

Rotel Euro pre-power

Two-for-one amplification By Brent Burmester

Rotel RC03 Pre-Amp and RB03 Power Amp. \$1999 pr

While reviewing Rotel's accomplished 02 component system a while back, I noticed something intriguing about the 'Euro' range of which it was a part.

It seemed odd that Rotel included separate pre and power amplifiers in an entry-level line-up of this kind. Integrated amps are all the rage these days, and pre/power separates typically appeal to those with deeper pockets and a deeper commitment to hifi than the typical 01-02 series buyer.

Nevertheless, here they are. The RC03 remote controlled pre-amp is a thin slab of silvery niceness accommodating the usual sources, with two tape loops and a phono stage. It has a balance knob, but unlike its integrated brethren, no tone controls, which I take to be Rotel's statement that this is a purist design.

More impressive is the featureless face of the 70W/channel RB03 power

amp. It's not large, but looks suave and purposeful seated above it's matching pre-amp (mindful of the need to keep those cooling vents in the lid clear of obstruction).

One step beyond

As a combo these units are

lively and dynamic. Transients have plenty of leading-edge urge, and basslines are played with a satisfying drive.

Letting Dave Dobbyn's *Overnight Success* CD loose on the pairing, it was evident that the mid-range takes a back seat to the more energized treble, making the duo a little taxing when the volume is liberally applied.

Soundstaging was somewhat ordinary – laterally everything was more or less where it should be, but there was not much sense of depth to the proceedings.



Rhythmically this pairing was certainly an advance on the RA01 integrated, with notably superior urge. The slight greyness of the integrated model was also absent in the more expensive double-act.

Once again, Rotel's budget moving magnet phono stage impressed with its clean and punchy sound.

Harry Nilsson's voice on his classic *Nilsson Schmilsson* album was more sensitively rendered through the RC03 than via its little integrated brother, thanks to the specialized pre-amp's greater transparency.

I'm reassured that at least one of the Japanese majors still takes vinyl seriously.

Two for one?

If you're still wondering why anyone would put the brainy bits of an amplifier in a different box to the brawny bits, let me explain.

The low-signal levels handled by the pre-amp, which looks after source selection and volume control, can be adversely affected if situated near the big voltages and currents being chucked about by the speaker-driving stages.

Putting the different circuitry in their own containers not only keeps them physically separate, but allows each to enjoy its own DC power supply.

Then there's the mix'n'match flexibility of the arrangement. A pre-amp can feed nearly any power amp, regardless of manufacturer or output.

Freedom to experiment is thus maximized, even to the extent of trying valves and transistors in unholy admixtures.

Power amps can be combined in

twos or threes (or fives or sevens, home theatre freaks) or can join an integrated amp for bi-amping duties.

And, when power amps are freed from their control units and used in mono, they can be situated much closer to their speakers, allowing way shorter speaker cable lengths and superior transparency.

Bang for your buck

While we're on that subject, the RB03 is bridgeable into 180W mono. If bi-amping with two big-hitting monoblocks sounds pretty cool, take a moment to ponder. The price paid would put you into sophisticated integrated territory, where you'd trade slam and attack, and maybe more low-level detail, for a more mature and organic sound.

If multi-amping is your bag, I'd consider giving the RB03s their head with a better class of pre-amp, perhaps something from Rotel's own 10 series. It's not that the RC03 is a weak link here, but the power amp seems to me to be the player more likely to win promotion to the next division at the end of the season.

Would I recommend the pairing? Depends. The RC/B03 combo has some attractive qualities, but lets itself down slightly on musicality.

There's a matter-of-factness about its sound that detracts from the emotional message in the music, and for the price of these two boxes I'd prefer less energy and more refinement.

On the other hand, if you want a starter pack that can grow with your sonic ambitions, this duo could be just the ticket.

As a combo these units are lively and dynamic. Transients have plenty of leading-edge urge, and basslines are played with a satisfying drive.