

Rotel 02 system

Rotel plays the system By Brent Burmester

**Rotel 02 hi-fi system.
\$2997.**

**RCD-02 CD player \$1199.
RA-01 amplifier \$899. RT-02
tuner \$899.**

The promotional brochure for Rotel's new 02 range suggests the hills are alive with the sound of frustrated audio-buyers wanting the affordability, good looks, and easy integration of an upmarket microsystem, plus the refinement and power of traditional hi-fi separates.

If that's the case, Rotel is onto a winner. The three-part set-up you see pictured represents a serious bargain for those fleeing the garish horror of department-store jukeboxes. The 02-series system under review consists of the RA-01 integrated amplifier, a slender but well-appointed beastie with a high-current 40W output; the RCD-02, a CD player featuring HDCD playback; and that rare thing these days, a stand-alone AM/FM tuner in the form of the RT-02.

My mission was to evaluate these three as a combo, but a word or two will be said about their individual merits once that's accomplished.

These are handsome units, boasting silver, matt-finished aluminium fascias, and commendably solid construction. While they're not going to pass for super-fi, stacked together these 02 separates look a long way from the indifferent black lumps this sort of money usually buys. At the same time, they avoid the self-conscious stylishness of rival lifestyle systems, and come across as serious music-makers rather than fashion accessories.

Inevitably, they feature fashionable blue LEDs to indicate power-on, but at least these don't blaze insanely in the dark as some do. The buttons and switches are all unashamedly plastic, but have a secure, positive action, and although the CD player's loading tray flaps about alarmingly when extended,



the look and feel of the system on the whole is pleasing.

So to the sound. After a few days settling in, the CD player was fired up with Tim and Neil Finn's excellent album, *Finn*. The immediate impression was of a taut, airy and detailed quality, both lively and tuneful. Over time, plied with music ranging from the Muttonbirds on CD to Mussorgsky on FM, the character of the system emerged as wide- though shallow-staged, well resolved, and with fair sense of timing, amounting to a very listener-friendly package. 'Lush' is certainly not a word needed in a review of these components, but then neither is 'harsh'.

There was a tendency for the left and right channel extremes to be emphasized at the expense of a broadly balanced presentation of the sonic image, and some high frequency detail came across as a little too etched to my ears. Comparison with a more talented, and more expensive system revealed the Rotels overlaid a slight haze on programme material, and robbed some venue-derived scale from live musical performances. However, I'm finding fault because the 02 range deserves evaluation as audiophile gear, and it holds its own on that footing.

Used outside the context of the 02 family, the individual components all performed well. The RA-01's MM phono-stage proved surprisingly competent, and the amp displayed a maturity of sound that reminded me of Denon's PMA-250SE, a budget giant-killer of the late '90s.

Although tone controls are the devil's

work, they have to be included on a unit of this nature, so I switched them in and experimented with different settings. Happily, they are limited in effect and seem not to greatly degrade the signal, but I left them switched out.

Critically, the 01 amp tested here lacks remote control, which comes as a \$400 extra with the otherwise identical RA-02. It is the latter that naturally partners the sources on test, while the 01 should appeal more to mix'n'match system-builders.

The CD player proved to be competitive in its price range, with a crisp, informative performance that nonetheless lacked the poise of my class referent, the similarly priced, but far homelier, NADC541i. For its part, the RT-02 tuner, sporting a well-designed display and less well-designed array of 15 identical little buttons on its front panel, turned out to be adept at auto-tuning and assigning station pre-sets, and capable of hanging on to marginal AM signals via the indoor loop aerial provided. On both wavebands it sounded accomplished, and it merits a dedicated roof-mounted aerial to give its best. I'd venture it could stand the company of more expensive partnering equipment.

All up then, a talented threesome that definitely merits audition by the aesthetically aware wanting to shift up to real hifi. Just one last point – if you buy the bunch and opt for the RA-02 amp, consider investing in Rotel's fancy learning-remote for \$299 – shame to clutter up the place with those unsightly little handsets.

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