

Rotel RC-1570 Preamplifier-DAC

These days, preamplifiers priced at or near \$1000 are expected to do everything. Many are able to accommodate virtually any sort of source component. Are you a techie who has fun adjusting the multitudes of features available in today's audio components? Or do you just want to turn the system on, set the input and volume, and not touch it again? The Rotel RC-1570 (\$999 USD) is designed for both types of user. It's a capable example of today's flexible system center: the modern digital preamplifier.

Description

The RC-1570 measures 17"W x 4"H x 12 5/8"D and weighs 16 pounds. Its general build quality seemed good, and comparable to other models at or near its price. The styling is similar to that of other Rotel models, with rounded corner pieces of painted aluminum that make a transition from the front to the side panels. The faceplate is thick, with "Rotel" deeply engraved into it at the top center, above the display. The case showed no obvious flexing, and except for the aluminum faceplate is made from folded sheet metal, as is common at this price. The feel of the front-panel controls was good, though the Power button is surrounded by a blue light that's a bit bright for my taste (though a black ring sticker is provided to cover this), and I mostly used the remote control (included). Rotel specifies the RC-1570's total harmonic distortion as less than 0.004%, and its frequency responses as 4Hz-100kHz (analog inputs), 10Hz-95kHz (digital circuits), and 20Hz-20kHz (phono stage). It consumes 15W during active use, and less than 0.5W in standby.

The technologically inclined will like the RC-1570's central display, whose blue-white characters display volume, input, digital resolution, tone control bypass, and other details. To the right of the screen, under the large volume dial, are buttons labeled Menu, "-", "+" and Enter. That last legend drew my eye as if it were a neon sign saying "You can play with some of the features!" Anyone familiar with these types of controls will immediately start to adjust the Rotel's settings for treble, bass, balance, turn-on volume limit, fixed volume by input, display brightness, USB audio class, and some Rotel hardware selection options. The volume knob, too, will appeal to the fiddler. A relative controller, it's not directly attached to a potentiometer. The dial isn't marked in any way; volume levels are indicated by numbers on the display, in a range from Min, then "1" through "95," and Max. Turning the volume control below the Min setting triggers a relay that mutes the output. The benefit of this all-electronic volume control is that you never have to remember to turn it down. Next time you turn on the RC-1570, the volume will reset to whatever turn-on setting you've saved.

But if you're the turn-it-on-and-play type of user, the RC-1570 is ready to go right out of the box. Those who prefer to keep the signal path as short as possible will find the balance and tone controls at their default settings of zero, the default volume setting at a reasonable level, and the brightness of the screen unobtrusive. In short, if you don't want to bother with the RC-1570's many settings, you don't have to.

One of the RC-1570's great features is the tiny Bluetooth transceiver that plugs into the USB port at the lower left corner of the faceplate, and accepts audio signals of resolutions up to 16-bit/48kHz. The Bluetooth connection is simple — anyone with an up-to-date Bluetooth device can connect with a simple pass-key. This sort of accessibility is important to those of us who now listen mostly to digital files instead of CDs and LPs: Your friend can play mixes and DJ your party all night from the smartphone in his or her pocket. I was able to transmit music to the RC-1570 from more than 40' away. Still, I can see this being troublesome for those who live in apartments or condos — their neighbors might put on inappropriate selections when their own Bluetooth device is not in control.

At the other end of the technology spectrum is something unexpected: a 47k ohm phono stage for moving-magnet cartridges. In addition to the phono input, the RC-1570's rear panel has four analog inputs on RCA jacks, and a single balanced analog input on XLRs. Outbound analog signals depart via two pairs of RCA jacks, a single pair of balanced XLR jacks, and, on the front panel, a 1/8" headphone jack.

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A variety of digital input signals are sent to what Rotel calls a “premium Wolfson stereo D/A converter.” Two coaxial (RCA), a single USB, and two optical inputs accept signals up to 24/192 (a driver is provided for Windows users). There’s also a Rotel Link connector, which provides communication for Rotel devices, a port for a remote-control trigger, and two trigger outputs for turning on your power amplifier and other compatible hardware. I imagine dealers might use the RS-232 input to update the RC-1570’s software; this input can also be used with control systems like Crestron and Control4.

By today’s standards, the included remote control is complex. Its 51 buttons will control most of the Rotel devices anyone might use with the RC-1570, but will be nothing but clutter if used with gear from other manufacturers. Rotel provided me with one of their RB-1582 MkII power amplifiers; I connected this to the RC-1570’s remote trigger, which made turn-on from standby a one-pushbutton affair. I long for the day when all remote controls are Wi-Fi-capable smartphone apps that can control everything from a computer to all functions and settings of audio gear. As for the Rotel pairing, all this complicated remote could do was turn the preamp and amp on and off and adjust the volume. Also, the remote’s volume buttons are oddly placed for controls that are usually the ones most often used: all the way at the top of the long, narrow wand, just below the Power button. Most of the remote’s weight is at its other end, which makes adjusting the volume awkward.

I tried most of the RC-1570’s features, and enjoyed the wireless connection’s convenience. For my critical listening, I plugged my iMac into one of the RC-1570’s optical inputs, with all optional controls set to zero or flat.

Sound

“The End,” a trippy jam session nearly 12 minutes long, first appeared in 1967, on the Doors’ eponymous debut album. I played it from a 1985 compilation, *The Best of the Doors* (16-bit/44.1kHz AIFF, Elektra). Jim Morrison’s voice was centered and *above* all of the instruments, which were placed either side of him, directly behind my speakers. Morrison’s familiar voice sounded slightly warmer than I’m used to through most of this track. I seemed to be hearing John Densmore’s drums from the opposite end of a large room, but that’s part of the recording and thus how it should be. The sound of Ray Manzarek’s organ, spread uniformly from side to side, felt like the ether binding the disparate instruments together. All of this was rendered well by the Rotel. Percussion instruments sounded natural, with cymbal strokes having a realistic metallic quality. Robbie Krieger’s electric guitar, played opposite the drums, had a nice fat sound. Roughly two-thirds of the way through there is a notable change, as the track crescendos to an aggressive climax as Morrison speaks of lashing out at his family. All three instrumentalists are playing aggressively, and the sound became a bit harsh. Cymbals went a bit white-noisy and weren’t as easy to distinguish from everything else. Percussion and guitar both became a bit less focused. The transitioning to the song’s slow, languid conclusion returned the clarity and warmth heard through the first half of the track.

I followed that with something smoother: the title track of Miles Davis’s *Milestones*, a 1958 recording that I played from a 2001 reissue (16/44.1 AIFF, Columbia/Legacy). The Rotel treated it well. “Milestones” had the same warm sound I’d heard with the Doors, but each instrument was better resolved. Davis’s trumpet had a nice, fat sound that was well placed in front of the band. Paul Chambers’s double bass underpinned all of the action, but began to lose focus on the deepest notes. Philly Joe Jones’s drums and Red Garland’s piano both had a fluid feel, without harsh edges. The entire band was centered narrowly between the speakers, with Davis slightly forward of the other musicians. The sound was generally laid-back, except when Davis muted his horn — then, it sounded forward and a bit jarring. The high-pitched edges produced by a Harmon mute were very sharply defined, and incongruous with the smoothness of the rest of the sound.

To stay with the smoother sounds that the RC-1570 reproduced best, while also testing its reproduction of nuances, I next played the 1970 recording of Dvořák’s Cello Concerto by Jacqueline Du Pré, with her husband, Daniel Barenboim, conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (16/44.1 AIFF, EMI). This recording has a nice flow without being too exciting. My initial concern about the force of an orchestra and massed strings was unfounded. The orchestra had considerable weight, as would be expected, but without the edges that we often hear with more resolving pieces of equipment. The Chicago

Associated Equipment

Speakers

Bowers & Wilkins 801 Series 2

Preamplifiers

Benchmark Media Systems DAC2 HGC, Hegel P20, Parasound Halo P 5

Amplifiers

Audio Research D300, Parasound Halo A 23, Rotel RB-1582 MkII

Source

Apple iMac running iTunes

Digital-to-analog converters

Benchmark Media Systems DAC2 HGC, Parasound Halo P 5

Speaker cables

Transparent MusicWave Ultra

Interconnects

AudioQuest King Cobra XLR, Transparent MusicLink Super RCA, AudioQuest Ruby RCA, generic TosLink optical

Symphony sounded more as one than the congregation of disparate sounds it actually is. It's not that there was something missing, but rather that the Rotel's smoothness bound everything together into a package. Du Pré's cello stood forward of the orchestra, but didn't sound harsh, or disconnected from the mass of orchestral sound behind it. As in the Doors' "The End," only during the most strenuous passages did instruments begin to separate themselves from each other and become more articulated against the backdrop of sound. However, that separation was like Miles Davis's muted trumpet — it drew attention to a single higher-pitched note and/or instrument as it suddenly shone brightly out from the smoothness of the performance.

I really enjoy the film soundtracks composed by Hans Zimmer, and find his mixes of acoustic and electronic instruments highly engaging. He manages to be impactful with both types of sound, and uses a lot of electronic backing that satisfies my preference for strong bass. "Time," from his score for *Inception*, exemplifies this sort of mix (16/44.1 AIFF, Reprise), and the Rotel RC-1570 did well by it. The orchestra, with incidental horns playing brightly, perfectly fit the model of everything mentioned above. "Time" has an underlying electronic deep-bass rumble that was more evident through the Rotel: It was there, and strong, but not so articulated that it distracted me from the bigger image of the orchestra above it. "Time" has a smooth, full sound — my Bowers & Wilkins 801 Series 2 speakers reproduce that fantastic deep rumble, providing a visceral sensation that complements the aural and visual experience. Toward the end of the track is a mournful passage played in the higher register of a piano; it's probably processed, but because it's played essentially unaccompanied, it didn't sound bright or etched and was wonderful to enjoy.

Comparison

During my time with the Rotel, I was fortunate to have another preamplifier of similar price, specifications, and technical abilities. Parasound's Halo P 5 (\$1095) has a variety of digital and analog inputs that mean it, too, can serve as the centerpiece of a contemporary audio system, while offering many of the same conveniences as the RC-1570. Still, there are some major differences between them.

The RC-1570 enjoys a tremendous advantage for digital users who like their preamps to keep them informed about data rates, digital format, and volume level, all of which the Rotel displays and the Parasound doesn't. The Rotel would be more enjoyable to a fiddler.

The other big difference is in the two products' sounds. Like its power-amp mate, Rotel's RB-1582 MkII, which has kept it company in my system, the higher-tech-feeling RC-1570 has a surprisingly warm, analog-like sound that worked very well with my B&W 801s. Behind its faceplate's more traditional analog dials and controls, the Parasound Halo P 5 produces a more precisely analytical sound that I found more accurate, with deeper lows and better-controlled highs. The Halo P 5 was able to produce a uniform sound throughout the audioband. But the Rotel RC-1570 maintained its warm and very alluring sound through most of the audioband that I found hard not to enjoy when I wanted a comforting sound.

Conclusion

When, a few years ago, I decided to start a second run in audio, my system included a tubed preamplifier from Audio Research that I'd had for some 15 years. The Rotel RC-1570 reminds me of the sound I had during that long stretch: warm and very comfortable, with bass that's firm but not as precise as that from similarly priced, all-solid-state preamps. I never found tubes to be the finicky nuisances they're often claimed to be, and my ARC preamp had a sweet, fat midrange sound that the solid-state gear of that time couldn't duplicate. But time has moved on, and so has solid-state. The warm sound and comprehensive feature set of Rotel's RC-1570 should keep its buyers happy for many years.

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Rotel RC-1570 Preamplifier

Price: \$999 USD.

Warranty: Five years, moving parts excepted.

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