

The Sensible Sound

Manufacturer: Rotel, 54 Concord St., North Reading, MA 01864; 978/664-3820; www.rotel.com

Price: \$999

Source: Manufacturer loan

Reviewer: Karl W. Nehring

Rotel RB-991 Power Amplifier

My thoughts about the Rotel RB-991 power amplifier were made abundantly clear several issues ago when I not only included it in the Sensible Choice list of recommended amplifiers but designated it a "Sensible Standard." Needless to say, the RB-991 will also be included in this issue's Sensible Choice recommendations for amplifiers, and only our decision to discontinue the practice of designating certain components as Sensible Standards keeps this excellent performer from being so singled out once again. The RB-991 is a basic two-channel power amplifier rated at 200 watts per channel into 8 ohms, 300 watts into 4 ohms. Starting from the dual secondary windings in the large (1000 vA) toroidal power transformer, the RB-991 is of dual-mono design, with each channel having its own rectifiers and power supply capacitors. The RB-991 measures in at 17.375"W x 4.75"H x 14.375"D, weighs in at a tick more than 34 pounds, and is finished in standard flat black. The bottom of the unit sports not the expected four feet, but five -- the expected foot near each corner of the chassis plus a fifth foot in the center of the chassis, presumably to help bear the weight of the hefty power transformer as well as to help dampen any mechanical vibration that the transformer might induce.

Perhaps the most striking visual feature of the amplifier, however, is the way in which the heat sinks are integrated into the front of the chassis. That's right -the heat sinks are part of the front panel. The center of the front panel contains a narrow flat faceplate that houses the on/ off button and two LEDs, one to indicate that the power is turned on and the other, which stays illuminated for several seconds after turn-on, indicates that the amplifier is in Protection Mode (if this LED is illuminated, power output is disengaged). To the left and right of this center panel are the heatsink arrays. Although my description might sound clumsy, prospective purchasers should rest assured that the aesthetic effect is strikingly handsome.

A nice benefit from having the heatsinks in the front of the unit is that the rear panel is left accessible and unencumbered. There are input jacks for both balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA) connectors, a switch to choose between balanced and unbalanced operation, and a pair of 5-way binding posts for each channel. Everything is easy to get to, making the RB-991 a snap to plug into a system.

And plug it into my system I did. The RB-991 was fed its input signal from an AVA FETValve EC preamplifier and fed its power output through a pair of Kimber 4VS speaker cables to a pair of Legacy Focus loudspeakers. (The amp was also used to power Legacy Studio, Coincident Speaker Technology Triumph, and Platinum Audio Studio One loudspeakers during its time in my system, but most of the serious listening was done with the Focus speakers). The program sources were the Dynaco CDV-Pro and AMC CD8 CD players. My "reference" power amplifier, the AVA FET-Valve 550hc, was swapped into the system from time to time over the period of audition.

The performance of this amplifier was exemplary. Never while using it did I ever detect even the slightest diminution of sound quality compared to my usual amplifier, which is considerably more expensive than the RB-991. If anything, there were times when I thought the RB-991 might offer slightly more emphatic bass reproduction than the 550hc, but when I tried to zero in any such sonic difference, careful listening to both amplifiers satisfied me that the differences were most likely imaginary and in any event inconsequential. I have no doubt that careful double-blind listening tests between the RB-991 and the AVA would have led to a result of no difference noted, which would certainly make the RB-991 a good value, as the AVA is an excellent performer indeed.

Other factors that make the RB-991 a desirable power amplifier are its healthy current capability (10 large power output transistors per channel), quiet operation (both electrically and mechanically), adequate power output, and cool operating temperature. There is an extensive and established dealer network selling and servicing Rotel products, meaning that this is a product that will be easily accessible to the majority of audiophiles, no matter where they might reside, and the RB-991 carries a five-year warranty. For those audiophiles looking for a clean, powerful, and reliable two-channel power amplifier of exceptional sonic capability, I recommend the Rotel RB-991 with vigorous enthusiasm. This is truly a nice product.

- **KWN**