

Rotel CD11/A11 Tribute

Without any sense of irony, the man most identified with rival brand Marantz for 40 years is posthumously recognised for his work in 'tweaking' Rotel's budget CD and amp Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Synchronicity is a strange thing: for whatever reason of scheduling, I found myself embarking on this review a year to the day since the passing of audio legend Ken Ishiwata [see boxout, p73]. The anniversary was marked by his daughter with a YouTube video of some joyously retro Latin music performed by an all-Japanese vocal group. 'Instead of making this a very sad day,' she wrote, 'we would like to share one of his favourite songs with you. He used to play this all the time, it brings back lovely memories and a smile upon our faces'.

This view of Ishiwata as a family man is one unfamiliar to those who knew him only for his work in the audio arena, but it was Ishiwata's son and daughter, Jun and Miki, who signed off on the completion of the products we have here, the fruits of the last project on which he was working at the time of his death. Out of leftfield, perhaps, but Rotel's £429 CD11 Tribute CD player and £599 A11 Tribute integrated amplifier are unmistakably the product of the thinking he applied over more than four decades of audio design and development in his previous 'home' at Marantz.

PURE SILVER

Ishiwata and Marantz went their separate ways back in early 2019, and given that Ken was never the 'retiring' type, many hi-fi pundits were keen to discover 'What will he do next?'. Now we know... Development of these two 'tuned' versions of Rotel's established '14 Series' actually began in the third quarter of 2019, Ishiwata working with Rotel's engineers to make improvements on what were already excellent components [*HFN* Oct '19].

At the time we commented on their 'even-handed and musically satisfying sound at a highly competitive price'. However, with Ishiwata's death, the task of completing the work fell to a team

RIGHT: Layout for the A11 Tribute is similar to the standard A11, but note replacement (bright green) Nichicon MUSE capacitors in the preamp [far right] and power amp [lower centre]

that included Ken's long-time friend and collaborator Karl-Heinz Fink, best-known for his company Fink Audio Consulting and FinkTeam loudspeakers.

Now launched, these latest editions are available in a choice of black or silver finishes, carrying a small 'Tribute' badge also bearing the Japanese character for 'Respect'. While the player and amplifier outwardly look just like the base models, badging aside, and indeed demand an informed eye to spot the internal changes, both the modifications and their effect on the sound are very much true to the Ishiwata way of doing things.

The CD11 Tribute conforms to the idea – relatively rare these days – that a CD player should do just what it says on the tin. So there are no digital inputs to hook external sources into the onboard DAC, in this case a 192kHz/24-bit device from Texas Instruments, while outputs are available on line-level RCAs and a coaxial digital socket only. No USB, no network connection and no SACD playback – just load up the silver CD and press 'Play'.

Standard track skip, track selection and program play are offered, of course!

As was the case with Ishiwata projects in the past, the changes here are both mechanical and electronic, with the application of damping materials helping to deaden vibrations in both the top cover and main chassis. The DAC stage sees the replacement of eight capacitors and one resistor with upgraded types, while all nine capacitors in the PSU have also been switched for preferred alternatives. Furthermore, the electrical ground paths within the player have been re-routed.

ALL ANALOGUE

The A11 Tribute amplifier, like the model on which it's based, is something of a curiosity – it's basically an all-analogue design, with MM phono and four line-ins, albeit also hosting a Bluetooth receiver on the rear panel, feeding another self-contained Texas Instruments 192kHz/24-bit DAC. However, that's all the DAC does, with this 50W-rated amplifier keeping the rest of its signal paths relatively simple.



That said, there is switching for two pairs of speakers, bypassable tone controls, plus preouts to feed an additional power amplifier or a subwoofer.

Oh, and with an eye to the populist market, which may prefer a spot of added 'excitement', the A11 Tribute also has the same 'Tone Rotel Boost' and 'Tone Rotel Max' facilities as the base model. The former claims 'boosted audio performance and a unique blend of tonal characteristics', while the latter delivers a low frequency lift, perhaps best suited to low-level listening.

To be honest, I found neither the tone controls nor the Boost/Max options to my taste and preferred the sound with everything off and bypassed. Meanwhile, the upgrades here are in line with those that have been applied to the CD player: all ten capacitors and two resistors in the power amp section have been changed, along with six capacitors in the preamp section and all six in the

volume control stage. The A11 also gets added damping material around its chassis.

As you might expect from the frill-free designs – the only extras here extend to some provision for custom installation, in the form of RS232 control sockets, a cabled Rotel Link connection for unified remote control and 12V trigger switching –

this Rotel duo is designed to do a basic job, and do it well. So, while there's no stump-pulling, 'drive any speakers' capability in the amplifier, pair these two components sensibly – the 603 S2 Anniversary Edition models from UK

partner B&W would be a slightly tough but interesting start [see p68] – and throw in a modest expenditure on interconnects and speaker cable, and you won't go far wrong.

CLEAR TO HEAR

The claim for the sonic gains here is 'an increase in resolution and detail while delivering a more musical presentation

ABOVE: Neat and uncluttered Rotel aesthetics are retained with only the 'Tribute' badge by way of identification. All primary CD/amp functions are offered, with more on the remotes

with improved rhythm and timing', and it's beyond a doubt that the changes have built on what was already a very musical pairing to deliver added musicality and involvement. Editor PM's Lab Report [p75] tells its own story of the differences (and similarities) between original and Tribute versions, but the immediate impression when listening to the duo with a variety of speakers is of a system that's all about conveying performances while bringing out the quality of recordings, and doing so without any suggestion of the electronic and mechanical processes involved.

The Rotel Tribute's combination of warmth, detail and precise soundstaging plays well with a set such as Tim Minchin's quirky *Apart Together* [BMG Australia 538621052], giving a wonderfully focused view of the singer and the accompanying instrumentation, which is not without its oddities in terms of electronic effects and sounds. Even with an up-tempo number such as 'Airport Piano', with its driving rhythms and processed lead vocals, the CD11/A11 Tributes keep the lyrics clear.

DEFT TOUCH

Meanwhile the thematically linked, but wistfully simple, 'If This Plane Goes Down' shows well the ability of this pairing to bring out the ambience and drama of nothing more than voice and piano, with minimal additional instrumentation.

Playing the richer textures of Parry's sprightly First Suite for String Orchestra, from *British Music For Strings, Vol 1* [CPO 555382-2] highlights this duo's deft touch with the gorgeous playing of these distinctly non-German musicians – the

'He's backed by a little band you may have heard of – the LSO'

THE TRIBUTE

After 40 years with Marantz, Ken Ishiwata's impressive track record – going right back to the company's original Special Edition models – was most recently celebrated with the KI Ruby SACD player and amplifier [*HFN* Jan '19]. In addition, in a role formalised in his latter years with the company as Brand Ambassador, Ishiwata played a major part in opening up then-emerging hi-fi markets – at one point he was surprised to find himself starring in a two-hour interview special on Chinese national TV! So how did he end up working on what would eventually become these Tribute products for rival brand Rotel?

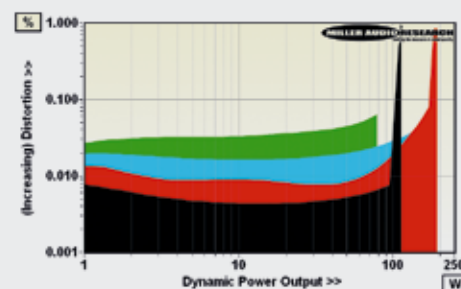
As Rotel's CTO Darren Orth explained, 'I was in the same audiophile circles with Ken over the years, as was the Tachikawa family in Japan – founders and owners of Rotel. There was mutual respect of the talent and market position and a long desire to work together but the opportunity never arose. [It] did finally arrive in the late summer of last year when our initial discussions began, with the project becoming a reality in September 2019. All of the Rotel engineering team were delighted at finally having the chance to work with Ken'.

LAB REPORT

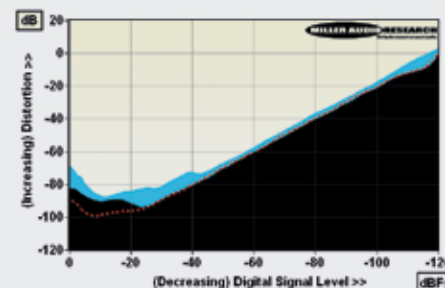
ROTEL CD11/A11 TRIBUTE

Our original CD11/A11 review carried an in-depth Lab Report [*HFN* Oct '19] so while the intervening period has necessarily seen some running production efficiencies at the Rotel factory it is still possible to *measure* and identify the 'fingerprint' of these new MUSE coupling capacitors. The slight reduction in output level from 2.1V to 2.07V, the 450ohm to 448ohm output impedance and improvement in A-wtd S/N from 108.1dB to 108.2dB (CD11 to CD11 Tribute) all fall within the compass of production variation while other parameters, including the 116psec jitter, 63.6dB stopband rejection and ± 0.04 dB response ripple, are 'fixtures' of the Burr-Brown/TI PCM5102A DAC. THD over the top 20dB of the CD11's dynamic range has increased slightly, however, from 0.004% to 0.008% (0dBfs) and 0.0012% to 0.003% (-10dBfs) through the midrange [dotted red trace vs. black infill, Graph 2]. While this increase in (mainly 3rd) harmonic may not be directly audible in itself, it is indicative of *change*.

The partnering A11 Tribute amp now has +0.5dB extra gain, the same 80.3dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW) and delivers a hint less power at 2x75W/8ohm and 2x105W/4ohm (vs. 78W/110W) albeit with a near-identical dynamic output of 113W, 194W, 187W and 78W (protected) into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads [Graph 1]. Also, rather than being held to a tight 0.004-0.006% distortion (re. 1kHz) over its rated 50W range, THD increases in the A11 Tribute above 10W, reaching 0.014%/20W and 0.03%/50W – but only under continuous rather than dynamic conditions... Also, the HF resp. is now flatter, from -0.3dB/10kHz and -0.6dB/20kHz (A11) to -0.04dB/10kHz and -0.10dB/20kHz here. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 9.7A



ABOVE: Distortion versus 16-bit CD digital signal level over a 120dB range at 1kHz (black vs. original Rotel CD11, red dashed) and 20kHz (blue)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	75W / 105W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	113W / 194W / 187W / 78W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.039–0.051ohm (448ohm, CD)
Freq. resp. (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	+0.0 to -0.1dB/-0.62dB (Amp)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 0dBfs/0dBW)	0.008–0.038% / 0.0033–0.012%
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBfs/0dBW)	108.2dB (CD) / 80.3dB (Amp)
Digital Jitter	116psec
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	19W / 213W (5W, CD)
Dimensions (WHD / Total weight)	430x93x345 (314)mm / 12.7kg



ABOVE: Bluetooth, MM and four line ins join pre outs and two sets of (switched) 4mm speaker cable posts on the amp [top]. CD player [bottom] has no digital inputs – just analogue outs on RCAs and S/PDIF out on coax. Note trigger and RS232 control ports

Südwestdeutsches Kammerorchester Pforzheim, under Douglas Bostock. The speed and precision of the player and amplifier are much in evidence, and what little ultimate bass weight is absent is more than compensated for by the warmth and richness on offer, without impeding the flow of the music.

STORM SEEKER

That ability with instruments and voices is also much in evidence on Neil Diamond's surprisingly successful *Classic Diamonds* set [Capitol 00602435318059], where he's backed by a little band you may have heard of – the London Symphony Orchestra. This version of 'Holly Holy', complete with choir and Indian instruments, is gorgeously lush and exotic, the Rotel Tribute's delivering an expansive, but well-focused soundstage. Even when used with speakers way above their pay-grade – in this case Neat's Iota Xplorers [*HFN* Jul '18] – they succeed in maintaining a persuasive view of Diamond's voice, which is still in pretty good shape for a chap about to move into his ninth decade.

While the little Rotel amplifier might not be the clubber's choice,

for the reasons I have already mentioned, it's still capable of kicking up a storm with a punchy set such as Deacon Blue's *Live At The Glasgow Barrowlands* [Ear Music 0211866EMU], on which tracks such as 'Real Gone Kid' and 'Fergus Sings The Blues' bubble with the sense of an exuberant performance in front of an enthusiastic hometown crowd. Keep the levels just on the slightly sensible side of bonkers, and this Rotel duo will crash the music out in hugely enjoyable fashion while holding it all together and showing little signs of stress.

Even with vintage recordings the CD11/A11 Tributes deliver that combination of warmth and scale, plus a relentless focus, as was clear when wrapping up the listening with Julie London's 'Come On-A My House', from the richly bejewelled 3CD compilation *Ultimate Collection* [Not Now Music NOT3CD170].

With nothing more than bass and percussion behind London's voice, the track showcases the player and amplifier's vocal sympathy. Similarly so, I might add, with the more lushly orchestrated 'Desafinado', which opens the collection's second disc, putting the voice right up in front of the listener. Spine-tingling stuff... ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

An impressive score at the very affordable end of the market, but then the CD11 and A11 Tribute models are very special. They build on already accomplished platforms with more warmth and definition, and above all that intangible quality: soul. Nevertheless, plaudits should be shared by both the original engineers and tuning team – for this duo is unmistakably created by people who love music.

Sound Quality: 86%



LEFT: Two very similar remotes are supplied – for the A11 [far left] including input select, vol, balance, mute and tone; for the CD11, fast search, repeat and program play among other features