

ROTEL RSP-985/RMB-1095

A class above

Rotel goes from strength to strength with its £1,700 processor and £1,750 amp



Rotel's fully-featured processor and, lurking behind it, the sizeable 1095 power amp

Rotel is a brand we've not featured within the pages of *Home Cinema Choice* for a long time and, for some strange reason, I had to jump through flaming hoops and wrestle man eating tigers to obtain the samples reviewed here.

I wouldn't usually be so persistent if it were not for my respect for Rotel products, which tend to offer outstanding no-nonsense performance at an affordable price. Rotel have, until recently, been slow to embrace new multichannel technologies, but now the brand offers an AV line-up to make even the most demanding home-cinemaniac sit up and take notice.

Both the RSP-985 and RMB-1095 sit at the head of their respective product categories. The 985 is a THX Ultra-certified Dolby Digital, DTS and Dolby Pro-Logic processor, while the 1095, its partner in this test, is a THX-Ultra five-channel power amplifier.

As expected, the £1,700 RSP-985 takes a straightforward approach to home theatre and if it were not for the THX, Dolby and DTS logos on the front panel it would be easy to mistake it for a simple

two-channel pre-amp. An-at-times erratic motorised analogue volume controls sits in the centre of the fascia to the right of which are main room source and record source selection buttons. Beneath them, three keys enable mode selection, engage the tape loop and analogue 5.1 input.

Unusually for a processor, the RSP-985 has rotary bass and treble controls, a throwback to Rotel's two-channel heritage. One thing's for certain – the 985 is simplicity itself to operate once correctly installed and is therefore the ideal processor for technophobe family members.

USUAL SUSPECTS

On the rear panel the Rotel boasts all the usual connection suspects, seven analogue input pairs, six composite and S-video inputs and a 5.1 input. On the output side there's accommodation for five stereo analogue connections, four composite and S-video outputs alongside another DB-25 for amplifier connections which is backed up by RCA terminals. For digital sources, the Rotel boasts six inputs (two Toslink optical and four coaxial) arranged rather strangely with one optical input seemingly ostracised.

Internally the 985's layout is perhaps a little cluttered in some areas, but on the whole the design is sensible with neatly laid out circuits and few cable connections other than those used for digital control signals. At the heart of the unit is another Sample Rate Systems 'DSP' board, the Generation IIB to be precise. Produced in Finland, the Generation IIB incorporates two Motorola DSP56009 processors (one each for Dolby Digital and DTS duties), a Motorola DSP56007 for THX post-processing and Crystal 24-bit D/A converters. The RSP-985 is unfortunately not compatible with 96kHz so, once again, it's a case of downsampling those DVDs from Chesky and Classic Records. At least when fed a 96kHz input the Rotel behaves with decorum, unlike other processors in this test.

While the 'DSP' board may be from an OEM manufacturer, Rotel has stamped their own identity on the user-interface and configuration options. Press 'Menu' on the remote and up pops a detailed onscreen display from which seven submenus can be selected.

A detailed setup it is too, aside from time alignment, channel calibration and bass management (wherein only the THX



crossover value of 80Hz is available). One can also assign the digital inputs to source names, control LFE levels according to source and choose to disengage the subwoofer if full-range main loudspeakers are used when in stereo, music or Dolby Pro-Logic modes to prevent unwanted bass doubling.

FEATURE-FILLED BOX

There are more unusual features, too. A default-processing mode can be assigned to each input and, rather than automatic format detection which, engages the analogue inputs when a digital stream is not recognised, either analogue or digital can be specifically selected. It's also possible to attenuate analogue inputs and correct source volume anomalies between inputs by offsetting their volume by +/-10dB. So what may appear to be a simple box is in fact quite a complex beast on the inside and can be configured to suit almost any system.

The most significant operating problem which faces the Rotel is its front-panel

simplicity – specifically the lack of an alphanumeric status display – and sometimes it's difficult to know what processing mode is engaged. For example, Re-EQ can be applied without the remainder of the THX enhancements, even accidentally, to the 2-channel stereo mode. However, this is not indicated at all on the front panel and only when fully-blown THX Cinema is loaded does a small LED illuminate. Likewise, the four music modes share two status LEDs so you've no way of knowing if Music 1 or 2, or alternatively, 3 or 4 is loaded.

The onscreen display helps, but only if you're willing to route all video signals through the RSP-985 – and here lies my second complaint. The OSD in either PAL or NTSC mode has a tendency to be trigger-happy and an annoying blank screen pops up whenever a video signal is absent or when simply surfing between terrestrial and/or satellite channels. Each time one hops between channels, a blinding flash punctures the transition between them.

But enough complaining, I'm eager to get down to the business of sonic performance because the Rotel turns out to be a home theatre gem.

PERFORMANCE TIME

Movie performance in both Dolby Digital and DTS modes is quite simply stunning, especially when the RSP-985 is fed a diet of exciting and dynamic high-fidelity soundtracks. One specific example which impressed was the Region 2 DVD release of *Pink Floyd: The Wall*, in particular the sequence leading up to the *The Wall* itself. Firstly, the Scarf apocalyptic London animation is accompanied by thunderous, menacing LFE, then razor-sharp percussive attacks, followed by piercing, enveloping "psychopathic wife" thwacks that would frighten any naughty schoolboy. Wonderful stuff.

For all its force and exciting delivery, the Rotel doesn't abandon subtleties and dialogue intelligibility. Bob Hoskins could clearly be heard telling an alarmed hotel manager not to worry, l'the boy's an

ROTEL RSP-985 AV PROCESSOR

RATINGS

Highs: Vibrant, exciting home theatre performance with a no-frills approach
Lows: A few more front-panel status indicators would help. THX Re-EQ can be engaged unwittingly as a result

Sound	★★★★★
Looks	★★★★
Ease of Use	★★★★★
Features	★★★★½
Overall	★★★★½

FOCUS

Rotel products offer a high standard of audio reproduction for a modest outlay. The RSP-985 is no exception, so move into the world of separates via this star performer

Model: Rotel RSP-985
Approximate price: £1,700.
Gamepath – 01908 317707
Website: <http://www.rotel.com/>

FEATURES

Connections: **Inputs:** 7 x analogue; 1 x DB25 external decoder port; 2 x TOS-link optical & 4 x coaxial electrical digital; 6 x composite video; 6 x S-video. **Outputs:** Main – 6 x analogue RCA; 1 x DB25 port; 4 x analogue record pairs; 1 x Zone 2 pair; 4 x composite video; 4 x S-video. 1 x IR input; 1 x IR output & 1 x external IR input; 2 x switched 500W AC mains outlets
Sound formats supported: Dolby Digital; Dolby Pro-Logic (Dolby Surround); DTS; PCM via S/P-DIF (maximum sample-rate supported 48kHz)
Other features: THX Ultra; automated mode selection; 'DSP' music modes, multizone and multisource switching
Dimensions: 440(w) x 121(h) x 316(d)mm;
Weight: 8kg

asthmatic') even during the deafening *Comfortably Numb* chapter.

From subtle soundtracks such as *Howards End* (PAL laserdisc), to archetypal demonstration material such as *The Matrix* (Region 1 DVD), the Rotel never disappoints, in fact it positively shines.

If your intent is to use the Rotel in a dual music/movies role then the music side of things isn't quite as impressive. There are times when its character is just a little too forgiving for my taste. The RSP-985 is best suited to Rachmaninov than Republica, but that's not the worst thing in the world. Of the four subtle 'DSP' modes, Music 1 is probably the best but, other than an increase in surround level and reverb, there's little to choose between them.

WALKING TALL

Introduced in late 1999, the £1,750 RMB-1095 is certain to dominate any equipment rack. At 240mm high it's somewhat taller than the average amplifier and weighs in at a backbreaking 88lbs. Rotel have thoughtfully added casters to the rear corners so that once lugged onto the front edge of a shelf, the 1095 can be more easily rolled backwards.

The Rotel's rugged anodised aluminium exterior hides beneath a top-notch design. Two 1.2kVA toroidal transformers sit just behind the front panel, one on top of the other. To the rear, mounted within a shielded compartment, lies a whopping 176,000uf of Dennis Moorcroft-designed BHC slit foil power supply capacitance and along each flank are thirty 15amp output transistors. This enables the RMB-1095 to deliver 200W into each channel simultaneously (20Hz-20kHz, <0.03% THD into 8Ω) without excessive heat build-up or, more importantly, the need for a noisy cooling fan.

To the rear huge colour-coded binding posts facilitate loudspeaker connections (spade lugs, banana plugs, but not bare-wire), while low-level signals are accommodated via either a DB25 array,



single-ended phono jacks, or balanced XLR terminals. Front panel controls are straightforward. Above the power on/off switch are five LED indicators which illuminate if the 1095 is overloaded (highly unlikely) or a loudspeaker short occurs. The only feature missing here is a trigger terminal to facilitate external processor control, an unfortunate lapse on the part of Rotel's designers.

SUPER SONICS

The RMB-1095's sonic character is difficult to describe as it imparts little, if any, of its own personality upon the signal it amplifies. The most noticeable aspect of performance, given the total absence of any real shortcomings, is the way in which the 1095 deals effortlessly with the most demanding of software, even 4Ω low-impedance loudspeakers which are notorious for being difficult to drive. Even with all five channels running simultaneously at THX reference levels and with processor bass management defeated (thereby sending full-range signals through the Rotel), the RMB-1095

barely even breaks into a sweat. What's more, there are endless reserves of power on tap, particularly apparent when software demands forceful, dynamic bass activity.

Perhaps the only aspect of performance that counts against the RMB-1095 is its neutrality (not sterility). If your system is lacking a little sparkle, then the Rotel is unlikely to inject new life into it, but then if it did, I would be complaining about the added colouration. In the world of multichannel power amplifiers the Rotel can play with the big boys from the likes of Parasound and Anthem, yet it's significantly less expensive.

Both the RSP-985 and RMB-1095 are worthy of an unreserved recommendation, either individually or as a high-end home theatre system. Yes, both components really are high-end and stand head and shoulders above the finest receiver or 'DSP' amplifier. If you're considering taking that first tentative step into the world of separates, look no further. Even at £3,450 both components can be considered a bargain ■

TECHNICAL ANALYSIS

Manufacturers rated output: 5 x 200W RMS
HCC measured output at onset of clipping: 271.5W RMS at 6.8% THD
HCC Fidelity Firewall: 172.17W RMS at 0.10% THD
 Although Rotel's powerful amp can actually output over 270W when clipping occurs, the company's rating of 200W is about right as the Fidelity Firewall suddenly drops 100W when you back off to a point with minimal distortion

ROTEL RMB-1095 MULTICHANNEL AMPLIFIER

RATINGS

Highs: A fantastic performer, capable of power and subtlety, and able to drive any load without hesitation
Lows: Just the omission of a remote trigger input

Sound	★★★★★
Looks	★★★★½
Features	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

FOCUS

Rotel's flagship THX Ultra power amplifier offers a standard of performance unrivalled at this price-point. The RMB-1095 will eat any home theatre receiver's amplification for breakfast...

Model: Rotel RMB-1095
Approximate price: £1,750.
Gamepath - 01908 317707
Website: <http://www.rotel.com/>

FEATURES

Connections: 5 x banana-capable binding post pairs; 5 x balanced XLR and 5 x single-ended RCA line level inputs; 1 x DB25 5-channel input
Other features: Two 1.2kVA toroidal transformers; eight 22,000uf BHC slit foil capacitors; thirty 150W/15 amp output devices; 'over current' protection circuit, 'current absorbers' turn-on surge elimination; gold plated balanced XLR and single-ended RCA inputs; 5 x 200W into 8Ω (continuous, 20-20 kHz, <0.03%); 5 x 330W into 4Ω
Frequency response: 15Hz-100kHz; damping factor 400 (20Hz-20kHz, 8Ω)
Dimensions: 440(w) x 240(h) x 398(d)mm
Weight: 34kg