



“MIND-BLOWING sound quality and video performance.”



BY MATTHEW EVERT

INTRODUCTION

Anthem, known for value-priced audiophile-grade electronics, quickly established itself in the high-roller market with their Anthem Statement D1 AV preamp. With surprisingly good sound, at a price lower than you might expect from the big boys, Anthem quickly became the value leader in the home theater industry. With many market changes, specifically a fast-changing HDMI switching space, Anthem is back with a new flagship AV preamp called the Anthem Statement D2. Its goal is clear: to dominate and conquer the world of high-end AV preamps. The Anthem D2 is priced in with some heavyweights.

DESCRIPTION

Visually, you'd be hard-pressed to tell the difference between the Anthem Statement D2 and the now discontinued D1 unless you are looking for the fine details up close. They are both 5-7/8" (14.9 cm) tall by 17-1/4" (43.8 cm) wide by 15-1/4" (38.7 cm) deep.

The same elegantly simple brushed aluminum faceplate houses the same buttons and layouts for both. A burly 14-awg steel chassis adds protection and heat dissipation for all the elaborate electronics contained within. The faceplate has flared extruded aluminum handles that can be supplemented with rack mounts as an option. Bright blue indicator LEDs and the two-line blue vacuum-fluorescent displays are strikingly similar to those familiar with the D1. In fact, the only things that really stand out as different are the newly updated white badges, which now include HDMI and Gennum VXP logos.

The D2 gained about three pounds over the D1 to reach 27 lb (12.3 kg). Those three pounds should not be compared to an enlarged beer gut; instead, they are more closely related to newly acquired muscle packed onto the arms of the D2. The addition of the video processing and HDMI switching is the source of this new girth

and it is a welcome sight to anyone with a passion for home theater, especially those on the cutting edge of HD DVD and/or Blu-ray; those who are lucky enough to have landed a Playstation 3; or people who are looking for a simpler way to connect their HD receivers and recorders.

The Anthem Statement D2 improves on the Anthem AVM 30 platform. Many of the onscreen options, remote, front panel, back panel, and even internal components are shared between all platforms mentioned above. The D2 does upgrade some critical components resulting in some pretty fantastic sound processing. One of these noteworthy improvements is upgraded AKM[®] analog-to-digital/digital-to-analog converters (one for each of the eight audio channels) capable of up to 24-bit 192-kHz resolution. Processing is provided by dual Freescale DSP 56367 engines, and all digital inputs are converted to 192 kHz by the same built-in up-sampler that the D1 made famous.

The Anthem Statement D2 comes with video processing that many of the in-the-know engineers in the business (many of whom work for competing brands) rave about. In today's "there's always a higher resolution video format" world, this is important, because in the case of the D2, you have a chance to take legacy formats like DVD, older video games and even something like D-VHS and scale it up to as high as 1080p if you actually own a true 1080p-capable video device. Truth be told, most people don't have 1080p, even many of those who bought "1080p" sets in the last year or two. Many of those sets simply scale from 1080i to 1080p. 99 plus percent of plasmas are not 1080p at this stage, but it is important to note that nearly every set coming to market from now on is 1080p-capable, even plasmas. The significance of this is that an Anthem D2 can scale you up to the native resolution of your set for sources that aren't up to today's (and likely tomorrow's) standards. Anyone who has seen what kind of problems a good video processor can solve will tell you that it can be really useful. It is also important to note that even the most impressive, stand-alone video processors at the cost-no-object level cannot make 480i (the resolution of a standard DVD) into something that looks as good as native 1080p from generation two HD DVD or today's 1080p Blu-ray.

Connectivity, coming in and going out of the D2, is plentiful and complete. The highlights are that it will switch between four (yes—I said four) HDMI, four component video inputs, seven composite and seven S-Video inputs. All of these except for composite can go from their native resolution to your actual resolution. For example, a Toshiba generation one HD DVD player outputs 1080i and can be deinterlaced from 1080i to 1080p (a much easier scaling task) in the D2. A DVD player connected using a component input at 480i can be scaled to match the resolution of your HDTV—say 1080p—which is a far more challenging scaling project. Nevertheless, your D2 not only manages a good number of inputs, it makes sure they are being pumped into your display device at the highest possible resolution. This is no small feat and in comparison to other video scalars I have seen in DVD players, receivers and even some less expensive stand-alone devices, the D2 is a very capable video processor. On DVDs I tested going either through the D2 or direct from my DVD player into my 1080i projector, you could see fewer "jaggies" and less visual flutter when connected through the D2. Motion artifacts were less evident, which was especially useful when comparing displays of NFL football recorded on my DVR. In every case, I would rather have my input connected

into the D2, not just because it's more convenient (which it is), but because the picture looks markedly better.

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In terms of audio connections, there are seven pairs of digital coaxial and analog inputs and three digital optical inputs. Completing the list are six channel analog inputs (good for DVD-Audio, SACD and some early HD disc players from Blu-ray and HD DVD if you use the analog audio outs for discs without TrueHD audio), three 12V triggers, eight unbalanced XLR and RCA speaker outputs, a RS-232 port and a partridge in a pear tree. The Anthem Statement D2 is one of the best-equipped AV preamps on the market in terms of switching and connectivity. Some preamps and receivers have an HDMI input or two, but not many have this offering.

SET-UP

With a preamp like the Anthem Statement D2, there will always be the do-it-yourselfer, but for the most part, you will want to have an Anthem dealer connect your system. While I did the project myself and was able to learn the onscreen display menus pretty quickly, there are many issues on today's cutting edge that keep you from rocking your music and movies quickly.

"... spectacular ... staggering color saturation ... the absence of jaggies yielded a more three-dimensional image ... great contrast ... even at several feet away — the image looked smooth and gorgeous."



Outside the scope of the Anthem Statement D2 are HDCP (the copy protection on HD DVD and Blu-ray) “handshake” concerns that are making even 25-year-old custom AV installers go bald from pulling out their hair. I am waiting a few more weeks to buy HD DVD and Blu-ray, since the generation two players will soon be on the street. My first foray into Blu-ray will be a Playstation 3, but there ain’t no way I am going to pay the current asking prices for a unit just for Blu-ray. Other reviewers and some Anthem dealers I spoke with suggest the Anthem Statement D2 is one of the few, if not the only, AV preamp that successfully switches HDCP copy-protected HD material from HD DVD and Blu-ray. Unfortunately for me, this review couldn’t wait for me to buy new sources, upgrade my projector to a 1080p model and rewire my theater. This is something I will be doing as the HD format battle settles down a little. In the meantime, I suggest you make any connectivity issues into somebody else’s problem. If you are really motivated to do it yourself, then know that with the D2 you get some very well-informed and extraordinarily polite technical service reps at Anthem.

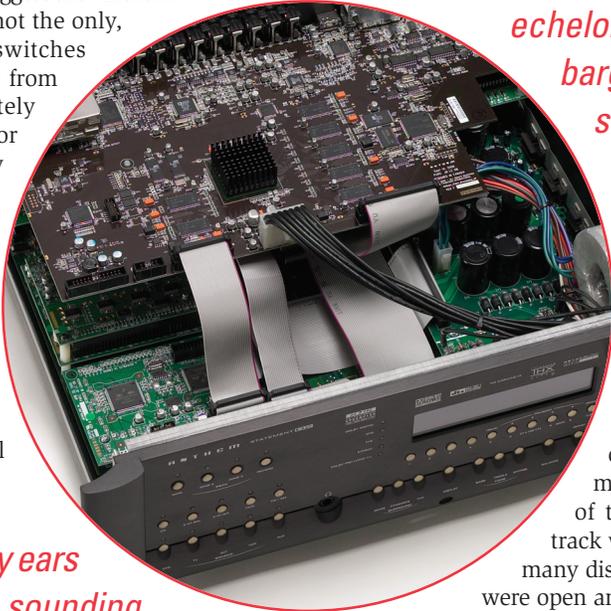
*“... nothing but clean to my ears
... transparent ... rich sounding
and deep ... excellent separation of instrument
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a crowded portfolio of drums, cymbals, keyboard
and electric guitar.”*

MUSIC

Much in the way the video is upsampled to your video display device’s native resolution, your audio is upconverted to 24-bit 192 audio. Just like the video, native 24-192 is better than scaled. However, you will always want your music scaled up by good DACs, as opposed to being left at lower resolution like a compact disc at 16-bit 44 kHz. George Benson’s *The Greatest Hits of All* (Rhino/WEA) is an example of modern jazz at its best. “Lady Love Me (One More Time)” begins with the strums of Benson’s guitar, which were sharply delivered to my ears and resulted in some serious toe-tapping on my listening room floor. Benson’s voice pleasantly danced harmoniously with the funky bass guitar towards the midpoint of the track. It is no small task for an audio system to capture this, given the broad range of Benson’s voice. These midrange demands were met calmly and were noticeably enhanced by the presence of the D2 in the system. Compared to the AVM 30 that I previously used, there was more detail in high notes and a more three-dimensional image to them. In “Love All the Hurt Away,” some of the almost endlessly held notes did not waver or lose intensity during the duet with the queen of soul herself, Aretha Franklin. There was

a sweetness that I had not heard before to the emotional performance of both vocalists. Occasionally, graininess may be noticed when two singing greats try to outperform the other in such a duet, but the D2-enhanced system was nothing but clean to my ears.

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Widespread Panic’s *Don’t Tell the Band* (Silverline) on DVD-Audio disc caters to both the mellow burnouts and mainstream rock fans in ways that only Phish and The Dead could do in years gone by. “Little Lilly” showcases the more tranquil theme of the band and features a gentle strumming of acoustic guitar with a transparent midrange that stood out from the rest of the track. The soundstage in this track was rich-sounding and deep, with many distinct instruments. The bongo drums were open and almost sounded as if they floated over the guitars and subtle keyboards. Besides excellent separation of instrument sounds, the soundstage seemed to engulf my listening position as if I were the conductor in an orchestra. “Give” was more of a hard rock adventure than the previously mentioned track. A heavier presence of electric guitar did not result in any harshness in the midrange with the D2. Bongos popped in and out of the soundstage with clarity, even amongst a crowded portfolio of drums, cymbals, keyboard and electric guitar.

MOVIES

The audio performance of the D2 was impressively close to what you should expect from stereo preamps costing as much as or more than the D2, yet I was getting anxious to start exploring the video improvements I would notice, thanks to the high-definition Gennum scaler and the other video goodies. My old AVM 30 did not have HDMI or DVI switching. Now the use of digital outputs from my satellite and DVD player into my projector was finally possible, which was truly exciting. It didn’t take me too long to get an HDMI cable running from my DVD player to the D2 and another one from the video output of the D2 to my projector, complete with an adaptor to make the DVI work. I dropped in *Constantine* (Warner Home Video) on DVD to view the scene where Rachel Weisz’s character is kidnapped by demons. Walls collapsing rumbled the room and my couch with a ferocious crashing sound. This demonstration of bass reproduction was powerful yet never got to the boomy level and never felt taxing on my ears. Loud sounds can be convincingly higher in volume and not be harsh on the ears. You are supposed to be startled by the explosion effect, not rendered deaf as a result. The transportation of *Constantine* to Hell was spectacular with the whining of the winds and the doomed souls climbing over each other in the pits below.

There was an abundance of fast-moving objects in this complex scene, and thankfully no visual artifacts were noticeable to my eyes. The bridge *Constantine* walks over has straight lines that merged together in the distance, yet did not have obvious jaggedness to their structure.

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Next, I decided to switch to a sports program on the HDTV version of ESPN2. *The Boston College vs. Wake Forest* football game was as abundant in action as it was in staggering color saturation. The almost bluish-green hue of the artificial grass contrasted beautifully against the light pants of the players. Subjects not directly in front of the camera still appeared to be in focus, such as the faces of the coaches on the sidelines. Close-ups of players running to sidelines to rap with the coaches would often result in me being able to read what they had scribbled on their clipboards. It appears in the HD world that covering your mouth on the sidelines simply isn't enough “security.” The edges of the players' bodies were very smooth and the absence of jaggies yielded a more three-dimensional image. Darker scenes like the players coming out of the tunnel after halftime also exhibited great contrast, with the dark uniforms popping out of the mostly black background. Of course, there were a few bone-crushing hits that stood out, but the video really was the story here. If you are a sports fan, you will love watching football on Saturdays and Sundays with your inputs connected to the Anthem Statement D2.

Another example of HDTV programming was *Eye of the Beholder* with Serena Yang on Discovery HD. In this episode I saw, Serena explored traditions of tattoos around the globe. The trip to India to learn about mendhi or henna's usage in wedding ceremonies was endless, with colors across the light spectrum. The blues in some of the costumes were well-saturated and easily got my attention when viewing that scene. I noticed individual stray hairs on the heads of the women during the interviews. Their flowing black hair against the light background did not appear artificially stair-stepped with jagged lines and was nearly smooth, even at several feet away on my 100-inch Stewart Studiotec 130 screen. The image looked smooth and gorgeous. To think, this is “compressed” HDTV at eight megabits per second, where HD DVD and Blu-ray are far less compressed at 25 mb/second.

THE DOWNSIDE

I would have liked to see a quick set-up wizard on the Anthem Statement D2 AV preamp as part of their onscreen display. Anthem could structure an option in here to ask the most important questions (in an interview-like format) in the configuration process, so that the customer is quickly up and running with sound and video. Seeing that most people who buy this will likely have a custom installer or geek set it up, this is probably not a big priority, yet making the unit even more consumer-friendly like Apple's Network configuration, which walks anybody through why their Internet connection isn't working.

The remote is nothing sexy, but it is functional and on par for a processor of this class. Another element that I would have liked to see from Anthem in the D2 is some form of room correction. Meridian and Lexicon AV preamps offer such features at much higher retail prices. It is hard to deny the importance of calibrating your speakers to your room through your system controller, and an Anthem D2 is certainly a worthy system controller. Perhaps if this idea ever took off with Anthem, it would be a good extra to sell for the audiophile looking to take his system over the top.

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CONCLUSION

Anthem took an unquestioned winner in the Anthem Statement D1 and raised the bar with the addition of a dazzling video processor, better audio and killer connectivity in the new D2. Focusing on using quality components for achieving mind-blowing sound quality and video performance, the D2 does not disappoint at any level. At its price, I toss around the term “bargain” infrequently, but when you consider you need to put the Anthem Statement D2 up against preamps at the upper echelon, perhaps the D2 is a bargain. I would certainly say so. With a poised pen, I paid the D2 the ultimate compliment and paid for one at a time when I had no less than three other AV preamps in my system. The Anthem Statement D2 is so good that I couldn't resist buying it.