

An A/V Receiver By and For Purists

ROTEL RSX-1550 5.1-CHANNEL A/V RECEIVER

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The world of modern-day A/V receivers sometimes seems to be driven by the headlong pursuit of elaborate technical gongs and whistles, plus the burning desire to quote impressive—though sometimes implausible—power specifications. Deliberately bucking these trends, however, Rotel has always chosen to march to the beat of a different drummer. While competitors have added more buttons and flashing

lights, Rotel has consistently taken a simpler, “less is more” approach. And while others have chosen to inflate their product power output claims, Rotel has taken exactly the opposite tack, quoting conservatively rated power figures that may not look very impressive at first glance, but that honestly reflect Rotel’s uncompromising standards. In short, Rotel has never built AVRs to impress the “wowie-zowie” crowd; instead, it makes receivers for A/V purists, and especially for those who appreciate the finer points of sound quality.

Admittedly, this product philosophy has meant that Rotel has sometimes moved slowly to adopt new standards or technologies that, in the end, turn out to have tangible benefits. Two examples would be the now nearly ubiquitous HDMI 1.3 interface standards or the latest high resolution Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio codecs, both of which were omit-

ted in past Rotel AVRs. But with its new “15-series” A/V receivers Rotel has gotten fully caught up on those technologies while still hewing to its traditional “simpler is better” roots.

Our review subject this month is the Rotel RSX-1550 (\$1999), which is a no-nonsense 5.1-channel receiver that puts out a very conservatively rated 5 x 75 Wpc (Rotel also offers a slightly higher-powered, 7.1-channel model, called the RSX-1560, whose MSRP is \$2599). However, we deliberately chose the RSX-1550 because it caters to the needs of those enthusiasts who prefer (as we do) the sonic benefits and simplicity of 5.1-channel surround systems. Let’s check it out.

OVERVIEW

Consider this AVR if: you believe, as many audiophiles do, that a simple, “less is more” approach often leads to superior sound quality. When matched with the right speakers, the RSX-1550 can de-

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liver a pleasingly articulate and lucid sound. Also consider this Rotel if you appreciate products that are well made; the closer you look, the more quality-minded details you'll notice. The remote is clean and simple to use, too.

Look elsewhere if: you need or want a receiver with built-in speaker setup/room EQ features; the Rotel offers neither of these. Also look elsewhere if you need a powerful receiver suitable for driving power-hungry speakers; the RSX-1550 is not the last word in sheer dynamic clout compared to other AVRs in its price class. Finally, be aware that, while build quality is very high, so is the price.

RATINGS

(compared to other sub-\$2K AVRs)

- * User interface: 9
- * Sound quality, music: 8
- * Sound quality, movies: 8
- * Value: 6

FEATURES

- * 5 x 75 Watts per channel at .05% distortion with all channels driven. Here you can see Rotel's policy of quoting conservative power ratings in action; by typical industry rating standards, the RSX-1550 would easily qualify as 5 x 100 Watt receiver.
- * Incorporates Rotel "Balanced Design Concept" audio circuitry, which emphasizes advanced circuit board layout techniques and comprehensive, listening-based selection of parts used in the audio signal path.
- * Includes the latest HD audio codecs, Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio.
- * Includes four proprietary Rotel music-oriented DSP-driven surround processing modes, labeled "DSP1," "DSP2," and so on, that duplicate the sound characteristics of everything from a small intimate club on up to a large arena-sized acoustic envi-

ronment.

- * 7.1-channel analog preamp outputs.

- * Provides analog bypass mode for "pure 2-speaker stereo with no digital processing."
- * Can accept NTSC or PAL video inputs at any of the resolution levels supported by either format.
- * Provides "videophile line-doubling and scaling up to 1080p."
- * Comes with backlit remote control.
- * User interface provides an advanced setup menu that allows users to assign specific subwoofer crossover frequencies on a channel-by-channel basis—a

touch audiophiles will surely appreciate.

User Interface

Rotel's provides one of the clearest and best-organized user interface/menu structures we've encountered. We especially liked the fact that the RSX-1550 manual provides an "aerial view" that shows essentially all of the set-up/control options available, all neatly presented on one page (this is something we wish all manufacturers would do). I have only two criticisms, both relatively minor ones.

First, unlike some AVRs, the RSX-1550 is designed so that play-





back must stop before the menu can be brought up onscreen (this, in contrast to receivers that overlay menus on top of playback screens, and that allow playback to continue while menu adjustments are being made). Second, when modifying surround mode settings from the user menu, mode changes do not take place in real-time. Instead, they take place only after the associated input has been de-selected and then re-selected.

REMOTE CONTROL

Rotel's backlit remote control is—

as AVR remotes go—blessedly simple and straightforward to use. A particular strength is that the Rotel remote makes it very easy to apply channel-level trim adjustments on the fly. I do, however, have two minor quibbles with the remote. First, it does not provide direct any means for on-the-fly switching between surround sound modes (although buttons that provide a limited range of surround mode switching are hidden behind a flip-open hatch). This won't be a drawback you're the sort of individual who likes to pick a favorite mode

and stick with it, but if you like to experiment with—and do back-and-forth comparisons between—various surround modes, the remote (and the menu structure) will definitely slow you down. Second, the remote is set up so that certain buttons vary their functions depending on whether you give them a “short” or “long” push. This can be a bit confusing until you've mastered the “short vs. long” learning curve.

VIDEO PERFORMANCE

I evaluated the performance of the Rotel's built-in line-double/scaler using the Silicon *Optix HQV Benchmark* DVD, and found the RSX-1550 performed extremely well—especially so on the HQV disc's challenging jaggies tests. The Rotel stumbled in just two areas, exhibiting a few flickering moiré patterns on the familiar racecar-passing-the-grandstands scene from the “Film Detail” test, and showing a very

slight lack of smoothness on the disc's notoriously tricky “Film Cadence” test/

The Rotel proved capable of switching/passing through very high-resolution Blu-ray images without adding any visible noise or other artifacts.

SONIC CHARACTER

Many of the Rotel components I've experienced in the past, have had an airy and transparent, but also somewhat lightly balanced character, but it seems to me that the RSX-1550 breaks new ground, introducing a sound that is somewhat warmer, a bit darker, and—for want of a better term—more “organic” in nature. In practice, this means the RSX-1550 shifts the focus of the listener's attention more toward bass and midrange frequencies, rather than emphasizing mids and highs.

Bass is taut, emphatic, and—if your main speakers and/or sub-

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woofer are up to the task—very finely textured (you can hear details such as the deep, resonant, woody “growl” of acoustic basses or the skin-sounds of bass drums being struck). Middle frequencies, in turn, are quite seductive, in part because the Rotel offers enough resolution for you to hear extremely subtle inflections in actors’ voices, or small performance details (plucking noises or the almost inaudible creak of a piano pedal being pressed down, for example) that add richness and realism.

The RSX-1550 sounds quite good up high, too, though it emphasizes treble smoothness at the expense of a very slightly soft-sounding presentation of high-frequency harmonic information or of the treble “air” surrounding instruments and voices. But please don’t misunderstand me: the RSX-1550 certainly does not sound “opaque.” It’s just that it misses, by a very small margin, that sense of

wide-open treble transparency that some of Rotel’s best components offer in spades.

In terms of large- and small-scale dynamics the Rotel is excellent provided you stay within its power envelope, though there is no getting around the fact that the RSX-1550 is—despite its conservative ratings—simply less powerful than many other AVRs in its price class (many competing receivers serve up 120-to-140 Wpc in contrast the Rotel’s 75 Wpc). In practice, this means the RSX-1550 works very well with speakers that offer moderate (or better) sensitivity, but less well with those that are power hungry. During my listening tests, I tried the Rotel with two speaker systems: the Acoustic Energy Radiance system (whose speakers offer fairly high sensitivity) and with an oldie-but-goodie Von Schweikert Audio System 12 (whose speakers are somewhat harder to drive). Not surprisingly,

the RSX-1550 sounded wonderfully expressive with the Acoustic Energy system in play, but struggled at times with the Von Schweikert rig, exhibiting faint signs of compression and/or sonic “hardness” when large-scale sound effects or musical passages came along.

The RSX-1550 does not provide any automated speaker set-up/room EQ functions—features some customers might not miss at all, but that others would definitely appreciate both on sonic grounds and as a matter of practical convenience. Frankly, some audio purists feel that the digital signal processing technologies used in “auto EQ” systems undermine sonic transparency, so the Rotel should appeal to them. On the other hand, my personal experiences with today’s best auto EQ systems have been quite



positive. Either way, automated room EQ features are pretty much de rigueur for \$2000 AVRs, so that I wish Rotel had included them in the RSX-1550 (even if purists might opt not to use them).

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

Because of its midrange clarity, the RSX-1550 can do a fine job of presenting even quite complicated and convoluted soundtracks. A good example would be the soundtrack of the “Hostage Situation” chapter from Spike Lee’s *Inside Man*. Police

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are responding to a bank robbery where hostages have been taken and activity at the crime scene is becoming increasingly chaotic. To reflect that fact, the sound designer builds in more and more layers of soundtrack information as the scene unfolds—the sirens of arriv-



ing police cars, the piercing horns and deep-throated diesel roar of emergency vehicles, the garbled back-and-forth conversations of law officers on police radios, and snippets of frantic conversations

from onlookers. With some receivers this scene could potentially turn into a cacophonous mess, but through the Rotel each individual sonic thread remains clear and well delineated, with every element maintaining its distinct flavor even as new elements are added.

Interestingly, each sound occupies its own tightly focused position within the larger sound field, so that as the sound track becomes more and more complex, listeners can track specific sounds not only by timbre but by their locations. But just when it seems the soundtrack can't get much more elaborate, director Spike Lee

cuts away to nearly silent interior of the bank. The contrast is delicious.

But later on, *Inside Man* also gives the Rotel a chance to flex its dynamic muscles. Detective Keith Frazier (Denzel Washington)

has deduced that the bank robber, Dalton Russell (Clive Owen) has a hidden agenda and that the robbery is not what it appears to be. But before Frazier can act on his insight Russell decides to change the game in a violent way by shooting one of the hostages. Spike Lee captures the horror of the moment by showing that the events leading up to the shooting are unfolding more rapidly than Frazier can follow. One moment Frazier feels he has handle on the situation, and the next we hear the hard, sharp, vicious report of a gunshot as we see a police video of a hostage being shot in the head and then slowly falling to the floor. The Rotel did a very good job of capturing the abrupt transient “bark” of the gunshot, and then the ensuing whirlwind of sounds from within the police van as the officers struggle to comprehend the murder they have just witnessed.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

A record that's been in frequent rotation on my various A/V test systems of late is jazz vocalist Norma Winstone's *Distances* [ECM]. A favorite (and very revealing) track from the album is “Mermaids,” which is chockfull of sonic riches from end to end. The track opens with a variegated mix of percussive sounds—deep piano strings that sound as if they have been plucked or struck, hand slaps, and the like—all of which seem to float in space as their notes slowly echo and then fade in the confines of what is plainly a reverberant recording space. The Rotel made a delightfully vivid sonic potpourri of those opening percussion notes, and then got even better when Winstone's voice, accompanied by Glauco Venier's haunting piano, enters the song. Winstone's voice is creamy smooth, yet by no means saccharine sweet, and full of subtle and evocative twists and

inflections—characteristics that play right into the Rotel's greatest sonic strengths. But for me, perhaps the greatest treat of all was hearing how the Rotel handled the dark, reedy sound of Klaus Gesing's bass clarinet. As it happens, the instrument's range falls right in the sweet spot between the bass and midrange—a frequency region that the Rotel handles particularly well. That bass clarinet sounded so vibrant and so right that almost felt like I could reach out and touch it.

If there were any drawback to the Rotel's performance on this beautifully recorded track, it would be that the usual sense of treble "air" and openness I normally expect to hear was diminished to a slight (but audible) degree. But perhaps this is the small price to be paid for the RSX-1550's overall treble smoothness.

BOTTOM LINE:

Rotel's RSX-1550 is a beautifully made A/V receiver that can—when matched with the right speaker system—sound highly expressive, with rich, well-defined bass and sumptuous mids. Highs are very good, too, though they do not offer the last word in sonic transparency as compared to the best Rotel components I've heard. The power produced by the RSX-1550 is very clean and conservatively rated, though I suspect some prospective buyers might wish that there a few more watts/channel on tap. Two caveats are that the receiver does not provide an automated speaker set-up/room EQ system, and is rated to drive 8-Ohm speakers only. Apparent build quality is very high, but so, too, is the price.

SPECS & PRICING

Rotel RSX-1550 5.1 channel A/V receiver

Power output: 5 x 75 Wpc @ 8 ohms

Decoding formats: Dolby TrueHD, Dolby Digital Plus, Dolby Digital EX/Digital 5.1/2/0, and Pro Logic IIx Music/Cinema/Games; DTS-HD Master Audio and High Resolution Audio, DTS 96/24, DTS Discrete and Matrix, and DTS Neo:6; Rotel XS mode; four proprietary Rotel music surround processing modes. Video inputs/outputs: Composite video (3 in, 6 out); S-video (3 in, 3 out); Component video (3 in, 1 out), HDMI (4 in, 1 out)

Audio inputs/outputs: Stereo analog (7 in, 6 out), 7.1-channel analog (1 in), 7.1-channel analog (1 out), digital audio (4 optical in, 3 coaxial in; 1 optical out, 1 coax out), HDMI (4 in, 1 out), AM/FM Radio tuner (1) Other: IR output (2 out), Remote input (4), 12V trigger output (6), Ethernet (1 RJ-45 jack)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 6.38" x 16.97" x 17.13"

Weight: 37.48 pounds

Warranty: Five years, parts and labor

Price: \$1999

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