



“WOW ... darn near impeccable ... at the head of its class.”



With Wes Phillips

BY WES PHILLIPS

Gee, it seems like only yesterday that I reviewed Anthem's AVM 20, but a quick check of onhometheater.com's archives reveals that it was almost exactly one year ago—which is either almost the same thing or an eternity ago, depending on whether you go by my befuddled sense of time or the average product life of a high-end home-theater component.

A lot can happen in a year. In the past 12 months I've reviewed great components from companies that are no longer around (TAG McLaren), and I've discovered great products from companies that have been around forever but I'd never heard of before (T+A). Oh yeah, and Anthem has upgraded the AVM 20.

Usually, the way this works is that a company takes a well-received and well-reviewed component, upgrades the software, makes a few cosmetic changes, and

increases the price to adjust for "current market conditions." But I don't think Anthem has read the *Rapacious A/V Retailers' Handbook*, because the AVM 30 looks better and has more capabilities than the model it replaces—oh yeah, and it costs more than 10% less.

"Bad form!" the other high-end A/V companies may scream—but the rest of us will be shoutin' "Right on!" Even Alan Greenspan would have to approve.

THE SUBLIME AND THE RIDICULOUS ARE OFTEN SO NEARLY RELATED, THAT IT IS DIFFICULT TO CLASS THEM SEPARATELY

The AVM 30 is *big*. It has to be—it sports one of the most completely packed rear panels I've ever seen in an A/V preamp, which is a reflection of its comprehensive list of control options. And let's start

there: Telling you what you can connect to the AVM 30 will go a long way toward telling you all it can do.

The Anthem AVM 30 is an impressive video switcher, allowing you to connect seven S-video and composite-video inputs. It also handles four sets of component-video ins and a pair of component outs. It has S-video and composite main outputs, two composite and S-video recording outputs, and two sets of remote-zone video outputs.

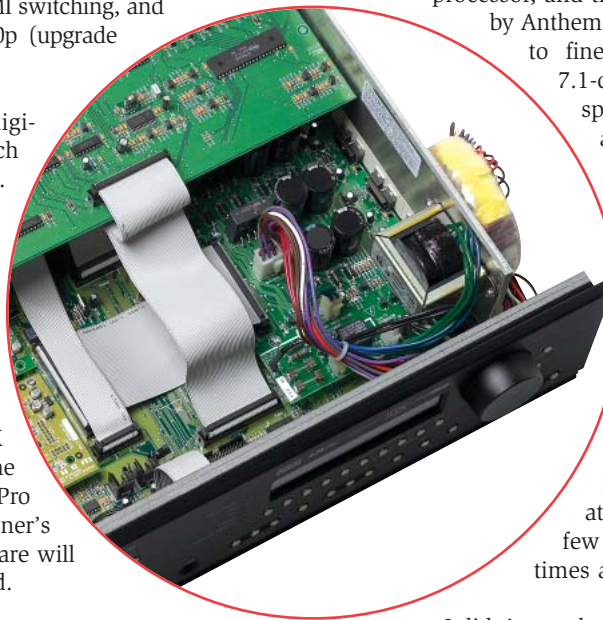
The AVM 30 has seven S/PDIF inputs, three TosLink inputs, and one AES/EBU input. It also sports seven pairs of single-ended analog stereo inputs, as well as a pair of balanced XLR analog inputs—which doesn't count the six-channel single-ended audio inputs. There are also complete analog multichannel outputs in SE and balanced—as well as analog

and digital recording outputs. Add relay triggers, RS-232 input, DC triggers, antenna inputs for the tuner, and a most intriguing blank space silk-screened “IEEE Interface,” and you have a very stuffed rear layout.

*“... one heck of a music preamplifier ...
one heck of a preamplifier-processor, too ...
It did everything it does, really, really well.”*

So the AVM 30 is a multizone, video-switching, surround-sound processor, tuner, DAC, and—we haven’t discussed this because it’s on the *front* panel—headphone amp. And its upgradeable—Anthem has already thought about the next step, which includes IEEE input, HDMI switching, and video transcoding scaling up to 1080p (upgrade available toward the end of the year).

The AVM 30 uses Anthem’s own digital signal processing (DSP), which runs on the Motorola 56367 chip. It offers a comprehensive package of surround options, including the company’s own Anthem-Logic Music multichannel playback and Anthem-Logic Cinema. It also gives you Dolby Pro Logic II, Dolby Digital Surround EX, DTS Neo:6, DTS-ES Matrix, DTS-ES Discrete, and THX Ultra2/THX Surround EX (with four optional modes). At the moment, it doesn’t feature Dolby Pro Logic IIx, but an insert in the owner’s manual promises that DPL IIx software will soon be available as a free download.



Downloadable software upgrades are an important part of Anthem’s strategy of keeping the AVM 30 current. Anthem takes this aspect of customer service very seriously: The AVM 20 has had three major upgrades so far, and will continue to accept future upgrades to stay competitive.

Under the hood, the AVM 30 has 1Mbit of motherboard memory—twice as much as the 20—allowing it to store more code, and permitting better number crunching for future software upgrades. It also sports a microprocessor with twice the clock speed of the 20’s. This, Anthem claims, means “significantly faster response from the front-panel controls, as well as from the unit’s remote control.” Yeah, as if the AVM 20 was responsible for remote-control delays—usually, they were caused by my inability to remember which button did what.

The front panel is better-looking than the AVM 20’s—it features better anodization and a softer, brushed-aluminum facade. The display is a blue fluorescent jobbie, which, to my mind at least, is nicer to look at in a dark theater than the 20’s green LCD (although the LCD was *more* sharply focused).

The remote is a monster, but it’s well laid out, and it’s programmable and a learning remote. It’s not sexy enough to go on the cover of a magazine, but it does what it’s supposed to do, it’s big enough to allow Ol’ Sausage-Fingers (*that would be me*) to hit the right controls, and it’s heavy enough to survive the cat-town races that seem to take place in the home theater after I’ve retired for the evening. And really, that’s all I ask of a remote—it *is* just a remote, after all. Does it have to be cover-girl sexy, too?

CLASS ISN’T SOMETHING YOU BUY

The AVM 30 was extremely easy to set up. Part of this is because Anthem has included an unusually flexible version of the THX Audio Setup software that I’ve never seen in another HT processor, and that I assume has been customized by Anthem’s engineers. It not only allowed me to fine-tune the rear-speaker delay in 7.1-channel playback, it also let me specify the degree of room reverberation present for subwoofer fine-tuning—a touch that *ought* to be standard and isn’t. There’s also a Boundary Gain Compensation menu to improve bass balance in boomy rooms.

And while I’m passing out setup kudos, I should mention that the AVM 30’s 77-page manual is complete, well-written, and inclusive. This is what a product manual for a component at this price really oughta be. Darn few products, even ones costing three times as much, have a manual as good.

I didn’t use the AVM 30’s multiroom capabilities, but they appear to be extremely straightforward, based on the manual. The 30 can control four separate systems—any source can play in any of four paths. (You need to use the Record path and an outside preamp to get four systems up and running, but it *is* possible.)

The AVM 30 lets you watch a video source while listening to an audio source in a different room, or run two different 7.1 HT systems simultaneously. I’ve already begun planning how I can use this flexibility in the coming weeks, and I’m surprised that it’s never before occurred to me how much of a *necessity* this sort of flexibility actually is. It’s not as though I never *wanted* to listen to music in my office while my wife watched *The BBC News Hour* in the theater room—only that I assumed I had to have different rigs to do it.

I did use the Anthem in my current reference rig: five Musical Fidelity M250 monoblocks, Krell DVD Standard DVD player, McCormack UDP-1 universal audio/video player, SIM2 HT200 DMF projector, Paradigm Reference Seismic 12 subwoofer, Magnepan MMG W/MGM C speaker system (with a pair of Axiom QS8s for the rear channels in 6.1/7.1 playback).

THE MASS FOLLOWS CLASS

If I make a big deal of the AVM 30's setup capabilities, it's because I find myself adjusting to a new, dedicated home theater, which means I don't have a few years of experience dealing with the room's sonic quirks. As a result, I was extremely grateful for all the help the 30 gave me. I needed it—especially the boundary compensation.

“... there was Michael Murray's organ recital — recorded in a reverberant chapel ... Oh. My. Goodness. ... Did I say WOW? ... The AVM 30 revealed the chapel to be a vast space capable of supporting shudderingly deep bass and power. I may never be able to listen to organ music in two channels again.”

However, the AVM 30 got me up and running in my new room PDQ, and I had a ball checking out all the DVDs that had piled up during the transition to the new HT room. Don Coscarelli's over-the-top Elvis/JFK monster movie, *Bubba Ho-Tep*, was at the top of the pile. Who could resist Bruce Campbell as the aging Elvis? Not me!

And darned if the AVM 30 didn't reveal *Bubba Ho-Tep* to have an extremely convincing surround soundtrack. I wasn't expecting much in the way of aural presentation or video resolution, but if the movie skimps on anything, it's special effects, not video quality (first-rate, with deep blacks and sharp details) or audio quality (very immersive and sonically specific). And, given the deliberate cheesiness of the plot, making *Bubba Ho-Tep* so obviously a guy in a rubber suit makes a strange sort of sense—or, at least, took me out of BH-T's fantasy less than a flatter soundtrack would have.

I was also eager to see *The Butterfly Effect*, another film that was less than well-reviewed, but that had so arresting a trailer that I moved it onto my shortlist for rental upon its DVD release. Call me a lowbrow, but I found it fascinating—not perfect, but jammed with more ideas than I anticipated experiencing in a movie so universally dismissed. Plus, the DTS-ES soundtrack is brilliant. There's stuff happening all the time—not the too-busy-all-the-time overload of bad Foley, but really subtle effects. Well, most of the time; there are some real corking effects, too.

With *The Butterfly Effect*, by the way, I was able to get a handle on the AVM 30's video resolution, which clearly revealed an overlay of grit on the transfer. This has been widely discussed on the Web—opinion is divided as to whether it's a poor transfer or an artistic decision—but the 30 didn't pretty it up and smooth it over. It revealed what was on the disc.

By the way, *TBE*'s trailer was a fantastic demo for the bass-management success of the AVM 30. In the course of its 120 seconds, it seems to hit every major thump and boom in the entire film. I expect to see/hear it a lot at the next hi-fi extravaganza.

Big Fish proved to be another sleeper. It didn't get great reviews, but word of mouth from people I respected made me think it might have promise. *Wow!* It was about as charming a fantasy as I could have asked for—and, Tim Burton being a perfectionist when it comes to the look and feel of his films, it was a visual and aural masterpiece. The video quality was exceptional, and the audio—well, it was short on the big bangs and giant thuds that so many spectaculars rely on, but all of the channels were cooking most of the time. I was transported out of my reality and into Tim Burton's (and *that's* a trip indeed).

Like the AVM 20 before it, the AVM 30's home-theater operation brings hi-rez performance to cineastes without bottomless pockets. Use the Anthem for a while and you'll start to think you deserve the same level of perfection as a rich guy. Call me a wild-eyed radical, but *maybe* you do.

Well, even if *I* don't deserve it, it was sure easy to get used to it.

I'LL GO THROUGH LIFE EITHER FIRST CLASS OR THIRD, BUT NEVER IN SECOND

When I was all watched out, I used the McCormack UDP-1's multichannel analog outputs to check out some of the multichannel Telarc SACDs that have been piling up in my to-play pile.

Ahhhh!

Jennifer Higdon's *Cityscape* [Telarc SACD-60621] proved even more vivid in surround. Well, the two-channel tracks of this hybrid disc are pretty dang lively, but the multichannel mix is fuller (as it should be) and solid as a rock (ditto). The second movement, *river sings a song to trees*, shimmers and flows with as much beauty and grace as any nature music I've heard—and yes, that includes Ludwig and Gustav. Did the AVM 30 make a convincing argument for music surround? I reckon so.

Then there was Michael Murray's organ recital, *The Organ at St. Sulpice, Paris* [Telarc SACD-60516]. Oh. My. Goodness. Music of Widor, Dupré, and Franck, recorded in a reverberant chapel—have I convinced you yet? Let's just say that I've never heard a stereo recording of organ that puts me in the true acoustic of that instrument as convincingly as this one does. Think about it—an organ's sound, more than that of just about any other instrument, is dependent on the space in which it exists. You can play a trombone or piano or orchestra just about anywhere, but once you build an organ, it pretty much stays where you put it—and where it stays is as much a part of its sound as the instrument itself. The organ in St. Sulpice is one heck of an instrument—and St. Sulpice is one heck of a space.

Did I say *wow*? The AVM 30 revealed the chapel to be a vast space capable of supporting shudderingly deep bass and power. I may never be able to listen to organ music in two channels again.

Yeah, the AVM 30 is one heck of a music preamplifier.

ALWAYS HAVE CLASS AND BE HUMBLE

Actually, Anthem's AVM 30 is one heck of a preamplifier-processor, too. It did everything it does really, really well. Period.

Is it the equal of the really expensive A/V pre-pros I've reviewed? Well, it lacks some of the flexibility and cutting-edge processing power of the TAG McLaren \$7999 processor I reviewed, but I have to say that, in most day-to-day use, the functional difference was minimal. (I also have to confess that the TAG McLaren's thin, sexy shape meant that its display was almost unreadable from my usual seat across the room. The bulkier AVM 30's is a lot easier on my aging eyes.) And, like the far more expensive AV32R DP, the AVM 30 is with software upgrades and superb customer service.

"... cutting edge ... intuitive ... simple to use ... and packed with features I actually use ... the AVM 30's home theater operation brings hi-rez performance to cineastes without bottomless pockets."

The AVM 30 is intuitive and simple to use, and packed with features I actually use. Maybe that's not important to everyone, but I found that it added substantially to my enjoyment of my A/V system. After all, expensive, cutting-edge A/V processors don't usually have such thoughtful touches as a working headphone jack that will coax good sound out of my Sennheiser HD 650s—and the "modest" AVM 30 *does*.

And as for its audio and video performance, the AVM 30 is *good*. No, better than good—darn near impeccable.

Of course, we *ought* to get that for the price. What the Anthem offers that a lot of expensive, complex A/V preamps don't is ease of use and thoughtful operation that make the home-theater experience the pleasure it ought to be. And that puts it at the head of its class.