



“SONICALLY EXCELLENT”



Volume 2, No. 5

BY MANOJ MOTWANI

One of the concerns about upgrading to higher end gear is how long the equipment can stay viable in this day of rapidly changing technology. Buying an amplifier or speakers is usually a pretty safe investment, as those technologies change relatively slowly.

Buying something like a surround sound processor is a completely different animal, as the changes that we have seen in formats have been dramatic over the past few years. In fact, the digital front ends of surround sound processors (SSPs) have essentially become mini-computers, running processors at speeds that far exceed those of my first computer (anybody still remember the Atari 800?). It follows to reason that it is possible to make SSPs that are upgradeable to prevent them from becoming rapidly outdated. Upgradeability has been a feature of some ultra high-end products,

but it is not until recently that this concept has worked its way down to more affordable products. Anthem has created just such a product in the remarkable, reasonably priced Anthem AVM 20. Just introduced before the latest Motorola processors became available last summer, the Anthem has since hardware and software upgraded to add a list of goodies including the all important Pro Logic II, and the moniker “Version 2.0” has been added. In fact, parent company Paradigm’s customer service has been so instilled in Anthem that these guys cruise the *Home Theater Forum* to look for problems that people are having so they can solve them. As a result, the Anthem AVM 20 thread has become one of the longest threads on that forum. To me, it is a significant statement about a company when they are so receptive to the feedback of us demanding audiophiles.

UNIQUE FEATURES

Going down the feature list reveals such goodies as 100 MHz component video switching (good enough for 1080p video switching), 3 zone capability, an AM/FM tuner, center channel equalization, and the latest surround decoding modes (Dolby Digital EX, Pro Logic II, DTS-ES, and THX Ultra 2 post-processing). Furthermore, the case for this processor has been strengthened by the aforementioned steady string of updates, including a hardware upgrade that incorporated the new Motorola processor only costing \$300.

The AVM 20 is available in both black and silver machined aluminum faceplates. Both have chassis cases in simple black metal, so as much as I liked the lustrous silver faceplate of my review unit, I personally found the disconnect to the black case to be a little off-putting.

This matters little when placed in a rack, but those who don't use one may want to consider the more integrated but slightly less avantgarde look of the black unit. The front LED display is unique in that it is large, legible, and provides a significant amount of information at any given time, which is a combination of traits that are altogether too rare on SSPs.

"... very neutral, relaxed, and smooth ... the midrange was one of the most neutral that I have heard ... Bass extension was taut and smooth ... overall character was cool and non-fatiguing."

INSTALLATION/SETUP/EASE OF USE

Turning to the back of the unit reveals an enormous amount of flexibility. The AVM 20 is equipped with balanced outs for all channels, a set of balanced analog bypass inputs, and 7.1 RCA analog inputs for outboard decoders. Component video switching is provided for 2 sources (although I really wish it was for 3), and there are seven S-Video and composite inputs. The AVM 20 uses a system of set digital coaxial inputs and S-Video/composite/RCA analog inputs. This is a very straightforward system that is easy to understand, but provides a little less flexibility than the completely assignable inputs of my reference Krell Showcase Processor. Still, many of my friends prefer such a system as being more user-friendly (you don't have to sit there and write down a list of what is hooked up to which number source). The TosLink digital inputs, AES/SBU digital input, and the three relay triggers are freely assignable. An RS-232 port is used for performing software upgrades.

The included learning/pre-programmed remote is very nice, with a rubberized matte finish that I found comfortable. The backlighting is in blue—a very attractive touch which is easy on the eyes in a dark room.

The setup menus, as you can imagine, are extensive due to the exhaustive list of features. Overall, they are fairly easy to use, and the included manual is easy enough to understand. Any input source can be assigned to have the audio input via the analog inputs without processing, through the analog inputs with processing, or from the digital inputs. The one quirk of this system is that it does not automatically migrate to a digital input if it becomes active when both it and an analog input are plugged in. The folks at Anthem tell me a fix is on the way for this in the next software upgrade (along with a host of other upgrades, many of which answer issues raised on the *Home Theater Forum AVM 20* (thread). Since this system also functions for the analog 7.1 inputs, it happens that the Anthem will perform DSP processing such as bass man-

agement on these inputs. Very handy, especially since bass management is rudimentary at best in most SACD/DVD Audio players.

The AVM 20 was connected to my Classé CAV-150 amp, the XLR outputs of the Krell DVD Standard, and to my Marantz DV-8300 universal player via the 7.1 inputs with AudioQuest Python interconnects. Video cables were Tributaries and BetterCables, digital coax was the AudioQuest VSD-4, and speaker cables to my B&W Nautilus 804/805/HTM2 system were AudioQuest Gibaltars.

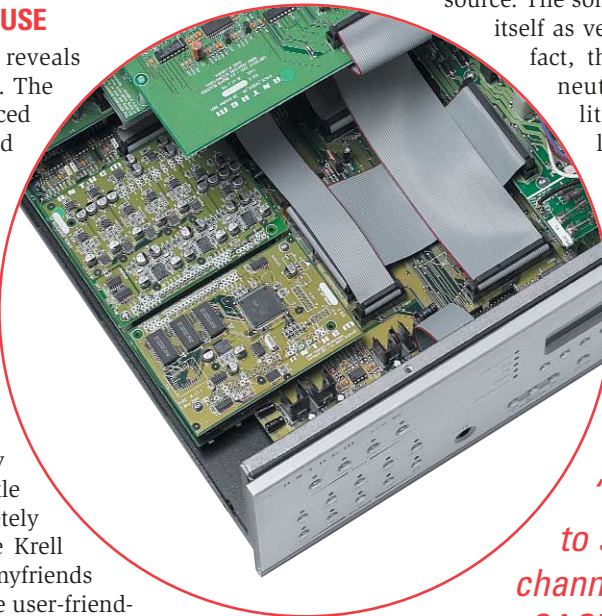
FINAL TAKE

After the appropriate break-in time, I started listening tests with 2 channel CDs using the Krell DVD Standard as the source. The sonic character of the AVM 20 revealed itself as very neutral, relaxed, and smooth. In fact, the midrange was one of the most neutral that I have heard, with very little coloration. The top-end is slightly rolled off, a desirable characteristic as there are so many aggressive soundtracks and poorly recorded soundtracks. Bass extension was taut and smooth, and the overall character was cool and non-fatiguing. In character, it was not far from the Integra RDC-7, although I found that processor to be softer in the midrange and slightly less rolled off in the top end.

"The AVM 20 continued to shine in the role of multi-channel pre-amp as I continued on to SACD and DVD-A listening ... The higher resolution music material displayed the ability of the AVM 20 to resolve detail and nuance ... and presented it in a form that was silky smooth and non-fatiguing."

More of the same was heard when I used the Krell in analog bypass mode, although the soundstage became wider. The top end opened up and became more transparent. The Anthem's neutrality gives it a rather matter-of-fact, here-it-is soundstage, and using the Krell's analog output brought more transparency and openness to the midrange and top end. This is not surprising, as the 2-channel analog performance of the \$8,000 Krell is simply excellent. Still, the Anthem acquitted itself very nicely as both a DAC and a pre-amp.

The AVM 20 continued to shine in the role of multi-channel pre-amp as I continued onto SACD and DVD-A listening via the Marantz DV8300. Since I have full range speakers all around, I set all the speakers to large, and did not experiment extensively with the bass management processing capabilities. The higher



resolution music material displayed the ability of the AVM 20 to resolve detail and nuance in music, and presented it in a form that was, again, silky smooth and non-fatiguing. The AVM 20 also generated a cohesive, immersive soundfield during multi-channel listening.

“... the AVM 20 did an excellent job with processing Dolby Digital and DTS, again creating a cohesive, smooth soundfield ... excellent dialog intelligibility ... surround processing was as good as any I have heard.”

Moving on to movies, the AVM 20 did an excellent job with processing Dolby Digital and DTS, again creating a cohesive, smooth soundfield. The neutral sonic nature made for excellent dialogue intelligibility, and the surround processing was as good as any I have heard. The slightly rolled off top end took the edge off bright movie soundtracks even without the use of THX processing, making for a very relaxed experience.

“It is sonically excellent, has just about every feature available, and is fully upgradeable. The AVM 20 is a very desirable piece indeed, and it comes highly recommended.”

The AVM 20 is a more than worthy choice among the ranks of similarly priced processors, a category that has seen a remarkable number of accomplished entrants. It is sonically excellent, has just about every feature available, and is fully upgradeable. The Anthem AVM 20 is a very desirable piece indeed, and it comes highly recommended.