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PHILIPS FIDELIO X3: Sweet-sounding old-school open-backs



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 469

December 2020

BUYING GUIDE
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TWIN PEAKS

Rotel's CD11 and A11 Tribute combo serve up the perfect pairing

GROUP TEST

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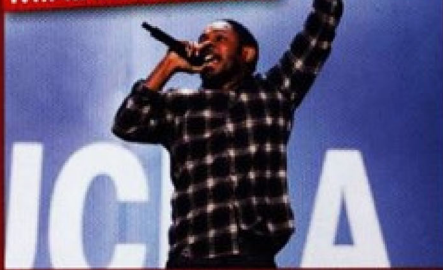
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GUIDING LIGHT



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COOL PLAY



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DECEMBER 2020

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rotel CD11 Tribute
ORIGIN
China
TYPE
CD player
WEIGHT
5.8kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 98 x 314mm
FEATURES
• Texas Instruments 24-bit/192kHz DAC
• Outputs: RCA analogue; coaxial digital
DISTRIBUTOR
Rotel Europe
TELEPHONE
01903 221710
WEBSITE
rotel.com



A fitting Tribute

A well-kept secret is revealed as the last flourish of one of the industry's greats, notes a very surprised **Andrew Everard**

Generally speaking, the hi-fi industry doesn't often go in for much in the way of big surprises: most new product announcements are more evolutionary than revolutionary, more often than not early samples are snuck out to selected outlets and given that there seems to be little awareness of the ability of social media to ensure that even the biggest secrets leak like a sieve – it's surprisingly rare that something truly

comes from out of leftfield when you're least expecting it. Yet that's precisely what Rotel managed to do with its Tribute models – tuned versions of its existing CD 11 CD player and A11 amplifier. They certainly weren't what those of us logging into a Bowers & Wilkins online press conference were anticipating. The meat of the event was the announcement of the 600 Anniversary speaker series, and the most any of us may have been

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rotel A11 Tribute
ORIGIN
China
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
6.85kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 93 x 345mm
FEATURES
• 4 line inputs plus MM phono stage
• Bluetooth with aptX and AAC
• 2x speaker outs, plus pre outs
DISTRIBUTOR
Rotel Europe
TELEPHONE
01903 221710
WEBSITE
rotel.com

expecting was some clarification on the acquisition of the company by Sound United, now finalised but at that time still very much the subject of speculation and the odd 'off-the-record' whisper.

What we heard wasn't quite a Steve Jobs-style "Oh, and one more thing" moment, but it was something of a jaw-dropper. No less than two new Rotel products, tuned by former Marantz Brand Ambassador Ken Ishiwata, who passed away late in 2019, and completed by a team involving his long-term friend and collaborator Kerl-Heinz Fink, hitherto best-known for his speaker designs. Not a word of the project had leaked anywhere, with the result that the appearance of the new products was almost as great a shock as the story behind them.

As Rotel Chief Technology Officer Darren Orth describes it: "I was in the same audiophile circles with Ken over the years, as were the Tachikawa family in Japan – founders and owners of Rotel. There was mutual respect of the talent and market position and a long desire to work together, but the opportunity never

arose. [It] did finally arrive in the late summer of last year when the initial discussions began, with the project becoming a reality in September. All of the Rotel engineering team were delighted at finally having the opportunity to work with Ken."

What we have here, then, are the CD11 Tribute, a £400 CD player, and the £500 A11 Tribute amplifier, commanding price premiums of £70 and £50 respectively over the respected entry-level models on which they were based, and bearing subtle 'Tribute' badging on their fascias. In fact, the two are actually less expensive than the prices at which the CD11/A11 were announced back in March 2019 when the suggested retail points were £430 for the player and £600 for the amp.

Not that there was anything wrong with the originals per se: both were well received, and the A11 went on to win the Best Buy Amplifier title in the 2019-20 EISA Awards, being described as: "an extremely attractive music-first integrated amplifier" and: "an absolute bargain". With extra tuning, that suggests the two are going to be an even better deal: both are products with which Ishiwata was familiar – hardly surprising as they were obvious competition for the Marantz 6000 series models – and also very similar in concept to those entry-level Marantz offerings in that they're relatively frill-free and were designed with performance on a budget firmly in mind.

The CD11 is about as simple as CD players get, especially in an age when multiple digital inputs and even streaming capability are becoming commonplace: it draws on experience gained by Rotel as a maker of CD

players of more than 30 years' standing and uses a 24-bit/192kHz DAC from Texas Instruments to deliver audio to its analogue outputs, with a coaxial digital out also provided.

The changes for the Tribute version are both electronic and mechanical, starting with eight capacitor adjustments in the DAC stage – and one resistor swapped out – while the power supply section saw all nine of its capacitors upgraded. Custom damping material has been added to the top cover to eliminate vibrations and ringing – so the top of the casework now goes 'thud' when tapped, not 'slightly clang', and attention has also been paid to both the mechanical grounding of the player and its electrical ground paths.

It has that very Ken Ishiwata thing: whatever you throw at it sounds special

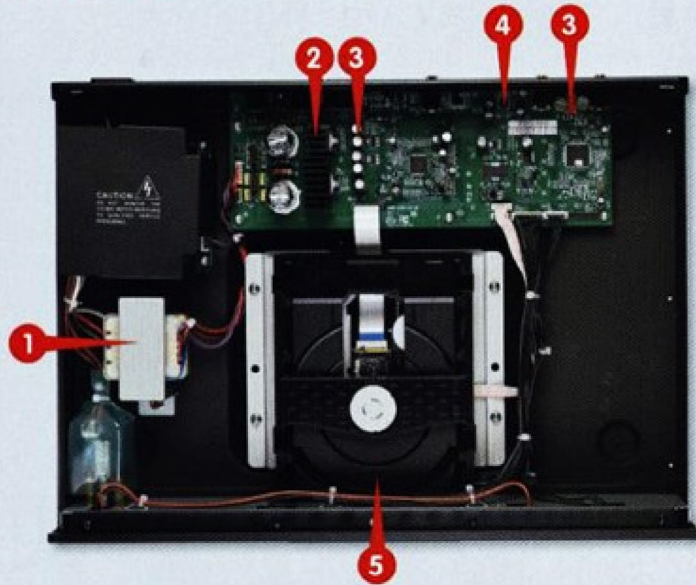
The amplifier is mainly designed as an analogue model, with four line-ins and a decent moving-magnet phono stage, plus switchable outputs for two sets of speakers and pre-out sockets to supply an offboard power amp or even a subwoofer. However, with an eye to convenience it also has a Bluetooth receiver on the back panel, with aptX capability, feeding another 24-bit/192kHz Texas Instruments DAC. Tone controls are offered in the menu system, which can also bypass them, and there are also Rotel Boost and Rotel Max facilities. Rotel says of the former that: "audio performance is 'boosted' and delivers a unique blend of tonal characteristics", while the

IN SIGHT



- 1 RCA analogue outputs (CD11 Tribute)
- 2 Coaxial digital outputs (CD11 Tribute)
- 3 RS232 and Rotel Link outputs (CD11 Tribute)
- 4 Two sets of speaker outputs (A11 Tribute)
- 5 Pre outputs (A11 Tribute)
- 6 4x analogue inputs (A11 Tribute)
- 7 MM phono stage (A11 Tribute)

CD11 TRIBUTE



- 1 Transformer feeds linear PSU with...
- 2 ... regulation for the digital and analogue circuits
- 3 Updated caps in 'Tribute' player
- 4 Burr-Brown/TI PCM5102A DAC
- 5 CD transport mechanism

It doesn't take much to hear what it can do: play *Get Here* from the 1990 Oleta Adams album *Circle Of One* and it's easy to hear the shaping of the voice, the reverberation and the simple instrumentation, with the piano and the 'it can only be Pino Palladino' bass especially vibrant. But what's even more impressive is that, for all this hi-fi goodness, what really gets to the listener is the performance, which is just as it should be.

In essence, what this very affordable little setup has is that very Ken Ishiwata thing: whatever you throw at it just sounds special, from full-orchestral music to driving rock – I have an absolute blast playing Rory Gallagher's 1977 *Check Shirt Wizard* live recordings and the recent Queen/

There is no sense that the system is hardening up or losing its focus

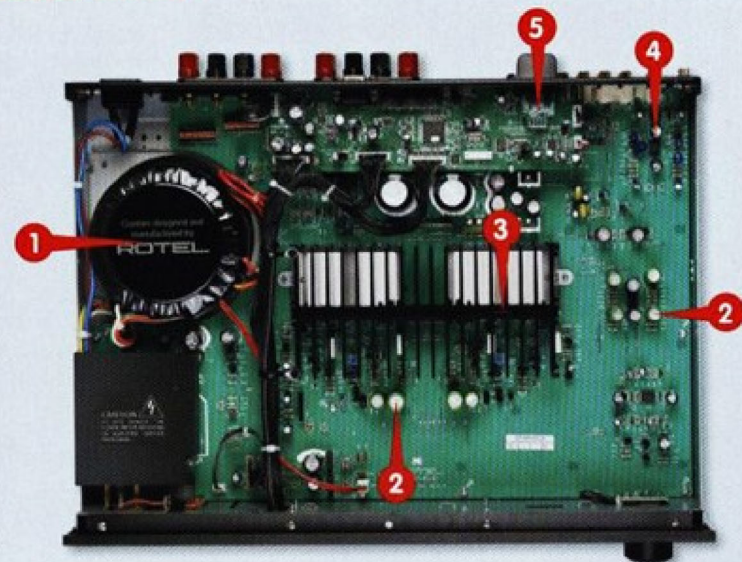
Adam Lambert *Live Around The World* set is full of appropriate pomp and swagger, especially the recreation of the Live Aid set from the Fire Fight benefit earlier this year. There's weight, there's warmth and there's richness, but there's also air and space, and a sense that the music's being given room to breathe. That enables this combination to draw the listener into what's being played as well as covering up any deficiencies it may have when compared with much bigger – and more expensive – setups.

Nor do you need to limit the listening to audiophile-approved

Marantz CD-63 Mk2 KI-Signature, which caused a sensation back in 1996?

The answer is an entirely unequivocal yes: in fact, I have to hand an original KI-Signature player – one of the first 500 'scroll badge' models – and comparing this with the CD11 Tribute, it isn't hard to hear the same thinking at work. True, the older machine has its foibles after almost a quarter-century of use – its drawer shrieks open and closed, and just occasionally it fails to read a disc – but what's clear is that both it and the new Rotel have that same direct communication of what's being played, and that the A11 Tribute amplifier does an excellent job of delivering all of that to the speaker.

A11 TRIBUTE



- 1 Custom Rotel-wound PSU transformer
- 2 Updated caps in 'Tribute' amplifier
- 3 Power amplifier mounted on central heatsink
- 4 MM phono stage
- 5 Bluetooth module

Sound quality

Setting up the CD11 and A11 Tribute models with a pair of Focal's really rather good little Chora 806 bookshelf speakers (HFC 465) – the likes of the Bowers & Wilkins 606 S2 Anniversary Edition model is also a good choice – there is a degree of anticipation. Can these simple, slimline, lightweight components (the amp weighs 6.85kg and the player 5.8kg, with each standing less than 10cm tall) really deliver the kind of musical involvement that's been the hallmark of Ishiwata-tuned products since the original



LOOKS FAMILIAR

Available in either black or silver, just like the original CD11 and A11, the Tribute models are based on a long-developed entry-level range from Rotel, known as the 14 Series after its lineup-topping CD14/A14. The most affordable model in the range of amps is actually the A10, which is very much an old-school design, lacking even a remote control but offering 40W per channel for around £300. All models used Rotel's balanced design concept, which has nothing to do with XLR

connections, but instead combines parts selection, circuit topology and critical evaluation in a quest for performance rather than more features. Look under the lids of the Tribute models and – apart from the extra damping materials – you'll be hard-pressed to spot the differences from the originals: they're all about the use of an even more discerning selection of components, and their application in sound-critical areas of the circuitry.

recordings: *Roadhouse Blues*, from the recently remastered *Morrison Hotel* by The Doors rockets out of the speakers with a suitably rough, dirty edge, but with great character to the performances. And the duo isn't fazed by the demands of big orchestral/choral works, as I discover playing the dramatic recent Alpha recording of Haydn's *The Creation*, packed as it is with information. Even with the outburst of "Let there be light" at the opening, there is no sense that the system is hardening up or losing its focus in any way. Yes, some may

suggest that 'only' 50W per channel isn't really enough, but the ability of this combination to keep it clean even when pushing hard belies that view.

Conclusion

If you're in the market for an affordable CD player and amplifier with more than a sniff of star quality, the Tribute pairing comes firmly recommended – it really is rather special and puts up very strong competition for the established favourites in this entry-level sector of the hi-fi separates arena ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: CD11 TRIBUTE

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Simple, refined and direct sound
DISLIKE: Not for those that want a 'do-it-all' disc player
WE SAY: CD replay, and nothing but – the frill-free approach really pays off here

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: A11 TRIBUTE

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: A good mix of directness and convenience
DISLIKE: A USB digital input would make it more flexible
WE SAY: A persuasive affordable amp made even better

HOW IT COMPARES

Obvious rivals come from the Sound United stable, in the form of the Marantz CD6007/PM6007, both of which have been refined over many years, and can trace their roots back to the CD63KI and PM66KI of a couple of decades ago. Meanwhile, Denon matches the pricing here with its DCD-PMA-800NE models, and undercuts it with the 600NE pairing.

Q&A

Karl-Heinz Fink
 Speaker designer and consultant



HFC: How far back does your association with Ken go?

KHF: We met the first time at the High-End show in Frankfurt 30 years ago. We became really good friends and shared hobbies like photography and watches. We travelled a lot together and Ken visited me in Essen as often as he could. It must have been a funny picture – the elegantly dressed star of our industry and the permanently under dressed crazy German. But we both enjoyed it.

Ken was working with you, and doing FinkTeam demonstrations until quite close to his death – were there plans for him to get more involved?

Ken was a mentor and a teacher for me and, after he was forced to leave D&M, I was very happy that he wanted to join us. We had plans to co-operate on several products – not only speakers. Rotel was just the start.

When did the Rotel tuning project begin, and what were the aims?

It started around a year ago and we wanted to do something affordable first. Ken was always keen to optimise budget gear to get a great sound from something not very expensive. In a way, it's more difficult than doing expensive stuff. He liked that.

How easy was it to decide to continue and complete the project?

I spoke with Jun and Miki – Ken's son and daughter – after his funeral, and everybody involved wanted to finalise the project as a tribute to the great man Ken was. Both of his children have been very proud to see it happen.

What's next for you?

The FinkTeam KIM is just beginning to appear and the next big speaker should be the WM5, a construction that goes back to Ken's influence some years ago. But before that happens, new Epos speakers will arrive first. [Fink bought the Epos brand at the beginning of 2020].