

# SOUND + VISION

The Audio + Video Authority



PSB HEADPHONES



PRO-JECT TURNTABLE

## EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS



WE CHOOSE THE 23 BEST PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR



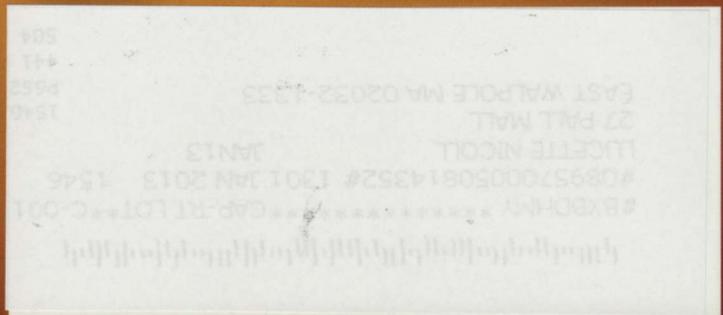
BOWERS & WILKINS SPEAKERS



PANASONIC 3D PLASMA HDTV

### TESTED

Sony 3D LCD HDTV • Sonus Faber Speakers  
Rotel Preamp/Processor • Yamaha A/V Receiver  
Logitech Harmony Touch Remote



# Rotel

RSP-1572 SURROUND SOUND PREAMP/PROCESSOR

\$2,199 BY DANIEL KUMIN

*A purist pre-pro for those who like their A/V with no frills.*



**AS HOME THEATER HAS BECOME** ever more digitally sophisticated, A/V separate components, specifically preamp-processors, have become thinner on the ground as many smaller, separates-oriented manufacturers drop away. While A/V receivers today steal much of the limelight (and dollars), separates soldier on, mostly from the major-brand makers, each of which offers a flag-

ship pre-pro. So too do a handful of low-volume, high-end makers offering very expensive models.

Rotel is one of a very few to occupy the middle ground with a separates line dedicated to both performance and value, and priced for people who might still have to think about it. The RSP-1572, the firm's most recent pre-pro, is the company's marquee A/V component.

## SETUP

Unboxing the RSP-1572 is a satisfying experience, thanks to classy packaging materials and the reassuring heft of the component itself. I placed the unit atop my rack, plugged in my HDMI cables from sources and TV, and hooked up RCA interconnects to my 7 x 150-watt power amplifier and SVS PC 12-Plus subwoofer. The Rotel has lots of 3D-ready version 1.4 HDMI inputs — six — and dual HDMI outputs. It also provides no fewer than 10 preamp outputs: the usual 7.1, plus “Center 2” and “Subwoofer 2” jacks, both of which simply parallel their primaries.

Rotel does not include any automatic setup, calibration, or equalization features, so setup is purely a manual procedure. A simple textual onscreen menu guides the process, which was straightforward and accurate, though there are quite a few options, including “CB/VH” outputs that can be configured either for front-height speakers (for Dolby PLIIz playback) or for center-back use in a 6/7.1-channel layout. I went with the front-height option. The RSP-1572 also has an “Advanced” setup page where you can assign a different speaker-crossover arrangement for each speaker/pair for Dolby, DTS, and stereo signals — an excellent refinement.

## PERFORMANCE

I don't have a great deal to say about the RSP-1572's intrinsic sound quality, because it was essentially transparent — a Very Good Thing, and in fact the highest praise for any audio component. Stereo music sounded as good as the source material. In the case of a high-rez title like Donald Fagen's *Morph the Cat* (from a 96/24 HDtracks.com download), this was superb. As Fagen has done for some 30 years now, he pretty much sets the standard for squeaky-clean studio production on *Morph the Cat*, and the Rotel presented these meticulously arranged and obsessively recorded tracks in all their glory. A cut like “Mary Shut the Garden Door” was stereo audio at its best: transparent and deep, with pronounced details like delicate cymbal attacks, and a woody bass-strings “bite” that I only hear from properly reproduced high-rez files.

Irritatingly, however, the Rotel RSP-1572's HDMI-format digital-audio output muted on even the briefest no-signal condition, and then required a half-second or so to unmute. The result: Nearly all CDs, and even my streaming music, were shorn of the opening half-second or so of almost every track, even when allowed simply to play through — a bit of a deal-breaker in my estimation. (This applied only to signals arriving via HDMI; both optical and coaxial digital inputs did not exhibit the cutoff.) Rotel told me it's aware of the syndrome, and the solution it proposes to concerned owners is to set up a second input from their disc player (or other source), via optical or coaxial instead of HDMI for music listening. Sensible enough, I suppose, but it also reintroduces one bit of

## KEY FEATURES

- +7.1-channel preamp output (with dual center and sub outs)
- +6 HDMI v1.4 inputs, 2 outputs
- +Transcodes component and composite video to HDMI
- +Upconverts lower-rez analog video up to 1080p format over HDMI
- +Decodes Dolby TrueHD, DTS-HD Master Audio; includes Dolby IIx/z surround, 4 proprietary music-DSP modes
- +10-band parametric EQ by individual channel
- +Textual onscreen setup menus
- +Assignable zones 2-4 (composite video/stereo audio)
- +USB-storage, iPod, and Bluetooth audio (using supplied dongle) playback via front-panel USB port
- +Dedicated remote control
- +IR in/out (4/6), 12-v trigger (6), RS-232 serial connection (via RJ-45 port)

Dimensions + Weight  
17 x 5.6 x 13.5 in; 21.4 lb



## VERDICT

The RSP-1572 offers good basic A/V performance, but suffers from a few glitches and ergonomic issues.

## + PLUS

- Transparent sound quality with stereo music
- Can set crossovers independently for various signal formats

## - MINUS

- Briefly mutes music tracks over HDMI
- Mediocre remote

complication that HDMI was supposed to eliminate.

The Rotel's surround-music options include, a bit oddly, onboard decoding for high-rez PCM signals delivered by the nearly defunct DVD-Audio format, but not for the still-kicking, if admittedly somewhat moribund, SACD one. Listening to multichannel SACDs requires that you set up your player to first decode the DSD bitstream and convert it to PCM, or to use a multicable analog connection.

The RSP-1572 does incorporate Dolby PLIIz, whose “height” dimension, though conceived for film sound, can do some interesting things for surround-music reproduction. The most valuable, to my ear, is to contribute a greater sense of scale on large-hall recordings. The thrilling way that hall sound “bloomed” on the hammer blows in the “Death of Tybalt” scene from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* (from an old Telarc CD) was literally hair-raising when heard with PLIIz engaged.

Less thrilling were Rotel's four proprietary DSP-surround modes. Named, with unusual restraint, DSP-1 through -4, these simulate progressively “larger” spaces but were without exception so clangorous and boingy-sounding as to be utterly useless. Rotel would have done better to leave them off.

Results with high-rez movie soundtracks were pretty spectacular. Both the music layer and the surround-intensive effects in the DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack of the *Planet of the Apes* (the 2001, Marky Mark edition) Blu-ray are first-rate, and the

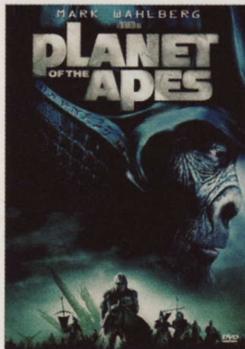
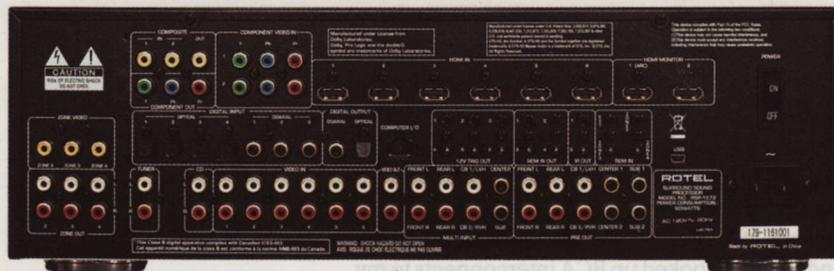
Rotel delivered both with full force. Scenes like the pod crash in Chapter 4 ripped through the viewing area with complete clarity and real impact.

The Rotel includes a "Cinema EQ" setting (essentially, a THX Re-EQ-like treble down-tilt) that can be invoked by input on the setup menu but not directly via the remote. This is a feature I applaud, though *Planet* was the rare disc that I found nicely balanced without it.

The RSP-1572 also has a 10-band fully parametric equalizer that can be set to operate either globally or individually by speaker channel — a tweaker's delight. This one can be accessed directly from the remote, via a small pop-up display, to modify frequency and gain.

The Rotel can play audio from a USB storage device jacked into the front-panel port, and a supplied Bluetooth dongle enables wireless audio streaming to the same destination. The Bluetooth hookup worked fine from my iPhone 5. You can also physically connect an iPod/Phone here, and get basic onscreen display of track and artist info, and remote skip/pause control. This worked as advertised with both an iPhone 5 and a 3GS (and with an iPod Classic), as long as I plugged the iDevice into the port before selecting the preamp's "USB" input via remote or front-panel keys.

Rotel confines the RSP-1572's video processing to transcoding incoming analog video to HDMI, and scaling it up to 1080p resolution. Video upscaled from 480i to 1080i/p by the late-generation Faroudja DCDi chip set looked fine across all my standard video test-disc tracks, including film-pulldown tests that have caused some earlier DCDi chips to stumble.



#### FANTASTIC PLANET

The 1572 lent real impact to a pod crash scene from *Apes*.

## ERGONOMICS

Since the Rotel has next to no onscreen operations other than setup, its ease of use lives and dies by the supplied remote, at least for those who will employ it rather than some other, third-party whole-system control option. Here, the RSP-1572 scores a "gentleman's C": The controller is generously laid out and well marked, but it lacks any illumination other than glow-in-the-dark cursor and volume keys, and the horizontal placement of the latter way up in the top-right corner felt quite odd to my hand.

But the remote's main failing is that it is a dedicated, single-component remote with no programmability or learning; a remote included with any but the cheapest of today's A/V receivers will outdo it. (The controller does incorporate keys to manage a Rotel CD player.) That said, most or perhaps all those of a mind to contemplate a \$2,200 A/V centerpiece (plus amplifiers) will likely have other plans for command 'n' control.

Otherwise, I have few complaints regarding the Rotel's operation. The RSP-1572 does have an onscreen text "pop-up" to show audio and video signal composition, selected surround mode, and volume-control changes, which I think is a great feature. You can also directly access channel-level trims by channel, also with pop-ups, from the remote, which I value even more highly. Unfortunately, all these pop-ups are fixed as small, white text positioned lower-center, where they were sometimes difficult to decipher, and sometimes obscured altogether by crawlers or subtitles. The Rotel also demonstrated an annoying habit of muting audio for a few seconds every time the bitstream switched from Dolby Digital 5.1 to 2.0 or back, which happens often when broadcast/cable TV switches between commercials and programming. (I watched a lot of live sports via the Rotel.) I got used to this quickly enough, but I can't say I enjoyed it.

## BOTTOMLINE

That HDMI muting issue aside, my time with the RSP-1572 was mostly smooth sailing. It's impossible to fault the Rotel pre-pro's basic A/V performance, and its elegant simplicity should harmonize nicely with a certain type of buyer's system plans. If you're a performance-first, features-second type who logs as many hours on music playback as on TV and movies, you may very well number among them. **SV**

## TEST BENCH / ROTEL

Pre-pro performance notes from the lab

I saw nothing on the test bench from Rotel's RSP-1572 to contradict the superb sound I heard from music and movies alike. The pre-pro's distortion and noise performance were consistently very good. Noise results fell less than a decibel short of the theoretical ideal on the 16-bit digital-signal tests, while analog-input noise improved on this by about 10 dB — good, but not great, performance. S/N for 96/24 PCM stereo signals bettered the 44.1/16 result by about 6 dB, a meaningful gain but also a few decibels shy of the best we've seen. Taken together, these suggest that analog-domain noise was the limiting factor. In any event, these figures suggest a real dynamic range of something over 100 dB, which, unless you listen in an anechoic chamber or over very fine headphones (and headphone amplification, as the RSP-1572 lacks a "cans" output), is plenty to spare. One other note concerns the RSP-1572's crossover-filter action. On digital signals, I found both high- and low-pass sides to show nominally 24-dB-per-octave slopes; the more usual arrangement is for the high-pass side to roll off at 12 dB per octave. With analog inputs, however, both sides displayed nominally 12-dB-per-octave slopes. The difference could conceivably effect a mild shift in bottom-octaves character between the two media, though on my system (which I cross over at a low 60 Hz), I noted no such thing. — D.K.