

Sensible Sound
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gies have identified the basic issues and a few very expensive masterpiece designs offer breakthrough performance. Mature technologies allow that breakthrough performance to filter down to the affordable level.

CD is a mature technology and the Rotel RCD-971 is that breakthrough affordable CD player.

The Rotel RCD-971's virtues start right at the faceplate with a handsome design, functional layout and solid feel. I miss the full number pad on the faceplate, which went out of style a few years ago, but at least Rotel has slimmed down the cabinet (only 2 7/8 in. high) to the room needed for the display and controls. The disc drawer is a typical plastic job, but thankfully its front edge is flush to the main assembly so there's little risk of scratching a disc. The display is white fluorescent with crisp letters (my favorite), and it's more intuitive than most (for example, it says "OPEN" when the drawer is open and "NO disc" when it's empty, as opposed to the Marantz CD-67SE which says "disc" [sic] in both conditions). Controls are what you'd expect these days, with the exception of a red "HDCD" indicator that signals the presence of this bonus feature.

The back plane is a model of simplicity: hardwired power cord, coax digital out, and a pair of analog output jacks. All the jacks are gold plated, but this is neither mid-fi (no variable outputs with crappy volume controls) nor tweak heaven (no multiple digital outs or detachable power cord)—just good solid low-end high end, my favorite stomping ground. Rotel suggests that you use "high quality interconnect cables" and is nice enough to supply some (nothing esoteric, but heavy-gauge cable labeled "OFC").

The remote control is a little disappointing: 26 tiny identical buttons in a tight 3 x 9 grid (don't impugn my math—there's one empty space). Minimal color coding makes it usable in low light, but this is not an eyes-closed operation. Big brother RCD-991 has a much nicer remote, which I would have preferred, but this one is quite small, so maybe others will consider it a good trade-off.

Under the hood the RCD-971 is even more impressive. Rotel's claims start with the power supply ("multi-segmented" with a large toroidal transformer with separate windings for the digital and analog stages). The digital and interstage data transfer circuits were designed to minimize jitter, and the analog stage was designed to maintain precise interchannel timing

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Rotel RCD-971 CD Player

Manufacturer: Rotel of America, 54 Concord St., North Reading, MA 01864; 800/370-3741

Price: \$699

Source: Manufacturer loan

Reviewer: Gregory Koster

New technologies offer great potential, but the performance of the early products tends to vary in unpredictable ways. Maturing technolo-



Rotel RCD-971 CD Player

relationships. That's all great stuff, but I can't tell if it's smoke or even if it's there (although the fact that Rotel centers its claims on items like these, instead of bells and whistles, is reassuring). What I can evaluate is the digital chip spec: dual Burr-Brown PCM63 20-bit Digital to Analog Converters (DACs), 8x oversampling Digital Filter, and the Pacific Microsonics HDCD Decoder are the right stuff for superior sound as CD technology enters the 21st Century.

The other thing I can evaluate is the sound, but the RCD-971 is so good that I'm almost left speechless. On the other hand, since they pay me by the word, let's take a stab at it.

The question that's been dogging my CD player reviews is whether 1-bit DACs are inherently inferior to multi-bit units, or whether I've just been unlucky (or hearing things). The four 1-bit units I've auditioned since buying Sony's last multi-bit player have all sounded tipped-up in the treble. There were always other variables that precluded a conclusion that it was the 1-bit DACs, and with multi-bit technology increasingly limited to super-high-end manufacturers such as Krell and Linn I was afraid that I'd never get to say for sure. That's why the Rotel RCD-971 is such a perfect test for me: it measures exactly the same on pink noise as the Marantz CD-67SE, one of our top recommendations and a 1-bit player. So let's duke it out head to head.

I went through my usual listening suite, starting with the Dvorak. The Rotel had a solid bass fiddle foundation, a very pleasant sound through the cool-sounding NHT Super One/SW2Pi subwoofer combination, good balance among the four string choirs, realistic (not over-emphasized) violin rosin bite—overall very

natural and very involving. The Marantz, by contrast, made the violins sound screechy and too prominent, and had very little bass—for a thin, tipped-up sound.

The other selections all generated comments similar to the above: on a wide variety of musical styles, instrumental groups and recording techniques, the Rotel RCD-971 always sounded natural, balanced, dynamic and involving, while the Marantz always sounded tipped-up in the treble, deficient in the bass, and thin across the spread. The differences were subtle—far smaller than differences between speakers and even smaller than those between the Marantz and my old Sony—but they were audible and consistent. Only on the Reference Recordings Liszt did the Marantz produce a more interesting sound picture, with a piano whose high notes had overtones all the way out to Mars—but other RR recordings tell me that Prof. Johnson aims for the slightly rolled-off high end I heard on the Rotel.

So the clear and consistent result was that the Rotel RCD-971 produces exactly the kind of mature-technology sound that I'd hoped for: faithful to the original without indulging in the "ruthless exposition of faults" that makes so much high-end gear no fun with real music.

But wait, there's more! There's HDCD. I was afraid this would be the fly in the ointment, since HDCD sounds like another tweak technology. It requires the use of the proprietary Pacific Microsonics decoder chip, which might even ruin regular CD playback since it's in the circuit at all times—but no, the above results put that fear to rest. So it was with mixed emotions that I popped in *Tutti!*, the soundtrack from "Car 54 Where Are You?"—no, I mean the "Prof. Johnson 24-bit HDCD recording *Orchestral Sam-*

pler (RR-906CD). Track 1 is Rimsky-Korsakov's *Dance of the Tumblers*, played by Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra. WOW! This is the most lifelike orchestral recording I've ever heard. Through the Rotel, that is. On the Marantz, without HDCD decoding, everything was veiled and less dynamic. Track 10, Malcolm Arnold's *The Padstow Lifeboat* by Jerry Junkin and the Dallas Wind Symphony, produced the same reaction.

Even the old *HDCD Sampler* CD (RR-S3CD), which I've never been able to use before, showed more immediacy with the Rotel's HDCD decoding than the Marantz's plain vanilla. A jazz cut on that CD even produced some detailed differences as HDCD and the players' basic personalities combined: the drummer's brush work sounded "real" on the Rotel but was unnaturally smeared on the Marantz, while the tenor sax was "in the room" on the Rotel and clearly a recording on the Marantz.

A final test ran both players (and the old Sony) through the *CD-Check* test CD (www.digital-recordings.com). The Sony showed its age, passing only track 1 (the "minimum SR/EC criteria" below which you need a service call). The Marantz passed track 1, failed track 2 ("average") and almost passed track 3 (although the instructions say that almost doesn't count). The Rotel sailed through tracks 1 through 3 ("good").

Conclusion: The Rotel RCD-971 is the best CD player I've ever heard. It plays regular CDs flawlessly and with great musicality, and HDCD adds immediacy and life that I didn't think was possible. Best of all, the price for this top-drawer performance is no longer in the stratosphere but down at the high end of the midrange. I'm sold, and I think that one listen is all it will take for anybody. Highly recommended.

—GK