

hardware review

Hifi Rose RS451 affordable streaming sophistication

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Hifi Rose RS451 network streamer

The Hifi Rose RS451 Master Fidelity network streamer is the latest addition to the Korean brand's line-up and incorporates the firm's second-generation streaming platform which has now trickled down from the flagship RS151. Right out of the box this feels like a premium product, the packaging is impressive, the user manual is comprehensive, the sheer weight at seven kilos is significant and the slender remote control reminded me of Bang and Olufsen for its elegance and style. The front fascia is dominated by a huge 8.8 inch black glass touch screen which really is a thing of beauty when the unit is powered up and displaying album artwork and track details. The top plate is milled from milled aluminium and incorporates the Hifi Rose logo machined into it for a quality feel.

The front panel is deliberately minimalist despite the fact that this unit seeks to offer a streamer, DAC and headphone amplifier within a single chassis – more shades of Bang and Olufsen here. Despite the overt minimalism, headphone listeners are particularly well served. The front panel offers 4.4mm balanced, 6.35mm single-ended and XLR headphone outputs. This is no mere afterthought – the firm clearly intends the RS451 to function equally well on a desktop as in a conventional two-channel system. The only other control on the front panel is a large volume control which offers the possibility of connecting the RS451 directly to a power amplifier. I chose to connect it into my Naim NAC82 pre-amplifier via the RCA outputs with Chord Signature cable. The rest of the system comprised my resident Naim NAP350 power amplifiers driving ATC's venerable SCM40 loudspeakers.

Connectivity is lavish. On the back panel you'll find coaxial, optical and USB inputs for external drive connection. Storage flexibility is extensive and users can install a 2.5-inch SSD internally for their music file collections. For those migrating from CD collections, this offers the

potential to become a one-box digital hub of unusual versatility. There's also HDMI eARC for integrating a television—a genuinely useful addition for users wanting improved sound from film and television without adding another box. Analogue outputs comprise both RCA and balanced XLR sockets, and the RS451 can function as a fixed-output source or digital preamplifier.

The volume knob offers smooth resistance and is nicely weighted, giving the impression that someone has thought carefully about tactile interaction rather than assuming users will control everything from a phone. HiFi Rose has equipped the RS451 with dual ESS ES9027Pro DAC chips, one handles line output duties and the second is dedicated to the headphone stage — a thoughtful separation that avoids compromise. These DACs employ ESS's HyperStream architecture and support PCM files up to 32-bit/768kHz and DSD512 playback. While such numbers have become a predictable arms race in modern digital audio, they do at least ensure future-proof compatibility.



Processing power is substantial. An eight-core 8-core Rockchip RK3588 processor (quad-core Cortex-A76 and quad-core Cortex-A55RK3588 ARM) is paired with 8GB of RAM and 32GB of internal storage, running HiFi Rose's proprietary operating system. Navigation feels snappy and stable, and the interface via my iPad avoided the sluggishness that plagues many ostensibly premium streamers. Streaming support includes Qobuz-, Tidal- and Spotify Connect, internet radio, Airplay and Bluetooth 5.4 with aptX support.

The full width RS451 is easy to accommodate and slotted neatly into my Ash Designs Cosmic rack, just be careful when pushing it back on the shelf not to break the short wireless antenna located on the rear panel. For those who don't believe in the voodoo of wireless networking or believe it degrades the sonics, rest assured an ethernet port is also provided.

Listening impressions

I began by listening to a sensational artist who I discovered around a decade ago, when idly looking for a local gig. The moment Eleanore walked on stage and began to sing I felt like Brian Epstein must have done that lunchtime in November 1961 when he walked into the Cavern Club for the first time and heard the Beatles. Eleanore, who was performing that night with her band The Lost is simply one of the very finest singers I have ever heard. She has a four octave range, the voice of an angel and the kind of style and looks that keep teenage boys and grown men haunted in the witching hour. This would all be for nothing if she didn't have the



songwriting chops to create music that is utterly enthralling and littered with the kind of hooks, soaring choruses and delicate balladry that marks her as a musical talent of rare genius. How she isn't a megastar is frankly beyond me, but oh, that voice – personally I'd marry the gal just to hear her singing in the shower!

Streaming from Tidal I sat back just soaking up the sheer purity of her opening vocal on My True Nature – every damned note was utterly bang on, haunting, captivating and magical. When she really opened the pipes and soared towards heaven during the chorus it was utterly electrifying. This song sends shivers up the spine every single time and I've been a fan for almost a decade. The band provide impressive accompaniment on drums, guitars and piano and pleasingly the RS451 delivered the full dynamics and detail of this glorious track. Perhaps the deepest bass lacked some of the sonority and gravitas of my resident Naim NDX2 streamer, but it's worth remembering the Naim unit is a significantly more expensive and player.

The band's Leap of Faith track also revealed the RS451's tonal character. This is a clean, open and highly resolved presentation. The sultry opening vocal emerged from a deeply black background with superb low-level detail. There was delicacy to breath textures and harmonic decay that felt sophisticated rather than forensic. Acoustic instruments occupied clearly defined spaces without sounding artificially spot-lit.

It's hard to follow an artist of such astonishing brilliance, but I gave Buffalo Springfield's For What It's Worth a shot. This song exposed how well the Rose handles older recordings, this song can sound thin and brittle through analytical digital front ends, yet the RS451 retained the recording's raw edges without exaggerating them. Stephen Stills' vocal remained emotionally communicative, while the guitar interplay had excellent separation. Bass was taut rather than fulsome, perhaps slightly lean compared with the Naim's Burr Brown 1792A DAC, but timing was excellent.

Finn Forster's Broken Game demonstrated impressive dynamic subtlety. The RS451 captured transient shifts beautifully, allowing quiet vocal inflections to bloom naturally into larger instrumental passages. There was an appealing sense of rhythmic control, and bass lines remained articulate even as arrangements thickened. Importantly, there was a tangible sense of musicians in the room while Finn's unusual vocal style and timbre was conveyed beautifully.

In an attempt to wrong foot the Hi-Fi Rose with excess I selected Frankie Goes to Hollywood's Welcome to the Pleasuredome, a track that can collapse under its own maximalism. Here the Rose excelled. Layer upon layer of synthesisers, percussion and vocal effects remained clearly delineated. The soundstage width extended well beyond the loudspeakers, but what impressed me most was the sense of depth. Effects emerged from distant corners of the mix while bass retained grip and propulsion. Lesser streamers can flatten this track or become cacophonous, the RS451 maintained order.

HiFi Rose RS451

After all this excess I needed a little classical interlude. John Eliot Gardiner conducting Handel's *Zadok the Priest* provided it. The famous orchestral crescendo built with admirable tension, and when the choir entered, the RS451 delivered thrilling dynamic expansion without strain. Choral layering remained coherent, individual voices discernible within the massed ensemble. Organ foundations had weight, though ultimate low-frequency bloom remains slightly restrained compared with more romantically voiced DACs.



Conclusion

The Hi-Fi Rose RS451 is a product which is beautifully designed and built and prioritises precision, control and transparency over overt warmth. While some listeners may prefer a more voluptuous presentation, others will appreciate its overriding neutrality. For the price I'm struggling to think of a competing product which delivers more sonically, visually or in terms of flexibility.

This all comes beautifully packaged in a product that epitomises Danish minimalism and style, though its origins lie six thousand miles away in the Eastern hemisphere. This is a beautifully designed streamer that makes high-end digital feel not just sophisticated, but refreshingly affordable and practical.

Pros

- Beautifully built with a premium minimalist design
- Excellent touchscreen display and intuitive interface
- Highly detailed, clean and spacious sound
- Superb connectivity including HDMI eARC and multiple headphone outputs
- Strong streaming support and flexible storage options
- Impressive dynamics, imaging and soundstage depth
- Outstanding value considering features and performance

Cons

- Bass lacks some weight and warmth versus pricier rivals
- Slightly lean tonal balance may not suit all listeners
- Full-width chassis and 7kg weight require decent space/support



The ear is all about great music and great sound. It is written by hard bitten audio enthusiasts who strive to find the most engaging, entertaining and great value components and music of the highest calibre. This really is what living is all about.