

MAIN REVIEWS – Jason Kennedy | LAB REPORTS – Paul Miller

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Dedicated stereo amps can still get you the sound quality of an AV behemoth but at a fraction of the price

ON TEST



ARCAM A65 PLUS
£370



HARMAN KARDON HK 670
£299



MYRYAD Z140
£450



NAD C320BEE
£220



ROTEL RA-02
£349

The budget or entry-level end of the stereo amplifier market is under attack. Sales in this sector are largely features-led and when it comes to bells, whistles and lights, it's hard to beat an AV surround sound amp. Unless sound quality is an important factor you are unlikely to end up with a stereo amp to play your music on – after all, if you can get three extra channels and umpteen flavours of DSP to play with, why on earth would you go for a smaller box that only plays stereo? Well, you might want to enjoy your music on it for one thing, and come to think of it, what other reason would you buy an amp for anyway?

The upshot of this situation is that the big oriental brands are gradually filtering stereo amps out of their ranges – Pioneer has got there already and more will follow. We scoured the market for new affordable stereo amps for this group and did well to get five. The irony is that to get the quality offered by £220-worth of stereo amp out of an AV design you have to spend over three times as much. Which seems odd until you realise that the AV amp has two and a half times the output devices and digital processing to pay for, not to mention the surround sound licenses.

It's gratifying to see the hi-fi stalwarts are still bringing out new babies for your listening pleasure. The models gathered here are fresh for the season, either revised (Arcam has Plussed its A65 and NAD has BEE'd its 302), or totally rebuilt (Rotel has replaced its RA-971 MkII with the much slimmer

RA-02, while Myryad has done the same, with the T-series making way for the slimmer and sexier Z-series). Harman Kardon is attempting to break all records by making the most powerful, not to say physically heavy, integrated you can get for less than £300.

These are all good amps but which ones are the best? Have a look at the following pages to see what we think, and try to read beyond the star ratings, then take your shortlist and your speakers to a dealer and listen for yourself.

EQUIPMENT USED

Vinyl

SME Model 20A turntable, van den Hul Grasshopper cartridge, Audio Innovations T2 step-up transformer

Disc player

Townshend Pioneer DV-747A

Amplifiers

Harman Kardon HK5500 AV receiver
Pioneer A300R TE

Loudspeakers

Cyrus CLS50, B&W Signature 805
Living Voice Avatar OBX-R

Cables

Townshend Cryogenic, Living Voice
Potato Wire

Stands & supports

Townshend Seismic Stands
Kudos S100

MUSIC USED

Ben Allison *Riding The Nuclear Tiger*
Various artists *Mark Levinson Live Recordings at Red Rose Music Inc Bach guitar piece*
Various artists inc Sammartini *Exceptional Masterpieces*
Groove Armada *Goodbye Country (Hello Nightclub)*
Missy Elliott *Miss E... So Addictive*
Tool *Lateralus*



ROTEL RA-02 £349

01903 750750 www.rotel.com

Rotel's new silver-clad integrated sounds alive with any type of music

Things have been happening at Rotel. Not only has the year seen the brand move from its long-term UK distributor, Gamepath, to its international distributor B&W, but we've seen the first silver components in the range for quite a while. The new integrated is this slimline RA-02, a 40 watts-per-channel replacement for the RA-971 MkII, and very cute it is too – an effect enhanced when you switch on and see the blue LEDs on power, volume and select knobs that sit on its 6cm high front panel.

Remote control seems to be mandatory on amps these days and the RA-02 is not challenging this state of affairs, though it has a similar sibling called RA-01 without the feature for £100 less. The fully stocked fascia features tiny and defeatable tone controls, balance, tape monitoring and speaker switching facilities. The remote is a system type capable of driving the matching Rotel tuner and CD player we looked at in the August issue of *HFC*.

The back panel has socketry for external remote control and 12V triggers, both elements designed to enhance multiroom use, and given the extra pair of speaker terminals on the RA-02 a practical option for simple second room operation via a keypad transmitter.

VERDICT

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



Very agile and capable compact amp with good transparency and the ability to reproduce all music types with vivacity and depth through a variety of loudspeakers, but avoid the inefficient ones.

CHECKLIST

REMOTE CONTROL	✓
PHONE INPUT	✓
LINE INPUTS	4
TAPE LOOPS	1

PERFORMANCE

If the RA-02 is anything to go by, £350 is the sort of money you'll need to find if you want an amp that will make you spend more time with your music. Less expensive models in this group have foibles that will probably become apparent with exposure whereas this Rotel sounds like it will just keep on getting better the more you use it. While not quite as sophisticated sounding as the Arcam, this is still a subtle and clean amp with a good sense of timing and a little more punch.

Playing the Groove Armada disc displayed clear, crisp voice articulation and a natural treble that doesn't 'tizz' and spit. At the other end of things, bass is solid though a touch on the lean side, but the quality of the midrange makes up for it. The Sarmartini piece proved this dramatically, the instruments recreated in a three dimensional soundstage, alive and vibrant. If you like to hear the timbre of instruments, the richness on

show with the Rotel will turn you on.

Ben Allison's jazz band likewise comes alive in a spacious soundstage, the groove driving the music along without any of the edginess found with lesser designs. There is a slight hint of dryness in the treble but this doesn't undermine the sense of space and air, and doesn't become apparent until you hear something sweeter. Vinyl sounds remarkably listenable as well, albeit a little lightweight.

While this doesn't look like Rotels of old it has lost none of their charm and if you're serious about music the RA-02 will show you the fun side – after all, music is supposed to be enjoyed. **B**

LAB REPORT

▶ Although the RA-02 is only rated at 40W/8 ohm, you can rely on 2x55W/8 ohm and 2x80W/4 ohm, increasing to 88W, 148W, 195W (9.9A) and 158W (12.6A) into 8, 4, 2 and 1 ohm loads, respectively, under dynamic conditions.

▶ There's no suggestion of crossover distortion at low signal levels where figures of around 0.012% are broadly maintained up to 50W or so through bass and midrange.

▶ Unusually, however, second and fourth-order distortions gently increase through the upper midrange and treble, finally reaching 0.06% at 20kHz. This undoubtedly contributes to the RA-02's 'characterful' performance.

▶ The response has the mildest -0.2dB bass roll-off at 20Hz but is otherwise flat, extended and assisted by a consistent 0.04 ohm output impedance.

▶ **LAB CONCLUSION:** A slim and capable amplifier with a gentle, rather than typically abrupt, increase in distortion through the treble.

"It may not look like Rotels of old but it's lost none of their charm and if you're serious about music the RA-02 will show you the fun side."

DETAIL – CONNECTIONS



AMPLIFIERS CONCLUSIONS

Jason Kennedy is relieved that budget stereo amps can still outperform more expensive surround options

All of these integrated designs outperformed the £750 AV amp that was on hand as a benchmark representative of the breed, proving the point that if it's music you're into rather than movies, a dedicated approach will give the best results – for less dosh.

The standard overall is pretty impressive here and the garlanded contestants are extremely strong performers for the money. It became apparent fairly early on that quality was improving with price, a result that one might expect though not one that is always the case. However, the Arcam and Rotel models did come very close to matching the Myryad's overall finesse and actually outperformed it in a few areas. Arguably the closest fought battle of the group involved the



Myryad's potency versus the Arcam's nimbleness, and the ultimate choice here will probably come down to the speakers used.

The two sub-£300 options, the NAD and Harman Kardon, both deliver plenty for the money. The HK scores with its power, drive and facilities, while it's hard to imagine a more engaging and musical amp than the NAD at £220.

But one of the most compelling conclusions from this group is that it's well worth spending more if

you can afford to. The Rotel has a beguiling midband and a cleaner sound than the cheapies here, and like the Arcam and Myryad it's good enough to see you through several speaker upgrades.

Loudspeaker choice is critical with amps of any price, but the lower down the scale you go the more likely you are to be limited in power terms, and, at an absolute level, by the amount of distortion created. If you want to play long and loud there's no substitute for good clean power, something the dearest contender here offers above the competition. However, if you have modest but efficient speakers any of these integrateds will give you years of musical entertainment, and you can even play your movies through them (in stereo) to great effect. Try it! 🎧

TRY THEM WITH THESE

CD PLAYERS

MARANTZ CD6000 OSE LE £300

Detailed, well rounded, at home in any musical context, this will suit any of these amps.

NAD CS411 £330

A dynamic, tonally varied and confident sounding player with class leading detail resolution.

ROTEL RCD-02 £379

An articulate sounding player, new from Rotel and an obvious match for the RA-02 amp.

LOUDSPEAKERS

ACOUSTIC ENERGY AEGIS EVO ONE £180

Classy and sophisticated performer for the price, with laid-back sound and good looks. Good partner for the NAD.

B&W DM602 S3 £300

Large, lively standmount with fine bass and low coloration. Will suit the better amps in this group nicely.

MISSION M51 £300

An engaging new standmount from Mission – would make an interesting partner for the Arcam, Rotel or Myryad.



AMPLIFIERS AT A GLANCE

MAKE	Arcam	Harman Kardon	Myryad	NAD	Rotel
MODEL	A65 Plus	HK670	Z140	C320BEE	RA-02
PRICE	£370	£299	£450	£220	£349
SOUND	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆
VALUE	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
CONCLUSIONS	Articulate and coherent model that will charm you with its midrange sophistication.	Well equipped and powerful with a gung-ho sound well suited to modern music.	If you are after quality rather than quantity this is an impressive amp that will serve you well.	A substantial and engaging sound continues NAD's fine tradition for budget amps.	Agile and persuasive amp with a strong feature list and good transparency. Great value.

LAB REPORT

DYNAMIC POWER OUTPUT	AVERAGE	EXCELLENT	GOOD	EXCELLENT	GOOD
SPEAKER LOAD TOLERANCE	AVERAGE	EXCELLENT	GOOD	EXCELLENT	AVERAGE
AUDIBLE DISTORTION	GOOD	GOOD	AVERAGE	GOOD	AVERAGE
NOISE	AVERAGE	GOOD	GOOD	BELOW PAR	BELOW PAR
OVERALL RATING	60%	75%	65%	70%	60%

HINTS AND TIPS

🔧 **Support:** Place your amp on a dedicated equipment support or platform, preferably one that will isolate it from vibration created by the speakers. Avoid placing components on top of an amp – they need plenty of ventilation. If you have to stack components put the amp at the top.

🔌 **Connections:** Use the best interconnect and speaker cables you can afford. Speaker cables can significantly affect the way an amp and speaker interact, see the Directory (p94) for recommendations.

🔥 **Warm up:** All audio electronics perform better when they are warmed up and this is particularly true of amplifiers. If you can't leave it on all the time try to switch on at least 15 minutes before listening.