

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Rotel RA-04



£250

ENTER THE CHAMPION: this Rotel RA-04 is last year's Award-winner, holder of the title for best stereo amplifier under £300. That makes it our reigning budget-end favourite and, as such, is there to be shot at. (Such is life!)

It possesses some specification highlights (switching for two pair of speakers, moving magnet phono stage) and some specification gaps (no remote

"This Rotel amplifier isn't about to give up its crown without a darn good scrap"

control), but what's been indisputable until now is its position as the pre-eminent amplifier at this price.

A spin of David Bowie's *Sweet Thing* is enough to confirm that the Rotel isn't about to give up its crown without a darn good scrap. There's an undeniable unity to its sound, from the bite and energy of the top end to the

↑ FOR

Looks and build; expansive, convivial sound, especially in the low frequencies

↓ AGAINST

Lacks the last scintilla of vocal expression; no remote control

... VERDICT

Easy to love and a gregarious partner for other equipment

sinuous dexterity of the deeper notes. The soundstage that the RA-04 presents is solid and spacious, with the amp's excellent stereo imaging making each instrument easy to follow and integrating every element seamlessly.

Dynamic headroom is ample, the Rotel shifting through the gears with smooth rapidity, and the RA-04 superbly balances the presentation of fine sonic detail with its ability to deliver the overall musical picture. You can follow the minutiae of the idyllic opening passages of Beethoven's 'Pastoral' *Symphony No. 6*, but without the whole piece ever sounding too frivolous.

Just what the doc ordered

Switching to Dr John's *I Walk on Gilded Splinters* reveals the Rotel as the best communicator of low-frequency action in this *Group Test*: the sinuous bassline is delivered with solid impact and clean,

straight-edged entry and exit. Only the RA-04 can reveal the last ounce of low-end detail and character, and only the RA-04 balances this against tempo and timing with such assurance.

It's fair to say, though, that the same song exposes the Rotel's lack of the final drop of midrange resolution. It's by no means inarticulate in this department but, compared to those that excel here, like the Marantz PM6002, the RA-04 wants for out-and-out vocal communication and immediacy.

Rotel set the bar mighty high

What this means, overall, is that the Rotel RA-04 remains a superb amplifier at the money. It's well made, enjoys a competitive specification (bar the missing remote control) and is a consummate music-maker. It's because of the RA-04 that the competition at this price level has become so intense.

