psec
Frequency resp. (CD/amp, 20Hz-20kHz)	-1.1 to -0.15dB / -0.1 to -0.06dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/60W)	23mV/189mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD/amp)	107.1dB / 84.1dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, CD/amp)	0.0012-0.0025%/0.0007-0.22%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	21W/138W
Dimensions (WHD)	431x99x339mm