
DRIVING YOUR TUNES FORWARD

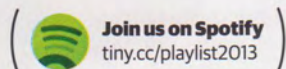
Pick the right amplifier and your music will flourish. We've tested five budget contenders to find out who's racing ahead and who's stalled at the lights

At the heart of any hi-fi system lies the amplifier. Whether you're new to the world of hi-fi and are planning to build up your very first system or a seasoned enthusiast who's looking for an upgrade, getting the right stereo amplifier is critical if you want the best out of your music collection.

Whether you're playing your tunes via a CD player, a streamer or a turntable, all five amplifiers on test here are versatile enough to do the job - and at a great price. With every model here costing between £300 and £400, this noble quintet presents the proof that you don't have to dip too deeply into your savings to get the perfect music system.

We've got some familiar faces amid new contenders here. The newly crowned Award-winner from Rotel goes head-to-head with its predecessor Marantz in a hotly anticipated comparison, while the likes of Denon, Edwards Audio and Onkyo join the fight in what promises to be a formidable test.

So turn the page to see who excels at what, and which stereo amplifier made us bow in admiration.



WHAT'S ON TEST



Denon PMA-720AE
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Long-awaited follow-up to the excellent 710AE has an enviable pedigree



Edwards Audio IA 1
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Half-size contender from the respected British specialist manufacturer



Marantz PM6004
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A 2011 Product of the Year that's still making waves in the marketplace



Onkyo A-9050
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Beefy, power-stacked big brother to the talented A-9030 entry-level amp



Rotel RA-10
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Another Award-winner, this one from the veterans of affordable amplifiers



ROTEL RA-10

£350 ★★★★★



Phono stage

If we had to choose just one source for this Rotel it would be a turntable - the RA-10's phono stage really is wonderful, especially at such a budget price. It means that you can easily pair it up with the likes of the Rega RP1 or the Pro-ject Debut Carbon turntables - each superstars in their own right - and get truly excellent results.

Quite simply put, this Rotel stereo amplifier is superb. The RA-10 makes its mark among formidable competition by turning out a spellbinding performance that's well beyond its asking price.

Spin the record of Dusty Springfield's *Spooky* again, and you'll be engulfed in the melodic glow of this classic tune, with Dusty's soulful intonations relayed with a remarkable level of subtlety.

The bags of detail on offer are propelled by the Rotel's quietly confident but staggeringly light-footed sense of timing. Like the Marantz, there's no hurry with the Rotel amp: it takes all the grace and care needed to deliver a song exactly as it's meant to. It's this insight into the emotional content of the message that firmly sets it apart from the Denon, Onkyo and Edwards Audio amplifiers in this test.

Some may prefer the smoother approach of its closest rival the PM6004, but the Rotel manages to inject a game-changing dose of space, transparency and just an ounce more of subtle detail - enough to win it the 2012 Product of the Year Award.

Switch to some Metallica or A Perfect Circle and the Rotel shows it's just as capable of delivering thrashing guitar riffs and growling vocals with plenty of muscle and aggression.

Hans Zimmer's *Inception* soundtrack can fell even the most adept of amplifiers, but the Rotel pulls off the deep and mournful progression of *Time*, building up to its striking crescendo. Instruments are well-placed in a wide soundfield, and the soaring orchestra is handled as assuredly as the piano notes.

Transparent and enticing

The gradual shifts of dynamics are conveyed with ease, and this Rotel is the most open and transparent-sounding amplifier in this group as well. Whether paired with speakers such as budget Q Acoustics or the more expensive KEF LS50s, the RA-10 deftly fills the room with revealing and enticing sound.

It's a good-looking amplifier as well: available in both black and silver finishes, the slim and sleek build of the Rotel sits elegantly on the shelf. It's well-specified, with analogue inputs

coming hand-in-hand with a 3.5mm jack for portable media players, a headphone output and two sets of speaker terminals.

What's more, the on-board moving-magnet phono stage is the best in this group - we'd recommend taking full advantage of it if you're into vinyl.

Plus you know you're on to something special when the only criticism you can think of is that it doesn't come with a remote control. And really, there's little to find fault with here.

Rotel has a fine history of turning out decent budget amplifiers, but it's been overshadowed in recent years by other well-established manufacturers such as Yamaha and Marantz. With the RA-10, however, Rotel holds our full attention - it's a talented performer that delivers a captivating and simply lovely sound.

It's this insight into the emotional content of the message that firmly sets the Rotel apart from the Denon, Onkyo and Edwards Audio amps

Rating ★★★★★

FOR Superb level of subtlety across detail and dynamics; agile, precise timing; wide and open soundfield; elegant built; good specs

AGAINST No remote

VERDICT This is a stunner - a lovely sound that will keep you enthralled for hours

TEST VERDICT**THE WINNER****Rotel RA-10**

£350 ★★★★★

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
TEST WINNER

With an elegant dip to the tape, it's the **Rotel RA-10** that takes budget-amp gold. At this price, it really has no business being this good

We often say that a stereo amplifier is the heart of a hi-fi system, and this test was a reminder of that very notion. Whether you're looking to revamp your existing system or starting your hi-fi experience from scratch, a good amplifier is critical.

You don't need to splash out a ridiculous amount of cash, though - the five stereo amplifiers we've tested here are proof that you can get good-to-excellent sound on an affordable budget.

Standards are high for both sound and build quality, and the first to fall at those hurdles is the Edwards Audio IA1 amplifier. It's not an unpleasant listen, but the priciest amp on the list falters when confronted with the others.

The Onkyo and Denon fare better, with solidly built machines that look and feel the part. They perform well, too, but the Onkyo would be so much more enjoyable

with a dash of the Denon's strong-willed authority, while the Denon could pick the Onkyo's brains when it comes to a gentler touch with dynamics and detail.

Which leaves us, inevitably, with the Marantz PM6004 and the Rotel RA-10. You could see this stand-off coming a mile away, what with the Rotel bumping the Marantz off its Product of the Year throne at our 2012 Awards. A slightly over-smooth sound is the Marantz's only hindrance, but its deft handling of detail and its sophistication complement a full-bodied and engaging performance.

In the end, it's the Rotel RA-10 that steals it. We could wax lyrical about its scale, insight and rhythmic precision, but to cut to the chase - it's simply lovely to listen to. If you want a stereo amplifier to deliver effortlessly all the emotional content and pure enjoyment of any song, this is the one to go for.

SYSTEM BUILDER

Perfect partners for your Rotel RA-10

**STEREO SPEAKERS**
Wharfedale Diamond 121
£230 ★★★★★

The Rotel's flexible enough to drive most speakers, but we'd go for these - they wowed us with their staggering scale and detail.

**TURNTABLE**
Pro-Ject Debut Carbon
£300 ★★★★★

The Rotel's phono stage is really worth pursuing - we'd pair it up with this turntable for a lively, surefooted performance.

**CD PLAYER**
Marantz CD6004
£310 ★★★★★

Our favourite budget CD spinner for two years in a row now, its refinement and drama partners up wonderfully with the Rotel RA-10.

Total build £1190

For a full list of specifications and other useful info visit whathifi.com

Facts & figures**Denon PMA-720AE**
£350 ★★★★★

Power per channel 50W •
Inputs 4 x analogue, MM phono
• Outputs 2 x speakers,
headphone, preamp • Remote
Yes • Dimensions (hwd)
12 x 43 x 31cm • Weight 7kg

**Edwards Audio IA1**
£400 ★★★★★

Power per channel 50W •
Inputs 4 x analogue, MM phono
• Outputs Speakers,
headphone, preamp • Remote
Yes • Dimensions (hwd)
9 x 22 x 33cm • Weight 3kg

**Marantz PM6004**
£300 ★★★★★

Power per channel 45W •
Inputs 5 x analogue, MM phono
• Outputs 2 x speakers,
headphone • Remote control
Yes • Dimensions (hwd)
11 x 44 x 37cm • Weight 7.5kg

**Onkyo A-9050**
£350 ★★★★★

Power 75W • Inputs 2 x coaxial,
5 x analogue, MM phono, digital
optical • Outputs 2 x speakers,
preamp, headphone • Remote
Yes • Dimensions (hwd)
14 x 44 x 33cm • Weight 8kg

**Rotel RA-10**
£350 ★★★★★

Power per channel 40W •
Inputs 4 x analogue, MM phono
• Outputs 2 x speakers,
headphone, preamp • Remote
No • Dimensions (hwd)
7 x 43 x 34cm • Weight 6kg