



“ ... a processor-preamp that performs at the highest level ... ”



BY BRYAN SOUTHARD

INTRODUCTION

It was only a few years ago that a great separation was drawn between those who indulged in the passions of music reproduction, and those with a passion for video and movies. Rarely did the hardware for the two combine at a level of ultimate performance. The new millennium has ushered in a whole new breed of consumer electronics enthusiasts, passionate about watching movies or listening to music, but also enjoying the prodigious world of complete home entertainment including video games, music in multiple formats and more.

At the core of any multi-channel audio/video system is the Surround Sound Processor (SSP) or AV preamp, responsible for providing digital signal processing

for multi-channel movies, music and games. The Anthem AVM 20 is a high-performance Surround Sound processor, preamplifier and tuner, available in either silver or black finished front plates. The most typical configuration for surround processing comes in the form of the mass-market audio/video receiver. These A/V receivers start as low as \$200-\$300 and provide either five or seven channels of amplification, a surround preamp and tuner, all in one convenient package that supplies consumers with a low-cost solution for multi-channel entertainment. Those who have deeper pocketbooks and the desire for greater performance will want to consider a product like the Anthem AVM 20 and necessary outboard amplification.

When selecting a surround preamp/processor, you will need to do your homework. There is a large variety of available products, all boasting enormous lists of features at greatly differing prices. Much like wine, the best is not always the most expensive, and with a keen taste for what is right, you can save money and end up with better results.

The AVM 20 is a 24/192 kHz preamp, theater processor and tuner manufactured by Anthem, a company originally formed by Sonic Frontiers in an effort to address the growing demand for more affordable audio/video gear. The AVM 20 is Anthem's next generation preamp/processor, taking the baton from the highly acclaimed Anthem AVM 2, an AV preamp known for high performance

and abundant features at a somewhat moderate price point. The AVM 20 comes in a package visually similar to its predecessor, measuring 17-1/4 inches wide, 14-1/4 inches deep and 5-7/8 inches in height, weighing a shade over 27 pounds. There is no shortage of available input and output options with the AVM 20. The AVM 20 comes complete with seven composite video RCA inputs, seven S-Video inputs, two sets of component video inputs, 5.1 analog audio inputs for multi-channel music, three digital TosLink inputs, seven digital audio inputs, AES/EBU digital audio inputs, balanced audio inputs, five S-Video outputs, five composite RCA video outputs, component video outputs, RCA analog audio outputs and balanced analog outputs, just to name a few. Additionally, the AVM 20 provides inputs and outputs for three relay triggers, an RS-232 port for software upgrades, an optional PHAST interface and a removable power cord connection. This unit will accommodate most all connections today, both high- and low-performance, depending on your needs and requirements. The remote control is programmable with learn capabilities, fits the hand nicely and has effective blue backlighting that activates when touched. The overall layout was pretty good, not the best that I have seen, but in contrast to a rash of mediocre remotes of late, I was more than satisfied.

“The Anthem AVM 20’s price suggests that it should be considered in the middle of the highly competitive AV preamp market place, yet its performance competes with the cost-no-object big boys.”

FEATURES

The Anthem AVM 20 comes so full of features that owners might have this unit for months, if not years, before they find and take advantage of all it has to offer. It can accommodate everything from simple installations to complex custom installs controlling multiple rooms and more. Topping the feature chart is its six-channel analog audio inputs. This feature is found in many receivers and processors today and allows for the connection of DVD-Audio and SACD high-definition multi-channel audio sources. The AVM 20 is 7.1 capable for software encoded with such information, probably not yet an essential feature due to the limited software available. The AVM 20 has a unique feature in that it has multi-zone capability, giving you the

ability to control sound systems in multiple rooms. Combined with its ability to accept IR emitters, you can control your music from three unique locations in your home. In addition, the AVM 20 eliminates the need for outboard bass management by including a bass management controller, a necessary ingredient to maximize multi-channel reproduction, especially for DVD-Audio. This is a great feature omitted from most processors today. The AVM 20 provides nine input source selections to choose from. This feature is essential for those of us who have been greatly frustrated in the past by the lack of available selectable source inputs. In my case, I have everything from video games to satellite and digital cable, and have been extremely handicapped by other controllers in the past. The AVM 20 provides an AM/FM tuner with 18 FM presets and six AM presets for your programming needs. It comes with a slick simulcast feature that allows you to combine your favorite audio source with a video source simultaneously. This could perhaps allow you to listen to competent radio sportscasting, thus avoiding the need to hear Dennis Miller on Monday nights struggling for clever quips in an obvious absence of any real and relevant information. The AVM 20 comes with all the typical DSP modes, from Hall to Stadium and beyond. I am not really sure who listens to these modes at this point—the surround-related signal processing is more important at this point. Anthem offers a nice SSP mode in the proprietary Cinema Logic. I used this mode instead of Pro Logic for all sources not encoded in multi-channel. The AVM 20 provides DTS and Dolby Digital processing and, new since the older AVM 2, Home THX and THX Surround EX (7.1) modes. The Home THX mode provides re-equalization, eliminating the overly emphasized treble used in commercial theaters, which can sound overly bright when played back in your home. Additionally, it provides timber matching and adaptive discoloration for refining timing issues.

“For movies, the AVM 20 is big league. For music, this is the best theater preamp I have heard in my system to date.”

The AVM 20 comes without the newest DSP buzz—Dolby Pro Logic 2. Anthem recently announced that they’d be offering this upgrade. The upgrade will be performed (cost to be determined) at your local dealer, consisting of a board change to add the Pro Logic 2 DSP chip, with a software upgrade that will include DTS ES 6.1, THX Ultra 2 and reportedly more.



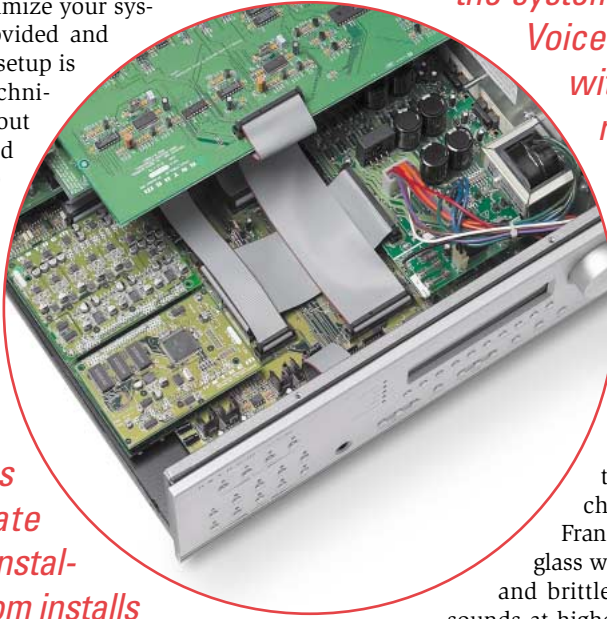
AVM 20 REAR PANEL

“On musical selections, the AVM 20 sounded remarkably refined ... great separation ... a complete lack of audible congestion.”

SETUP

The AVM 20 provided the easiest setup I have encountered on an AV preamp to date. Its OSD (On Screen Display) menus are intuitive and very easy to navigate. It takes no better than 20 minutes to configure your system and rename devices to suit your needs. Once information is provided, the timing delays are automatically set to optimize your system to the listening positions provided and your system is ready to rock. This setup is something that even the most technically challenged can perform without trouble. After setup, I discovered another slick feature: the ability to password-protect your settings so they cannot be lost or accidentally modified by an individual aimlessly navigating through your settings looking for the latest episode of “South Park.”

“The Anthem AVM 20 comes so full of features ... can accommodate everything from simple installations to complex custom installs controlling multiple rooms and more.”



To run the AVM 20, you will need to own a multi-channel amplifier and cabling to link the two. You can team the AVM 20 with any number of multi-channel amplifiers. I would suggest an amplifier worthy of the AVM 20's performance level. The Anthem PVA 5 or PVA 7 are possible choices, as they offer great value and may lend system synergy. Look for the review of the Anthem PVA 7 in an upcoming issue of the *Audio Revolution*. When budgeting for cables, I would recommend that you explore quality cabling to take the best advantage of this level of performance.

MOVIES

I started sampling movies with “Almost Famous” (DreamWorks), a film known for great music, and winner of last year's Golden Globe Award for Best Picture. I had originally seen this film with the use of the competitive Sunfire Theater Grand II—AV preamp. With the AVM 20, I noticed many immediate differences from the Sunfire. The overall balance of the system seemed more cohesive. Voices were better integrated, with less seam between recorded information. Particularly in the center channel information, I found voices were not only sweeter, but contained better balance than what I experienced with the

Sunfire processor. The AVM 20 made me feel more a part of the conversation and effects. On musical selections, the AVM 20 sounded remarkably refined for a theater preamp, providing a clear improvement from what I have experienced as the norm. In the scene where the band's plane was crashing, it provided great separation between the conversation and the roaring plane and cracking thunder—a complete lack of audible congestion.

“With the AVM 20, I noticed many immediate differences ... The overall balance of the system seemed more cohesive. Voices were better integrated, with less seam between recorded information. ... better balance ... The AVM 20 made me feel more a part of the conversation and effects.”

From “The Rock” (DTS Criterion Collection—Hollywood Pictures), in scenes such as the one in which the yellow Ferrari F355 Spider is chasing through the streets of San Francisco, subtle details such as breaking glass were loud and articulate, yet not bright and brittle as some electronics deliver such sounds at higher volumes. Screeching tires, explosions and a huge variety of very dynamic information never confused or congested the low-level information.

“In the song ‘Before You Accuse Me,’ ... the detail surrounding Clapton's guitar was terrific. ... I was startled by the finesse and control that the AVM 20 provided. ... highs had a silky quality ... Clapton's voice had body ... an abundantly dynamic presentation. ... wholesome timber and gobs of detail.”

For music videos, I reached for *Eric Clapton Unplugged* (MTV Unplugged). In the song “Before You Accuse Me,” the detail surrounding Clapton's guitar was terrific. In fact, I was startled by the finesse and control that the AVM 20 provided. I am very used to this recording in its two-channel CD version and have long considered multi-channel processors completely inferior for music reproduction, but in this case, the highs had a silky quality and never tended to become brittle as they can with many multi-channel processors. Clapton's voice had body and

supplied an abundantly dynamic presentation. The guitar had wholesome timber and gobs of detail. In the past, I had considered this pressing to be somewhat lean, with details like the clapping becoming irritating at higher volumes—this is not what I experienced with the AVM 20.

“... nice separation between the instruments ... very good detail ... open and liquid ... I have heard \$3,000 two-channel products that did not outperform the AVM 20. ... Bass was taut and delivered great impact. The midrange was very solid ... very revealing top end.”

MUSIC

I first wanted to test the AVM 20's ability to perform on music recorded in two-channel stereo. It has always been a question for me as to whether the performance of the preamp section of a preamp/theater processor could hang with the better two-channel preamplifiers of today. This is for those who are unwilling to compromise their music for their movies. After connecting my CD source through the AVM 20, I dove into some Bob Marley from *One Love: The Best of Bob Marley & The Wailers* (Island Records). This greatest hits compilation is superbly dynamic and nicely detailed, and of course a groovy jam for those of us who are in this for the music. In the song “Jammin” there are wild sounds from jars, cans and other Jamaican percussion instruments. The AVM 20 reproduced this information better than I expected. There was nice separation between the instruments, and individual elements such as the drums had very good detail. This recording can sound a tad compressed, yet the AVM 20 was quite open and liquid for its price point. I noted that the AVM 20 didn't seem to add anything negative to the playback. The question is, can it perform at the level of today's less expensive, high-performance two-channel preamps? The answer to that is yes. I would have no reservations about combining this with a high-level two-channel playback system. Does this preamp perform as good or better than a \$3,000 dedicated two-channel preamplifier? That is something you would have to decide for yourself. However, I can say that I have heard \$3,000 two-channel products that did not outperform the AVM 20.

For multi-channel DVD-Audio testing, I selected Metallica from their self-titled release (Elektra). This recording was a great test disc, as I first listened to it prior to utilizing the necessary bass management in the AVM 20, then gave it another hearing afterward. Once configured, this recording was as fun as a white-knuckle roller coaster ride. Bass was taut and delivered great impact. The midrange was very solid, with a hint of edge in the higher frequencies. This is a quality that I have found in recordings prone to high-frequency aggressiveness. I determined that this was likely due to the AVM 20's very revealing top end.

“The AVM 20 provided the easiest setup I have encountered on an AV preamp to date. Its OSD (On Screen Display) menus are intuitive and very easy to navigate. It takes no better than 20 minutes to configure your system and rename devices to suit your needs.”

Although this preamp/processor is a multi-channel product, I still prefer to listen to much of my music in stereo, rather than in any kind of theater surround. There is no denying that multi-channel music is exciting, yet with the lack of available software and quality recordings, stereo listening is still my favorite. My theater and music system is combined and, because my music system is at the ultimate reference level, I have never considered running my two-channel music through a theater preamp. For this, I continue to run a two-channel preamp, keeping my music as a pure connection without compromise. In this configuration, I run my CD source through my two-channel preamp, through my amps and out to my front main loudspeakers. When playing movies, I output from the AVM 20 into my two-channel preamp, then out to my main loudspeakers. This would be unnecessary, if it weren't for the fact the Anthem AVM 20 can provide theater processing up there with the very best systems, and fit into systems like mine costing tens of thousands of dollars. Yet old perfectionists die hard, and it would be a tall order for this preamp to keep up with my new \$16,000 Mark Levinson No. 32 stereo preamplifier.

“... subtle details such as breaking glass were loud and articulate ... Screeching tires, explosions and a huge variety of very dynamic information never confused or congested the low-level information.”

THE DOWNSIDE

A significant concern when purchasing a theater processor is obtaining a product that will not easily become outdated by the changing direction of digital playback. Anthem offers periodic software upgrades to assure that you are not a victim of this ever-moving industry. The way that the software is upgraded is through its RS-232 port via the Anthem website. This means that you need to have both Internet access and enough savvy to get this information from your computer to your AVM 20. Although this is not difficult, it requires some basic computer knowledge and access. As always, I recommend that you run the most current tested software.

“... the Anthem AVM 20 can provide theater processing up there with the very best systems, and fit into systems like mine costing tens of thousands of dollars.”

CONCLUSION

The Anthem AVM 20 is a processor-preamp that performs at the highest level, regardless of price. Its easy setup and moderate price makes it a candidate for every enthusiast with a yearning for the highest level of multi-channel performance. The AVM 20 is flexible and, with the use of its RS-232 port, will provide software and firmware upgrades that will make it a product not soon to be obsolete. With the looming audio format changes, most preamps lack the future connection method, as it was reported that the fire-wire has been accepted as the new method of transferring information between your DVD-Audio player and your preamp. Anthem assured me that the AVM 20 possesses the ability to be easily upgraded when this new transfer method becomes available.

“The Anthem AVM 20 is a processor-pre-amp that performs at the highest level ... a candidate for every enthusiast with a yearning for the highest level of multi-channel performance. The AVM 20 is flexible and — will provide software and firmware upgrades that will make it a product not soon to be obsolete.”

For movies, the AVM 20 is big league. For music, this is the best theater preamp I have heard in my system to date. I recommend this unit to anyone who is looking for great sound and versatility. The Anthem AVM 20's price suggests that it should be considered in the middle of the highly competitive AV preamp marketplace, yet its performance competes with the cost-no-object big boys.