



Rotel's flagship is a stunner

★★★★★

Rotel RCD-991

CD player £750

For Fantastic clarity; wonderful rich tones; just about everything else

Against Nothing

Verdict One of the best CD players

under £1000, this player has got the lot

Surprised to see a Rotel CD player at this level of the market? Don't be – it's not the first time: Rotel previously made the RCD-990 – a limited-edition model sold mainly in the US – based on components cannibalised from its high-end Michi range of products. It sold so well that the company has decided to introduce the RCD-991, which at £750 is its first full-production CD player at this price.

This is an imposing machine, styled in the usual understated manner. The chunky casework has a centre-mounted drawer sitting below a clear display, which along with the usual information also tells you which dither setting has been selected (see panel).

Under the bonnet it's obvious a lot of thought has gone into the components surrounding the Sony-built transport. The five-segment power

supply's transformer is isolated from the main circuitboard and uses a pair of UK-made sli-foil capacitors, while elsewhere a pair of Burr-Brown 20-bit DACs do the number-crunching. These and the Pacific Microsonics HDCD digital filter are surrounded by good quality capacitors from Nichicon and Rubicon. Rear connection options are first rate, too, the Rotel having optical and coaxial digital outs and balanced and unbalanced outputs.

As a result, the first problem was to determine which of these connection methods works best with the '991 wired up to our Krell reference system. Well, we can report that there's nothing wrong with the unbalanced outputs, and the player would have got the same star-rating listened to either way, but the balanced connections give a more musical sound.

As soon as the '991 starts playing it's obvious you're in for a treat. Its sound is big and open, drawing the listener into whatever's played on it. And there's certainly no lack of detail or 'hi-fi' qualities here: playing Will Oldham's *I See A Darkness* set it's impossible not to be impressed with the levels of depth and detail. Vocals are top-notch and the singer's mournful musings are wonderfully textured, every inflection, breath and subtle change of mood or timing being conveyed superbly.

Tonally the Rotel is neutral, although not in a bland way – it just brings out the best in whatever is played on it: from its weighty and punchy bass to its sweet and detailed treble the '991 does the business. Playing the techno/rock hybrid of Add N To (X) the '991 manages to keep pace with the pumping bass lines, while never sounding harsh or brittle even with the most demanding screeches or synth squeals.

With large-scale classical works the Rotel is equally impressive, replaying Holst's *The Planets* with suitable degrees of grandeur and depth: string sections really sing out at you, while the dramatic high points are replayed with both real drama and an impressive dynamic range.

The Rotel RCD-991 is one of the most impressive sub-£1000 CD players we've ever encountered. Solid design principles are rewarded with a coherent and detailed sound, which will enthrall and thrill, whatever the music you play on it.

ALL OF A DITHER

You can adjust the level of dither on the '991 to suit your own preferences, using a button on the player's fascia. The dither level is shown on the display, and ranges from 'nothing' to '7'. Dither is high-frequency noise added to the audio signal in a bid to reduce quantization errors and so improve resolution. As a by-product, however, the audible noise floor is also raised.

We found that the RCD-991 worked best with a dither setting of around two or three, where zero is no dither and six the highest. At a low setting, detail and insight improved, but any higher and background noise intruded. Level seven introduces 'unweighted dither', which adds low-level white noise and gives an airy but less well-balanced presentation.

