

# Rotel RDV-1080 DVD-A player and RSP-976 AV processor

Here's a promising DVD-Audio player, plus the pre-amp/processor you need to feed it



**PRICE:** £1500/£900

**SUPPLIER:** Gamepath Ltd

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**Musing aloud on** a flight to the Frankfurt Show, while seated next to Rob Sinclair of Rotel — 'I'm finally going to get to grips with DVD-Audio'. Rob says, 'Why not try ours?' Rotel has been almost coy about the presence of a seriously good DVD-A player in its range, leaving it to the likes of Matsushita and Pioneer to make all the noises. Pity: the RDV-1080 deserves to be regarded as much more than a mere camp follower.

DVD-Audio being the colossal screw-up we know it to be, all was not as clear-cut as I'd hoped as far as myself being 'DVD-A-ready'. Although armed with a dozen discs from Warner, DTS, Chesky and others, and although I had a 5.1 channel system just waiting for another source, I use a 'pre-DVD-A' processor — one lacking the 5.1 analogue inputs to accept the signals from DVD-A. This, as you know, is the result of the music industry's unbridled paranoia, a feeble attempt at foiling the pirates by eliminating the presence of a digital output. What they've clearly not acknowledged is that DVD-Audio will never, ever, ever be a popular format, today's young'uns having already decided that they're never gonna pay for software if they can help it, so all the DVD-A gang has done is hamstringing the format for those who don't want to get rid of nor upgrade their

18-month-old Lexicons and TAGs and the like.

Which is also how I ended up with the Rotel RSP-976 surround-sound processor pre-amp.

Leaving aside DVD-A for a moment, the RDV-1080 is a seriously well-endowed DVD video player which looks the part of a £1500 unit. Given that no format has ever taunted us with the Law of Diminishing Returns in the way that DVD does — you can get stunning results from sub-£300 machines — a DVD player even into the low four figures has to have *something* special if you're to be seduced away from the supermarket specials. Rotel has equipped the RDV-1080 with conversion rates up to 24-bit/192kHz, a tweaked analogue section boasting 'designer' components, 10-bit video D/A conversion and — as if to torment me — component video and NTSC-only progressive scan. Alas, I have a UK-made monitor, so I cannot testify to their superiority. Suffice it to say, the visual side of the RDV-1080 was superb, up there with the Denon DVD-5000, and damned close to the Theta DaViD.

Cleanly styled and bearing the nifty handles found on all of the 10-Series models, the 430 x 100 x 305mm (whd) RDV-1080 is finished in satin black, with its display and tray centrally mounted. On the left are the power-on button, display on/off button plus LED, IR receptor and a blue light which indicates the playing of a DVD-A disc. The display is comprehensive, indicating the usual time/track info as well as an alphabet-soup litany of formats: DTS, MLP, MPEG, Dolby, *ad nauseam*. To the right are the minimum of transport controls and a row of lights indicating

progressive scan and decoding rates of 44.1/48kHz, 88.2/96kHz and 175.4/192kHz. A chart in the owner's manual tells you which light should come on with which type of disc; suffice it to say, I had no discs — from CDs to DVD-As — which tricked it.

As a CD player, let alone an all-bells-and-whistles DVD player, the RDV-1080 has much to recommend it; those who despise multi-channel, DVD, etc, can think of the non-CD elements as stuff which happened to come free that you just don't use, like self-timers on cameras, or the fish-hook remover on a Swiss Army knife. As a CD player, it's a gem, with a smooth, warm sound which borders on the tubular. With the player feeding the RSP-976 pre-amp, driving Theta's Intrepid into Martin Logan Ascents, nothing indicated that there were three unused channels in the room.

Rotel has mastered the easy-on-the-ears sound beloved of its affordable integrated amps and applied it to dearer separates, adding more detail and greater finesse. Remember: this front end was played via an affordable pre-amp into close to ten grand's worth of Yankee audiophilia, and it more than held its own. With a cluster of delicately-recorded JVC XRCs, including the magnificent Tony Bennett/Bill Evans album, the system produced all of the air and space with ease, while handling transients and decay in a decidedly un-digital manner. And the way it reproduced Bennett's voice! I heard again why my old man thought Tony could stomp Sinatra.

Moving to DVD video, the RDV-1080 proved a real charmer, though I missed the Pioneer's on-



➤ Rotel's RSP-976 has the necessary analogue inputs to take the player's DVD-A output



screen display superimposed over the picture. The Rotel drops the main visuals down to a window, with the display taking up three-quarters of the screen and proving to be about as manoeuvrable as a kayak in a vat of Heinz beans. Whatever, the picture was clear, if not as knife-edge sharp as the assorted Pioneers', colours were lifelike and blacks were pure jet. No annoying artefacts emerged, but it was interesting to note that the Rotel has the same hard time with the flames on the remastered *Die Hards* (which *Die Hard?* you ask? Er, doh) noted on other players, with some blurring. Maybe some new discs are too much for the players? Whatever, I've been using it for two months and will hate to see it go.

And the vexing question of DVD-Audio: I tried a dozen discs — none, to my knowledge using Verance watermarking bar Steely Dan — and reached the rather depressing conclusion that DVD-A isn't so bad after all. I wanted it to suck, to go away. But we must be clear about something: quality sound and multi-channel are not mutually exclusive. There are two-channel recordings which sound awful, and multi-channel recordings which sound wonderful but annoy because the producers stick instruments all over the place. My remarks below refer to sound quality, not instrument placement

Steely Dan's *Two Against Nature* sounded magnificent, as rich and involving as the CD and with less grain and more warmth. Christy Barron's *Steppin'* on Chesky, though, may be a better intro for doubters, because the rear channels are never used to distraction; I gather that Chesky isn't happy with this disc, but I thought it was impressively lifelike, especially the vocal textures and the freedom from sibilance. But there's a shock in store, one which I have inflicted on recent visitors to *Chez Kessler*.

On DTS's Bach and Tchaikovsky discs, which allow you to hear both DVD-A 5.1 and DTS 5.1, every single person who heard the comparison preferred DTS, including my piano/recorder-playing 11-year-old, who has better hearing and fewer prejudices than most of us. It wasn't subtle: it was embarrassing. The Rotel system showed this repeatedly (and, yes, it was the same with DTS vs Dolby Digital movie DVDs),

which begs that old question again: who needs DVD-A when we already have DTS? Alas, DTS could have ended these format wars two years ago, but it was not meant to be...

Whatever, this is not Rotel's problem — Rotel is a manufacturer dealing with reality, and that means coping with as many formats as possible. And it has dealt with DVD-Audio deftly enough to let me hear that the format doesn't stink as badly as it might have. As a player, the RDV-1080 serves all my needs bar one: 'Magari!!!' if only it played SACDs, too. Far be it for me to tell anyone to adopt a new format at this stage. But if you want a sublime DVD-video player and a way-better-than-average CD player, put this one on your list. And just look at the DVD-A portion through the same eyes with which I regard my old Nakamichi 400-Series FM tuner: it has an FM Dolby button...

## ROTEL RSP-976

In a way, it's unfair that I should discuss the £900 Rotel RSP-976 Surround Sound Preamplifier in the context of my carefully-honed-over-the-years AV system. After all, I'm a sworn Lexicon lover, who worships the MC-10's utter flexibility and what are surely the most sensible, user-friendly and intuitive ergonomics in all of home theatre-dom. And its remote is a model of economy: minimal buttons and maximum usefulness. But the Lexicon costs as much as a decently-equipped FIAT Punto, while the Rotel is almost a giveaway in comparison.

For the money, you do get a lot, including five digital inputs, eight analogue inputs and five video inputs providing a mix of S-video, component and component. I simply cannot imagine any normal user running out of sources accommodation — unless you have a multi-channel SACD player too. But what the Rotel also has are one major strength and one major flaw. The strength is its performance, with superb sound quality in keeping with the brand's tradition of tailoring its sound to audiophile ears, and its video switching and signal paths gave me no grounds for complaint. Even the most asshole-ish anti-AV hater would be hard-pressed to criticise its two-channel sonics, especially at its sub-£1000 price point. The

sound is sweet, open and remarkably free of digital nasties, provided you stay away from the 'ambient' modes and stick to stereo, Dolby Digital, Dolby Pro Logic or DTS

The flaw? Both this unit and the RDV-1080 DVD-A player appear to have been designed by either sadists or computer geeks who don't actually use the AV hardware they create; neither do they have any idea what real-world users might want. Things which I had taken for granted, such as easy (multi-channel) balance setting on-the-fly, swift access to test tones, straightforward input set-up and other parameters which one might wish to change from time to time required a mind-set more akin to configuring Microsoft Excel from scratch. No amount of repeated readings of the owner's manual provided shortcuts. Call me thick, but I couldn't even find a way for the RDV-1080 to show remaining time rather than elapsed.

Then I kept telling myself: 'this thing costs under a grand, so stop bitching.' Rotel's Sinclair said to me, bearing the look of a kicked puppy, 'Maybe you'll get used to it, as you did with the Lexicon.' Sorry, Rob: the Lexicon was so user-friendly that I didn't need the owner's manual. With the Rotel, I kept the guide by the remote.

**WORDS** KEN KESSLER

### TECHNOLOGY

Around the back, the player provides coaxial and TosLink optical digital outputs for two-channel and DVD-Video (DTS and Dolby Digital 5.1) signals, six analogue outputs for the DVD-Audio 5.1 signals, video outputs for component, composite and S-video, a PAL/NTSC switch and external remote sockets. Also supplied is a daft remote — a non-illuminated, hard-to-use piece of crap best left in the box and replaced with a sensible universal device, like Rotel's own RR-1090 learning remote.

### KEY FEATURES

- No-fuss DVD-Audio capability
- Smooth, almost tube-like sound
- Plenty of bells and whistles