

Every Picture Tells a Story

Rotel RSP-1098 Controller

In one of life's smaller ironies, nothing, not even an HD plasma display, draws a crowd like a controller with an integral TFT video screen. Even when I was displaying HD programming on my calibrated Sony monitor, every one of my friends kept sneaking up to Rotel's new RSP-1098 for a closer peek. While the RSP-1098 is definitely targeted at the "uptown" crowd—at nearly twice the price of Rotel's own well-received RSP-1066—one thing is indisputably clear. This is no mere 1066-clone with a tiny TV plastered on. It's a whole new ball game!

First, the 1098's architecture is of the plug-in, modular-card variety—vastly superior in facilitating upgrades. Its DSP engine is the new Crystal CS49400 (which represents a large processing boost over the 1066's 49300 series). This single 32-bit audio processor packs 120MIPS processing power and supports all major decoding formats, including Dolby Digital Surround EX and DTS 96kHz/24-bit 5.1-channel. Also on tap are Rotel's proprietary XS 7.1 surround format for creating surround-back signals from 5.1-channel sources, various surround-sound enhancement programs, and even HDCD-decoding for stereo listeners. Crystal has also been tapped for its 192kHz/24-bit D/A converters, which offer 96kHz-to-192kHz upconversion of CD and DVD source material. High-speed switching devices with 200MHz bandwidths are used in the video section. A transcoding feature upsamples composite and S-video to component-video output.

Other significant items include a pure stereo analog bypass, delay for re-syncing audio from a delayed video feed, bass and treble contour settings for each speaker group, and a CINEMA



EQ setting for rolling off excessive treble in aggressive soundtracks. A really cool software touch: The volume control's gain can be customized for 1, 2, or 5dB steps. There's a bounty of assignable video and audio inputs and outputs. Zone 2 connectivity includes four assignable 12-volt triggers.

The front panel of the RSP-1098 is so uncluttered that it looks as if Rotel hired Felix Unger as its consultant. Aside from the stunning 3.5"-by-6" TFT color display, there are only volume and function knobs and a few support buttons. The OSD software is operated by a large rotary/push knob that works better than BMW's vaunted iDrive concept. Overall I preferred the front-panel operation to the backlit remote control.

And Rotel's TFT is more than a pretty face; it also has a practical side. Rather than powering up your main display, you can use the 1098's small screen to adjust audio settings or, picture-in-picture style, to simultaneously monitor another channel or check your satellite program guide. With camera attached, it can serve as a home-security device. However, it should be noted that the TFT displays only composite-video signals. The hitch for users with players or scalars that don't send signals from the component and composite-video outputs simultaneously is that they won't be able to view a DVD's program menu on the RSP-1098's TFT.

Speaker-configuration options are exemplary. Beyond the standard or "master" speaker setup, there's an advanced menu of custom settings for four modes—DOLBY, DTS, STEREO, and MUSIC. For example, for stereo listening I set the front L/Rs to full-range, no center, and no subwoofer. For Dolby Digital and DTS, I high-pass the center and surrounds only and reintroduce the subwoofer at an 80Hz crossover setting. (Bass management has seven crossover points between 40Hz and 200Hz.)

The 7.1 multichannel input is a direct analog bypass only. For the multichannel player that lacks comprehensive bass management, Rotel has LFE REDIRECT, which combines the seven-channel source and routes it through a 100Hz analog low-pass crossover to the subwoofer preamp output—a useful solution for smaller satellite-based systems.


Sound on Display

Every Rotel I've previously reviewed hews closely to a tried-and-true formula: Produce a winning midrange and the rest will follow. In the past this has meant a warmer, darker overall character with a bit of roundness in the bass and a slightly closed-in treble. The RSP-1098 builds upon this sonic framework but adds extension and detail at the frequency extremes, setting it apart from its predecessors.

From the opening grunt of the bass viols on Mahler's Sixth Symphony [Philharmonia, Zander; Telarc], I could hear and feel the orchestra's weight expanding throughout the hall. With both HDCD and SACD sources, the 1098 generated a spaciousness and dimensionality that far exceeded anything I've heard from Rotel, either in a controller or an AVR. While listening to James Taylor sing "Wandering" in PCM stereo (from *Live at the Beacon Theatre*), I noticed finer dynamic gradations than I'd heard before. The images of Taylor and the four backup singers to his immediate left and right were as cleanly defined as I've heard them sound. Ultimately my own two-channel reference bettered the Rotel in treble transparency and extension, but the differences were by no means obvious.

The lack of artifice with which the RSP-1098 reproduced music translat-

ed effortlessly across the Dolby Digital divide. The brassy, glittering soundtrack from *Chicago* was served up with rare dynamic authority and vocal nuance. Roxie and Velma's dialogue was intelligible yet buttery smooth in the sibilance region. Ambience retrieval was richly defined throughout all five channels, producing a genuine sense of immersion. This was first-class performance all the way.

It's true that most controllers offering features and specs like the Rotel generally end up in larger video installations. But in this instance that would be a shame, for the RSP-1098 is also an audiophile-grade preamp that I'd be happy to have in my system even if I never watched another movie again. And that's what I admire most about Rotel. It's a company that doesn't forget its audio roots. Even with the stunning TFT display, Rotel never loses sight of the bigger picture. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Video inputs: Five S-video and composite-video, four component-video

Audio inputs: Five A/V, three audio

Digital inputs: Five coaxial, three optical

Decoding Formats: Dolby Digital EX, DTS-ES (Matrix and Discrete), DTS 96/24, 192kHz/24-bit LPCM, MP3, MPEG Multichannel, HDCD

Dimensions: 17" x 6.5" x 17.1"

Weight: 34.6 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

See Pioneer/JVC review, page 89

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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