

**Rotel RDV-1050 DVD-V/DVD-A/MP3/JPEG/NTSC/PAL
Progressive Scan Disc Player
SRP: US\$699 June 2004**



Intro

This versatile disc player is about as close to a universal player as one could get with the one exception of not handling SACD disc playback. It was only a couple years ago that only the most expensive DVD players offered the improved image reproduction of progressive scan, but now that feature has become part of even some players in the \$100 area. Also, until very recently only some odd-brand DVD players mostly sold in Europe offered playback of both the NTSC video system used in North America as well as the PAL system used in Europe. Now this player allows the more exploratory DVD collector to obtain discs from Europe and play them easily on the same player used for our system of DVDs. It opens up a panoply of superb classical videos and operas from European TV productions which are not telecast in the U.S. or made available on NTSC DVDs for purchase.

The 1050 also plays most of the various recordable CD and DVD discs, including CD-RW and DVD-RAM discs which fail to play on many units. So if you should have a standalone Panasonic DVD-RAM recorder such as we reviewed last month you can benefit from the hard-drive-like features of this format in recording telecasts and yet play the resulting discs on the 1050. My main interest in the 1050 was as a DVD-Audio player. I have auditioned a few universal disc players now and haven't yet felt that any of them did equal justice to both DVD-A and SACD formats. I have each time returned to my multiplayer setup, having at least one separate dedicated player for each format and a set of switches for the six-channel inputs. However, my DVD-A player is not up to the sonic level of my SACD players and I have felt I was giving the format short shrift as a result. More on this below.

One slight disappointment on the 1050 was to find that it automatically downsamples 96K stereo linear PCM signals to 48K. This was a problem with most early DVD players which slowed interest in the 96K DADs of Chesky, Classic and others because only certain Pioneer DVD players did not downsample the 96K signals. With video DVDs offering PCM stereo options, I haven't run into any 96K ones as yet, and if you don't own any of the earlier DADs the downsampling won't matter. The new series of HDADs from Classic also have a 192K DVD-Audio side, which does play back at that sampling rate. In fact the 1050 displays the sampling and bit rate for any disc playing by simple pressing the appropriate Rate button on the remote.

Hookup & Setup

The back panel of the 1050 sports the expected jacks with a couple exceptions and additions. There is a switch for moving between output of either PAL or NTSC signals. Both coax and Toslink digital connectors are featured, but two-channel purists may be disappointed to find that there are no separate analog stereo output jacks - only the front left and right channels of the six channel analog out for DVD-A playback. So if you want to feed an analog two-channel input on your AV preamp or receiver you will have to use Y connectors. The three-wire component connection should be used for the best video images if your monitor has such an input. The initial on-screen setup involves selecting such attributes as the screen language, screen ratio of your monitor, whether you want the analog audio output to be stereo, Dolby Surround, or multichannel and so on. The expected options of repeat playback, fast forward and reverse, changing the language, audio and scene angle are available from the remote. There is also a zoom feature such as also included on many monitors. Again, many different adjustments for picture quality offered on most monitors are also available in the 1050. A very handy feature accessed with the Audio fs/Rate button is a display of

the sampling frequency and quantization bit length for any digital audio being played back. This showed, for example, that 96K/24bit DADs such as the series still being issued by Classic Records, are downsampled in the 1050 to 48K/16bit, a bit disappointing.

Auditioning/Viewing Various Formats

I had been unable to get previous players listed as accepting MP3 audio and JPEG image files on CD-R to work with discs I had burned on my Macintosh, and the situation was no different with the 1050. However, sample discs for each type of files kindly sent me by Rotel played perfectly. The manual does state that some disc may not play due to disc characteristics. Perhaps the chip handling these functions just doesn't like Macs. The first onscreen display for both formats is a blue screen with all the files listed. You use the up and down cursor to selection the files you want to see or hear. I found the play button worked with the image files, advancing from one to another with about three seconds on each image. The Menu button also operates. Many other controls on the remote did not work during this operation. With the MP3 files the up and down cursor worked properly. If the JPEG files are only at screen resolution (72-75 dpi), don't expect hi-res images on your screen - it will look just like your computer monitor has been enlarged to your larger home screen.

Some other audio settings are the selection of Large or Small speakers, and a Range Control which operates only in Dolby Digital playback and adjusts the audio for Normal, Wide Range, or TV mode (compressed). There is also VSS - a type of pseudo-surround process when only a pair of stereo speakers is connected for playback. The remote is rather small but well laid out and being silver-colored the various button identifications are easier to read in spite of the control lacking a backlight function.

Video-wise the RDV-1050 provided a top quality image in both S-Video and component forms, but the component connection was cleaner and more detailed. Image quality was very similar to my modified original Sony 9000ES using the component connection (which has topflight DVD-V playback out of the box). Results were excellent with and without the progressive scan feature, but I got a slightly improved image (as I have with all DVD players) when turning off the progressive function on the player and letting my 53-inch Pioneer Elite RPTV take care of the progressive processing operation.

DVD-A Auditioning

I have a couple of duplicate DVD-A discs, and after the 1050 had broken in for several days I did an A/B comparison with my old Toshiba 5700 DVD-A player. No close race here; the 1050 was far superior. There was more fullness, depth and impact to the sound, a wider soundstage, greater transparency and apparent frequency extension. One of the discs was the Silverline Classics DVD-A of Vaughan Williams works with the Abravanel and the Utah Symphony. The impressionistic work Flos Campi, with its wordless choir and small orchestra, sounded thin and anemic on the Toshiba, leading me to want to actually use my preamp's tone controls (for the first time) and turn up the bass. Via the Rotel the richness of the sonics came to the fore and there seemed to be an extension of the frequency response at both extremes. The wonderful acoustics of the Mormon Tabernacle were not really in evidence via playback on the Toshiba, but added a most appropriate envelopment with the Rotel - especially during the portions featuring the choir.

One of the extremely frustrating characteristics of the Toshiba player was that it always muted briefly between tracks. This made no sense on music that was continuous between track accesses and I realized that although navigation and programming on DVD-As has not been terribly consistent this could not be a feature of DVD-A playback in general. Of course I was right - the Rotel smoothly changes from one track to the next without muting, as on the continuous music of the Mahler Eighth DVD-A reviewed this issue.

The other frustrating operational feature of the Toshiba was selection of the proper audio output - Bitstream for Dolby and DTS, PCM for standard CDs and DVDs with that option, and 6-channel analog for DVD-A. The switching affected the two-channel outputs, the digital coax AND the six-channel analog outs. If the wrong selection was made for any of these the result could be either absolutely no sound or a roar of digital data from DTS tracks on a standard CD (which at high volume could blow speakers). And although the three options were supposedly easily selected on the fly and displayed on the front of the player, they usually refused to "take" on the first try and required many repeated button-pressings until they would actually switch. Displaying the choices on the video screen and selecting them there improved little except making them easier to see. The Rotel RDV-1050, on the other hand, has a quick and logical selection of audio format playback without any problems. It only affects the digital audio outputs - coax and Toslink - NOT the analog six-channel outs. The three options are: Dolby Digital/PCM, Bitstream/PCM, PCM Only. Since all three options connect the PCM outs, you are always getting some sort of signal and thus not thinking something in your system is amiss when complete silence ensues.

44.1 CD Auditioning

Using the digital coax out on the 1050 running to the digital in on my Sunfire preamp, comparisons were made with many different 44.1 CDs (which I have in duplicate) with my highly tweaked DVP-S9000ES Sony two-channel SACD/DVD/CD player (mods by Dan Wright). The Sony sits on a heavy MSB isoplate and on special suspension feet, whereas the Rotel was on its own feet on a plain shelf with no base. I found absolutely no difference I could identify between the two players in this mode, which I find impressive considering that even before the mods (which encompassed most of Dan's repertory save his vacuum tube output stage) the original SRP of the Sony player was \$1500.

However. The majority of the mods to the Sony are realized at the analog stereo output jacks, not the coax digital out. This output runs thru Bybee filters and Jena Labs cables to the Source Direct input on the Sunfire Theater Grand III. This input bypasses all digital processing, sending the signal only thru the level control before going straight to the Parasound amp. The improvement over the "Stereo" setting is immediately hearable on most source material - more transparency, detail and richness of sonics. The 1050 lacks a separate analog stereo output pair of jacks - the L & R front channels are part of the six-channel output jacks.

Playback of standard stereo using these outputs is however better than via the coax digital connection. I used one of my favorite pairs of duplicate discs: The Complete Piano Music of Ernesto Lecuona, Vol. 2 on BIS. This has both solo piano music and works for piano and orchestra, all very cleanly recorded. I was surprised to find the match between the two players almost as close, even though the Sony was going into the Source Direct input without processing of any sort in the Sunfire. I used both the Sunfire remote and the Sony remote I programmed to switch the Zektor six-channel switcher between the multichannel players. The other multichannel player I was comparing was the latest Sony flagship XA9000ES, which I will be reviewing in next month's issue. I moved one of the BIS CDs from my original two-channel 9000ES to the new multichannel XA9000 and using the L & R front multichannel analog outputs I found again an almost identical match with the L & R fronts from the 1050. I could not tell the two sources apart, and this is a \$3K player vs. the Rotel at \$700. (However it should be pointed out that the XA9000ES does have a separate analog stereo output which switches the six D-A converters used in multichannel mode to operate three on each of the stereo channels - thus giving a 3x increase in signal and similar superior sonics to the analog out on my original modded two-channel 9000ES.)

Summing Up

In spite of the lack of a tweaked analog stereo-only output I found the sound quality of the Rotel with standard CDs to be easily the equal of some universal players at three or four times the cost. And I found the DVD-A playback quality better than any of the universal players I have heard. When you consider the versatility of the player in handling most of the recordable CD and DVD formats as well as MP3 and JPEG files, its very solid and handsome build, ease of operation, and its reasonable price, I feel this is a player well worth your consideration if you are in the market for a DVD-A & V player. You can probably obtain about as good video playback for half the investment. In fact depending on your display monitor you may not even require progressive scan, but for high quality DVD-Audio playback the RDV-1050 can't be beat in my estimation.

- John Sunier