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“... nimble, responsive ...

VIDEO PERFORMANCE

WAS TRULY TOP-NOTCH.”

Reviewed by Al Griffin

Anthem preamp/processors have been a fixture in my home theater for so long now that I can barely remember a time when I wasn't greeted by a big Anthem logo upon powering up the ol' system. Back in the Dolby Digital/DTS days I owned an AVM 30. Then came the AVM 50, which added the welcome feature of DMI switching and analog/digital video up conversion. Anthem's new AMV 50v isn't a radical redesign of its predecessor, but it does add a batch of desirable new features — specifically, HDMI 1.3 connections, built-in Dolby True HD; and DTS-HD Master Audio decoding; and Anthem Room Correction (ARC) which Daniel Kumin covered in detail in his review of the company's Statement D2 preamp/processor (available at www.anthemAV.com).

The AVM 50v's front panel is far from minimal, but the many uniform-sized metal control buttons covering its brushed aluminum face are arranged in neat rows for a streamlined look. The LED display is large enough that you can read text from more than 10 feet away, and there's a large volume knob that makes level adjustments in 0.5-db increments. Best of all, the AVM 50v's welcoming face lets you easily switch sources and audio processing models without having to use a remote control.

With a total of eight HDMI inputs, along with more legacy video inputs of the component, composite and S-video stripe than you'd ever possibly need, the AVM 50v stands at the ready to handle even the most exotic collection of video sources. Its Sigma Designs VXP video processor—a

high-end solution that bats in the same league as video heavy hitters Marvell Qdeo and HQV—can take any incoming analog or digital signal in any format and upconvert it to 1080p resolution. Beyond basic upconversion, the Anthem's video features include high-quality noise reduction (block and mosquito) and detail enhancement, gamma correction, and aspect-ratio control, as well as standard picture adjustments like brightness, contrast, color, and tint.

Audio connections include a six-RCA-jack multichannel analog input for hooking up an SACD or DVD-Audio player, 2-channel balanced (XLR) digital and analog inputs, and both single-ended and balanced audio outputs (7.1 channel). There's also a bunch of custom-installation-oriented connections,

including powered IR receiver inputs and emitter outputs, and an RS-232 port for linking to an advanced home control system.

That RS-232 port also gets tapped for use by the Anthem's ARC (Anthem Room Correction System) feature, which requires both a computer running Windows XP, Windows 7, or Vista, and a specially calibrated USB microphone. (You supply the PC; the mike, stand, USB cable and ARC software application all come with the AVM 50v.) As with other room-correction systems – most notably, Audyssey MultiEQ – ARC sequentially measures each speaker's in-room response and compares that data to a "target" frequency-response curve. ARC automatically adjusts levels, delays, and crossover points, and then taps the AVM 50v's substantial processing horsepower to apply filters to "fix" room anomalies—but more on ARC later.

SETUP

Pressing the Setup button on the Anthem's remote control whisks you to a magical world where all your A/V system configuration wishes become possible. You can store up to four separate video output memories, each one with unique settings that can be applied as the default for various sources. This will let you, for example, pass a straight 1080p/24 output to your display from a Blu-ray Disc player connect via HDMI, and then switch to upconverted 1080p/60-format output when you select a component video-connected

sources like a high-def TV broadcasts, movies streamed from services like Netflix and Vudu, or even tweak settings for a computer. This list of possibilities is sort of staggering.

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But that's only the video side of the equation; let's talk about audio. Any one of the Anthem's digital and analog audio inputs can be independently routed to any source. For an analog hookup (stereo or multi-channel) you get the additional option of specifying it as an Analog-DSP or Analog-direct source. The Analog-DSP engages the Anthem's DSP engine, with options for bass management, time alignment, room correction, and surround-mode processing. Analog-direct, meanwhile, completely bypasses DSP so that the preamp will function as a simple analog gain stage for that source. Anthem's separate Music/Movie bass management settings also let

you do crazy stuff like run your front tower speakers full-range when listening to classical music CDs and then, once you tire of high art and switch to watching *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, have a subwoofer kick in to convey that movie's awesome LFE Track.

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After setting up the included mike, ear-level at the main seating position and connecting my PC to the AVM 50v's RS-232 serial connection, I ran the included ARC software application. Two different modes are available: Standard, which prompts you to create five separate mike positions for measurement; and Advanced, which allows for additional mike positions and also lets you tweak some of the software's recommended settings. With Standard, everything is automated; you press a start button and the system emits test tones and makes measurements. Once that's done, correction data is uploaded to the AVM 50v and you can view graphs of the measure, target, and corrected response curves for each speaker.

PERFORMANCE

The AVM 50v turned out to be a very capable controller—nimble, responsive, and virtually free of HDMI-related glitches. And its video performance was truly top-notch. High-def signals were switched with no degradation, and standard-def ones coming in via analog and digital connections and then upconverted by the processor looked uniformly solid and clean.



PLUG AWAY

The AMV 50v provides eight HDMI inputs, along with enough component, composite, and S-video connections to handle even the most exotic array of sources. All digital and analog inputs can be output at 1080p resolution.

TEST BENCH

The Sigma designs VXP processor in Anthem's AVM 50v delivered consistently excellent video performance. It passed most of the tests contained on both the Speers and Munsil and HQV (BD and DVD) discs including those used to check 2:3 and 2:2 processing; clips for subjectively evaluating deinterlacing of video-based programs also revealed VXP's strong advantage over the processors found in many TVs and some Blu-ray players we've tested recently. There was no sign of below-black or above-white clipping, although some compression of highlight detail could be seen on standard-def signals entering via a component-video input. (HD component switching looked fine.)

Both the block and mosquito noise reduction adjustments proved effective in cleaning up noisy images. However, the block mode also tended to smooth over picture detail at settings beyond the 25% mark.

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ERGONOMICS

Anthem's upgrades for the AVM 50v don't extended to its remote control. But over the years, I've come to appreciate this handset, with its backlit keypad, multiple buttons for direct source switching, and separate buttons to trim front L/R, center, surround, and subwoofer levels on the fly. A few operations—aspect ratio and dynamic range model selection, for example—need to be accessed by pressing a button that does double duty controlling an entirely different function and holding it down for a few seconds. Keeping track of which button does what can sometimes be tough, but it beats dealing with a hopelessly cluttered remote.

Anthem also didn't bother to give the AMV 50v's onscreen menus and information displays a makeover this time out. Not that I'm complaining. Although basic in appearance, both text and menus are easy to read and quick to scroll though via remote control

BOTTOM LINE

Anthem's AVM 50v is a worthy successor to the company's AMV 50 preamp/processor, bringing a number of welcome audio features like the company's impressive ARC digital room-correction and built-in Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack decoding. Video, too, gets a bump up with Anthem's addition of block and mosquito noise reduction. I've often told friends and colleagues that if you're going to buy an A/V preamp/processor, Anthem is the brand to get. After spending time with the company's new AVM50v, it's clear that there's no reason at all for me to change my tune.

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ARC

