

## Every Picture Tells a Story

# Rotel RSP-1098 Controller

In one of life's smaller ironies, nothing, not even an HD plasma display, draws a crowd like a controller with an integral TFT video screen. Even when I was displaying HD programming on my calibrated Sony monitor, every one of my friends kept sneaking up to Rotel's new RSP-1098 for a closer peek. While the RSP-1098 is definitely targeted at the "uptown" crowd—at nearly twice the price of Rotel's own well-received RSP-1066—one thing is indisputably clear. This is no mere 1066-clone with a tiny TV plastered on. It's a whole new ball game!

First, the 1098's architecture is of the plug-in, modular-card variety—vastly superior in facilitating upgrades. Its DSP engine is the new Crystal CS49400 (which represents a large processing boost over the 1066's 49300 series). This single 32-bit audio processor packs 120MIPS processing power and supports all major decoding formats, including Dolby Digital Surround EX and DTS 96kHz/24-bit 5.1-channel. Also on tap are Rotel's proprietary XS 7.1 surround format for creating surround-back signals from 5.1-channel sources, various surround-sound enhancement programs, and even HDCD-decoding for stereo listeners. Crystal has also been tapped for its 192kHz/24-bit D/A converters, which offer 96kHz-to-192kHz upconversion of CD and DVD source material. High-speed switching devices with 200MHz bandwidths are used in the video section. A transcoding feature upsamples composite and S-video to component-video output.

Other significant items include a pure stereo analog bypass, delay for re-syncing audio from a delayed video feed, bass and treble contour settings for each speaker group, and a CINEMA



EQ setting for rolling off excessive treble in aggressive soundtracks. A really cool software touch: The volume control's gain can be customized for 1, 2, or 5dB steps. There's a bounty of assignable video and audio inputs and outputs. Zone 2 connectivity includes four assignable 12-volt triggers.

The front panel of the RSP-1098 is so uncluttered that it looks as if Rotel hired Felix Unger as its consultant. Aside from the stunning 3.5"-by-6" TFT color display, there are only volume and function knobs and a few support buttons. The OSD software is operated by a large rotary/push knob that works better than BMW's vaunted iDrive concept. Overall I preferred the front-panel operation to the backlit remote control.

And Rotel's TFT is more than a pretty face; it also has a practical side. Rather than powering up your main display, you can use the 1098's small screen to adjust audio settings or, picture-in-picture style, to simultaneously monitor another channel or check your satellite program guide. With camera attached, it can serve as a home-security device. However, it should be noted that the TFT displays only composite-video signals. The hitch for users with players or scalars that don't send signals from the component and composite-video outputs simultaneously is that they won't be able to view a DVD's program menu on the RSP-1098's TFT.

Speaker-configuration options are exemplary. Beyond the standard or "master" speaker setup, there's an advanced menu of custom settings for four modes—DOLBY, DTS, STEREO, and MUSIC. For example, for stereo listening I set the front L/Rs to full-range, no center, and no subwoofer. For Dolby Digital and DTS, I high-pass the center and surrounds only and reintroduce the subwoofer at an 80Hz crossover setting. (Bass management has seven crossover points between 40Hz and 200Hz.)

The 7.1 multichannel input is a direct analog bypass only. For the multichannel player that lacks comprehensive bass management, Rotel has LFE REDIRECT, which combines the seven-channel source and routes it through a 100Hz analog low-pass crossover to the subwoofer preamp output—a useful solution for smaller satellite-based systems.

### Sound on Display

Every Rotel I've previously reviewed hews closely to a tried-and-true formula: Produce a winning midrange and the rest will follow. In the past this has meant a warmer, darker overall character with a bit of roundness in the bass and a slightly closed-in treble. The RSP-1098 builds upon this sonic framework but adds extension and detail at the frequency extremes, setting it apart from its predecessors.

