



**Products on test:** iFi Audio iPhono 3 Black Label, Chord EpicX cable, Topping D10S

**JBL Club One**  
Stunning 'hi-res' headphones



# Hi-Fi Choice

**PASSION FOR SOUND**

Issue No. **467**

October 2020

**BUYING GUIDE**  
100+ essential components p111

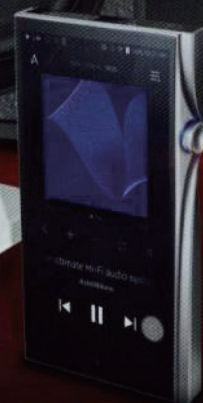
## TREBLE TOPS!

**Klipsch 'The Fives' standmount, Elipson Chroma 400 BT turntable & Astell&Kern SE200 DAP** spoil us for Choice!



**VINYL STARTER**

Keith Monks Prodigy record cleaning machine



## CHAMPIONS!

All the big winners at the 2020 EISA Awards

## HEAD OF THE CLASS

T+A debuts HA 200 headphone amp

### BACK IN BLACK



Rotel's Michi P5 preamp & S5 power amp are bang on!

### NATIONAL ANTHEMS



Lana Del Rey reveals her all-time favourite LPs

### PRECISION POINTS



Six of the best MM and MC cartridges battle it out



OCTOBER 2020

£4.99

10

US\$15.00

9 770955 111120

PRINTED IN THE UK





**109**  
**Topping Audio D10S**

"I've cried myself to sleep many a night listening to early Fleetwood Mac and asking myself, 'What happened to this guy?'"

**Music Legends: Peter Green p100**

**TESTED THIS MONTH**



**14**  
**Rotel Michi P5/S5**



**46**  
**Klipsch The Fives**



**48**  
**Astell&Kern A&Futura SE200**



**36**  
**T+A HA 200**

**REVIEWS**

- Kit testing
- 14 Rotel**  
Michi P5/S5 preamplifier/power amplifier
- 36 T+A**  
HA 200 network-attached headphone amplifier (Exotica)
- 42 Elipson**  
Chroma 400 RIAA BT belt-drive turntable
- 44 JBL**  
Club One over-ear headphone
- 46 Klipsch**  
The Fives powered loudspeaker system
- 48 Astell&Kern**  
A&Futura SE200 Digital Audio Player
- 53 iFi Audio**  
Phono3 Black Label phono stage
- 66 Sony**  
TA-E86/TA-N86100 pre/power amplifier combo (Retro)

**CHOICE EXTRAS**

- 109 Chord Company**  
EpicX speaker cable
- 109 Topping Audio**  
D10S USB DAC
- 110 Black Rhodium**  
Black and White speaker cable
- 110 Russ Andrews**  
RF Clamps

**GROUP TEST**

- Cartridges £230-£760
- 23 Dynavector** DV-10X5 MkII
- 25 Grado** Gold3
- 27 Nagaoka** MP-500
- 29 Ortofon** 2M Black
- 31 Rega** Exact
- 33 Sumiko** Moonstone



**42**  
**Elipson Chroma 400 RIAA BT**

**Never miss an issue – turn to p106 for our latest subs offer**



► **DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**  
Rotel Michi P5  
**ORIGIN**  
UK/Japan  
**TYPE**  
Preamplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
60kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
485 x 238 x 465mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Inputs: 2x balanced XLRs; MM/MC phono stage; 4x RCA; 3x coaxial; 3x optical; USB-A; USB-B  
• Outputs: RCA line out; 2x pre outs; 2x balanced XLR; 1x optical; 1x coaxial; 2x subwoofer  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Rotel Europe  
**TELEPHONE**  
01903 221710  
**WEBSITE**  
rotel.com



► **DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**  
Rotel Michi S5  
**ORIGIN**  
UK/Japan  
**TYPE**  
Power amplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
60kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
485 x 238 x 465mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Inputs: balanced XLR; unbalanced RCA; Ethernet network port; RS232  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Rotel Europe  
**TELEPHONE**  
01903 221710  
**WEBSITE**  
rotel.com

# Back in black

Not seen since the early nineties, Rotel's high-end Michi components return with a vengeance.

**HFC** rolls out the welcome mat for the P5 and S5



**R**otel's Michi sub-brand, in case you hadn't already realised, is back. But before we get into that, let's turn the hands of time back and indulge in a brief history lesson. A family-run concern, the Japanese company first emerged back in 1965. Jump forward a few years to 1981 and it formed an alliance with British loudspeaker manufacturer Bowers & Wilkins that continues to this day. Its 800 series really put the company on the map the following year and then in 1983 Rotel introduced its first CD player. But it wasn't until the early nineties (1993 to be precise) that things started to get really interesting as the manufacturer that had up until this point been best known for its high-quality, yet affordable components made a move into the big-time with

## A full-bloodied, holistic sound that really lets the music take centre stage

the flagship Michi range. With its distinctive red-lacquered wooden sidecheecks, this was one of those all-or-nothing products that showed that Rotel was so much more than just a producer of generously priced equipment. Over the following years, the Michi family grew to include an active preamp, tuner and CD player to name but a few (see *One Direction* boxout overleaf). Adored by those that were lucky enough to be able to afford them, the RHCD disc transport, matching RHA-10 slimline preamp

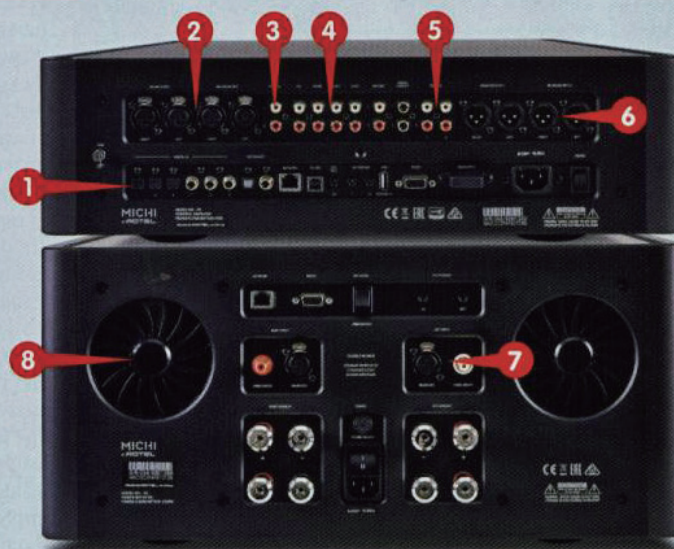
and more substantial RHB-10 power amplifier were a high water mark for Rotel. And then, just as quickly as it appeared, Michi was gone again...

All of which brings us back to where we came in. Some three years in development in a newly established facility where hand-made production is very much the order of the day, Michi has re-emerged phoenix-like from the ashes. Any signs of Rotel branding or any other connection with the Japanese manufacturer may have fallen by the wayside, but there's no mistaking these huge black hunks of electronics. The £3,300 P5 preamp, £5,400 S5 stereo power amp and £5,400 M8 monoblock are the rather glorious-looking result.

Forgetting about the M8 monoblock, today we're giving our attention to the P5 and S5, which are about as far removed from the slender preamps of the past as it's possible to get. The P5 is a fully featured preamp – with an impressive offering of analogue and digital connections – while its custom install features allow it to become part of a complete remote system.

When it comes to analogue sources, it has two sets of XLR balanced inputs, four line-ins (courtesy of RCAs) and a switchable moving-magnet/moving-coil phono stage. Outputs incorporate a line out, 6.35mm headphone socket on the front and a brace of subwoofer outs. If anything, the digital roster is even more impressive, including three optical and three coaxial inputs (plus a single output for each), a USB-B port for hook up to a computer and a USB-A socket to power external devices. A network port is on hand for control over IP and firmware updates ▶

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 3x coaxial/optical digital inputs (P5)
- 2 Balanced XLR inputs (P5)
- 3 Phono stage inputs (P5)
- 4 4x RCA analogue line inputs (P5)
- 5 RCA preamp outputs (P5)
- 6 XLR balanced pre outputs (P5)
- 7 Balanced XLR/unbalanced RCA inputs (S5)
- 8 Fan-assisted heat pipe to cool power transistors (S5)



– but not network audio streaming  
– while there's a socket for a remote infrared sensor, 12V triggering and serial RS232. Bluetooth is additionally available, supporting both AAC and aptX codecs.

In comparison, the S5 is a far simpler proposition. Inputs come via balanced XLRs and RCA sockets (selected by a switch) and there are two sets of solid rhodium-plated speaker terminals per channel.

Under the hood, the P5 boasts a pair of AKM DACs, handling PCM files up to 32-bit/384kHz, while DSD, DoP and MQA are all supported by the USB-B port. The extensive menu provides tone control, configuration or bypass as well as enabling the user to label the inputs, fix their levels or turn them off completely. The analogue preamp section runs in Class A and is powered by 17 regulated supplies that are hung from a pair of toroidal

## The Michi pairing boasts great weight, scale and a natural approach to music

transformers. These are custom wound inhouse and are positioned at the front of the chassis, away from any audio circuitry.

Similarly, the S5 power amp uses inhouse transformers – a pair of 2.2kVA units, feeding a bank of British-made capacitors totalling 188,000µF. The dual-mono Class AB design is of a symmetrical layout, with the two channels positioned in



separate fan-cooled housings and packing a total of 32 high-current output devices.

### Sound quality

Though a fairly demanding load, Bowers and Wilkins' 800 D3 feels a suitably fitting choice of speaker to partner with the Michi combo and sure enough wastes little time in revealing the duos' ability to exert plenty of control while delivering an open, captivating sound. Additional components called into action include a dCS Vivaldi One network music player and Melco N1ZS20/2 digital music library hooked up to the P5's USB-B port.

While initial impressions create a soundstage that isn't quite the last word in detail, the way that it is



Where power is the priority, albeit not without musical finesse, then one of the Michi's biggest competitors is not another pre/power but a beast of an integrated amp – Musical Fidelity's £5,650 M8xi (HFC 465). If on the other hand you can live with slightly less power, but hanker for full network-enabled flexibility then Primare's PRE35/A35.2 (£3,500/£2,700) combination is a class act. It offers plentiful facilities coupled with slick ease of use and an enjoyably fulsome, focused and articulate sound.

mercifully free from the sort of sting and forwardness that is so often evident in ultra-high-end systems impresses. Those that find their nose turning up at the mere mention of words like 'brash' and 'abrasive' will certainly find their comfy place here. That's not to suggest, of course, that the Michi pairing is in any way soft or over lush. On the contrary, it delivers a full-bloodied, holistic sound that avoids hi-fi trickery and instead lets the music take centre stage.

Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Karn Evil No.9* displays a big, bold sound with both striking bass extension and decent speed across the frequency range. A 24-bit/96kHz remastered version, it sounds a lot better than the original, which can focus too much on the top and bottom, but here there's a very good balance across the entire frequency range on show. While there's not quite the analytical revelation of every thread of the music being held up for examination like you might find on similarly high-end propositions, the symmetry of attack and substance is highly impressive. Given the scale of the ELP sound, the system does a superb job of drawing the listener into the music and then keeping it powering along as Carl Palmer's distinctive percussion remains taut and full of impact.

Michi's naturally generous balance is pushed to the fore even more with less processed recordings. Kyle Eastwood's 24-bit/44.1kHz *Blowin' The Blues Away*, for example, sounds bright breezy and bracing and yet is underpinned with weight and an impressive sense of substance. As the track unfolds, it becomes easier to discern every element of the performance from Eastwood's



The S5's large display offers a choice of VU meters, three spectrum analysers or being turned off





## Q&A

**Darren Orth**  
Rotel CTO



**HFC:** What prompted the return for Michi and why now?

**DO:** The original Rotel Michi series was launched in the mid-nineties and was mainly aimed at the home (Japanese) market despite quickly achieving a global reputation. Twenty-five years later we felt there was nothing of this quality currently in the market, so we embarked on a three-year project to develop a series of completely new and dedicated electronic designs that combine superlative performance with real overall value.

**The new range doesn't appear to have any Rotel branding on it. Is there a difference between Rotel and Michi?**

It would have been easy to simply build a bigger, better Rotel, however this would not have been true to the heritage of those original Michi products. So our engineers returned to the archives to gain an insight into those original nineties designs before re-imagining them through the lens of modern power supply, digital processing, audiophile component and PCB layout technologies.

**When Michi emerged in the nineties it didn't stick around for long. What are you doing to ensure this doesn't happen again?**

The current Michi products are only the beginning – our engineering teams are actively engaged in extending this platform and new models are scheduled for launch later this year. Michi will also extend to digital sources and other options, but we don't currently have firm timings on a launch for those products.

### ONE DIRECTION

Launched back in 1993, the Michi range took its name from the Japanese word for 'direction' and was a clear attempt to move the Rotel brand into the high-end. This was something the company had already come close to with models such as its RC-5000 preamp and RB-5000 from the late-seventies – a point that was further rammed home by them being named The CONTROL amp and The POWER amp on their front panels. As was the style of the time, the models looked highly technical: the preamp boasting a multitude of knobs, flip-switches and sliders – including a 10-fader octave equaliser – while the power amp had both VU meters and peak level LEDs.

In direct contrast, the Michi lineup was more subtle in its industrial styling, with a minimum of controls and not a VU meter in sight. The lacquered side panels emphasised the use of traditional Japanese craftsmanship, while each of the three initial models boasted not just a number, but a Japanese moniker. Thus the RHC-10 was also known as *Takumi* (craftsmanship), the RHQ-10 phono preamp *Shih* (poetry) and the RHB-10 dual mono power amp, delivering 200W/8ohm, *Kokoro* (heart). The range continued to grow, with an active preamplifier, the RHA-10, an RHT-10 FM tuner, a second power amp, the RB-05 and a huge CD player in the shape of the RHCD-10.

propulsive bassline to the piano stabs and dynamic drumming.

Switching to a 24-bit/192kHz recording of Mozart's *La Nozze Di Figaro*, there's a rich, ripe sound that has the necessary agility and detail to convey the exuberance of both the score and the performance. There's a more than healthy display of dynamic extension on show here, making clear both the light and shade of the orchestra and the composing itself.

While it could be argued that more intimate tracks like Lake Street Dive's *Better Than* can sound a little more distant than more forward rivals, this pairing is all about conveying the music and sweeping the listener along

– something that becomes all too clear with everything from the Tallis Scholars mesmeric take on Allegri's *Miserere* to the slow build of Mike Oldfield's *Return To Ommadawn*.

### Conclusion

OK, so the Michi combo might not be the last word in attack and slam, and some might bemoan its slight lack of detail, but to concentrate on such details is to ignore its weight, scale and breath-takingly natural approach to music making. With a wide-ranging ability across a broad selection of genres, the emotion and spirit that's on display here more than makes up for any shortcomings ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT: P5

##### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Impressive balance of power, attack and substance

##### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** The soundstage can lack a little detail at times

##### BUILD QUALITY



**WE SAY:** Though not as analytical as some, the P5 gets right to the very heart of the music

##### FEATURES



##### OVERALL



### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT: S5

##### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Powerful, yet gentle sound

##### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Intimate tracks can sound a bit more distant than rivals

##### BUILD QUALITY



**WE SAY:** A supreme combination of naturalism and agility with a wide range of different music

##### FEATURES



##### OVERALL

