



DX appeal

They say good things come in small packages... **Nick Tate** lives a life of style with this suave-looking little integrated amp

Rotel excels as an affordable integrated amplifier specialist – something for which it has a long track record. From the budget RA314 of 1978 to the entry-level RA820BX of 1985, the Japanese company keeps on making good Class AB solid-state designs. The family sound is clean, detailed and solid, rather than tonally rich, relaxed or romantic – and this has stayed the same throughout the years. Despite being radically different to look at compared with any previous integrated offering, the DX-5 maintains its house sound.

Although amplifiers bearing this name have been traditionally sparsely appointed, the DX-5 brings a whiff of luxury to the experience of owning it. First, it comes in a midi-sized case that is deeper than it is wide. Second, it is beautifully built and finished, and third it has excellent connectivity, including Bluetooth and HDMI ARC.

There are two interesting facets to its design which clearly state where Rotel's priorities lie. First and foremost is that it is not a Class D design, instead opting for Class AB.

Secondly, it doesn't have a built-in streamer. Were it to include this functionality, it would mean cost-cutting other parts to maintain the same price. Instead the focus has remained on the sound.

The end result is a rather artful compromise. Its compact proportions are very appealing and the quality of finish to its aluminium case is superb.

A supremely clean and lean performer with an upbeat and endearing character

The tactile metal volume knob works in subtle 0.5dB steps and has a great action; it works with the fast-acting display to show volume level and source. The matching aluminium-cased remote is better finished than those accompanying many more expensive products. Both Black and Silver finishes are available.

The rear panel offers connectivity for HDMI ARC, subwoofer output, headphone out and a choice of optical

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rotel DX-5
ORIGIN
Japan/China
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
4.1kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
215 x 76 x 251mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 25W (8ohm)
• Analogue inputs: RCA
• Digital inputs: coaxial; optical; PC USB; HDMI ARC
• MM phono stage
DISTRIBUTOR
Rotel UK
WEBSITE
rotel.com

or coaxial digital inputs. You also get aptX HD/AAC Bluetooth and a PC USB input. The built-in DAC is from ESS, offering up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM resolution via USB and DSD256.

The power output isn't great. At just 25W RMS per channel into 8ohm, you'd never call the DX-5 a power house. In practice it means you'll need to partner it to reasonably efficient loudspeakers – at least 88dB if you're using it in anything larger than a small room.

Sound quality

This amplifier serves up Rotel's trademark clean and crisp sound, unsurprisingly. Rather than simply attempting to dig right into any given recording and focus in on the absolute minutiae of detail, it majors on the rhythmic aspects in a successful bid to convey emotion. Everything you feed it, regardless of musical genre, is communicated in an engaging manner that makes you want to turn the music up. By contrast, certain other 'lifestyle' amplifiers that we've come across sound laboured – as if they're going through the motions until they can clock off and leave.

In a sense then, there's much in the sound of the DX-5 that you get from any other Rotel design. However, this is slightly tempered by its lack of sheer grunt. Driving a pair of Acoustic Energy AE1 40th Anniversary (HFC 534) speakers, the amp runs out of puff on dynamics at high listening levels. This isn't an unpleasant sensation, it's just that things seem better with the volume dropped down

a smidge. Substitute in Cambridge Audio's Aero 6 (HFC 382) floorstanders, with 3dB or so higher efficiency and it veritably blasts the music out.

Cue up some punchy dance music from deadmau5 in the shape of *Ameonna*, and you get a widescreen sound with solid, buzzing synth riffs, immersive backing synth pads and a crunchy bass drum and hi-hat cymbal beat. There's a lovely texture to the lead synth lines, making the music sound visceral and immediate. There's no sign of boredom on the Rotel's part as the DX-5 makes the music impactful and dramatic. By absolute standards, bass is just a touch on the light side and lacks a bit of meat on the bone, so to speak. Yet there's little in the way of overhang that might otherwise cause the track to drag along.

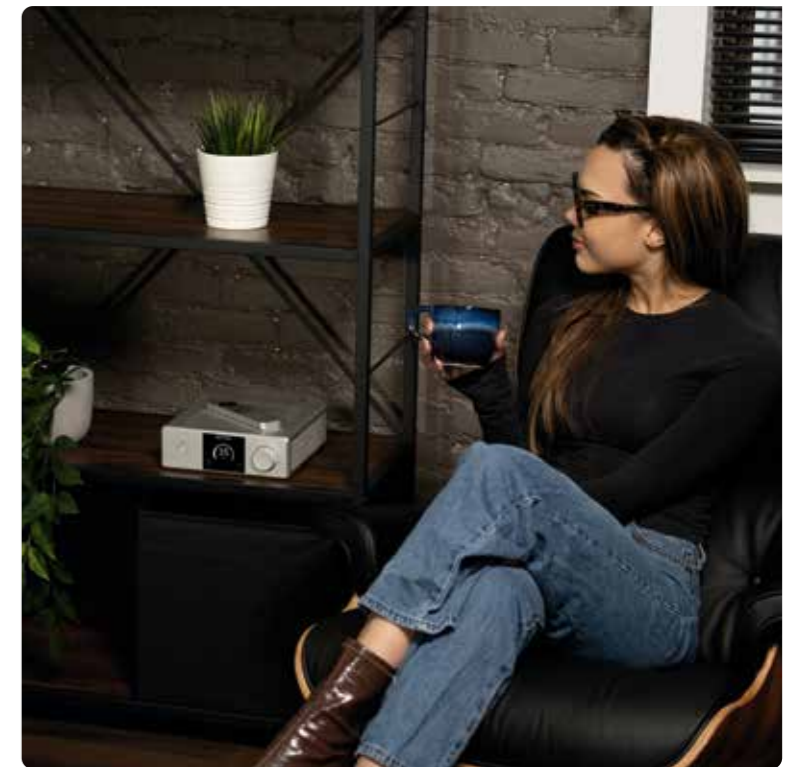
The tactile metal volume knob works in subtle 0.5dB steps and has a great action

Move to the guitar-rock of REM's *Shaking Through*, and you can hear this amplifier's distinctive tonality. It may be a bit on the dry side for some tastes, as there's an obvious lack of euphonic colouration to singer Michael Stipe's vocals. They sound gritty, impassioned and even a little hoarse, but his vocal phrasing is nevertheless very well carried – as is the way the backing piano work syncopates with it. Likewise, Peter Buck's Rickenbacker guitar picking is fully audible all the way through the track, separated cleanly and tidily from the rest of the mix. It's a beautiful, gentle song and the DX-5 handles it with good grace, while resisting the temptation to colour things in more than it should.

As is normal, this amplifier's built-in digital convertor gives a slightly more direct and upfront sound than an external DAC connected up via its analogue inputs. Playing the



There are precious few compact amps near the DX-5's price, which is why we need to stretch to Exposure's XM5 (HFC 424) to find a real rival. Of the two, the former is far better finished and sports a classy display and wider diversity of inputs. Although the Exposure lacks HDMI ARC, its 60W RMS per channel punch will please more people – as will its lovely, expansive and fluid sound. It feels more like a premium full-size integrated that's been shrunk down, whereas the Rotel appears to have been carefully built from the ground up to please more mainstream buyers.



compressed pop of Empire Of The Sun's *Walking On A Dream*, the DX-5 rightly signposts that this is an edgy-sounding, mid-forward recording. The lead vocals sound a bit sandpapery, although it is still listenable, which is more than can be said for some lifestyle amps attempting this track. Indeed, this design shows surprising grace with poor recordings, which is a further feather to its cap, so to speak.

Whatever the source selected – from MM phono to Bluetooth – this always comes across as a couth and grown-up amplifier, while still keeping a good feel for the music's rhythms and dynamics. In absolute terms it's not quite as capable as some other midi-sized designs – such as the admittedly more expensive Exposure XM5. It lacks the detail, depth and dimensionality of the latter, yet still impresses in value terms. Overall, the

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Conclusion

The challenge that Rotel set itself with the RX-5 was to make a pretty, ergonomically designed do-it-all integrated amplifier at a competitive price – which is enjoyable to listen to. In other words, its compact proportions and convenience features should not sully the sound. At this, the company has clearly succeeded. It isn't the last word in sonic excellence, but it is still lots of fun. As such, it's a highly attractive all-round package. So, if you want some style in your life without it spoiling your music, this is an essential audition. Here's hoping that Rotel's new mini separates will endure as long as its other ranges ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Build; finish; connectivity; sound
DISLIKE: Limited power output
WE SAY: Beautifully packaged mini amp

OVERALL

★★★★★