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“PURE JOY ... AN OUTSTANDING RECEIVER ...

MUSCULAR. COHERENT. STABLE. ROCK-SOLID.”

Reviewed by Wes Marshall

The world of high-end home-theater processors and receivers has been moving along at sweeping speed, often whipped from behind by HDMI, the fight for supremacy between Dolby and DTS, and, oh yes, the little issue of profits. Companies like Onkyo, Marantz, Pioneer, Denon, and Yamaha have been launching new products annually, telling us with each new iteration that we can't live without the new model's features, and that the model we bought last year is now destined for the local landfill.

This dizzying race to the Shangri-la of home theater perfection has been such a challenging competition that only the big-bank-account Japanese companies have been able to stay in the fight. Time after time, we've seen the companies that produce the truly high-end products just give up on the marketplace. Some just stopped

making them, or froze their production on outdated technology (anyone still prefer component video to HDMI?). Great makers I depended on for years for my own system—I'm thinking mainly of the Jeff Rowland Design Group, and any company run by Nelson Pass—just avoided the concept altogether.

The folks at Anthem have been almost singular in holding the torch for upscale, high-end home-theater products. They've played the annual upgrade game almost as exhaustively as have the big Japanese companies. By planning ahead and successfully predicting the direction the industry would take, they've been able to create a whole series of receivers, ranging in price from \$999 to \$1999, that have an impressive percentage of the sound quality and convenience of their category champ, the Anthem Statement D2v A/V processor.

How do they do it? Like those bright people who designed the Sony PlayStation 3 with enough horsepower to make it through several years of updates, the Anthem engineers made their processors with enough computer power to implement their own version of automatic room correction from the very start.

When Anthem developed their new juggernaut receiver program, they were able to include the same proprietary Anthem Room Correction (ARC) system already included in all iterations of their processors. In my opinion, properly implemented room-correction software has a greater influence on the final sound of a home-theater receiver than any amplification, be it preamp or power amp—assuming, of course, we start with sufficiently powered, well-designed amplification.

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And of course, stretching all the way back to the days when Anthem was a badge of Sonic Frontiers, Anthem amplification has always been clean, and way more powerful than the specs would indicate. The power output of the Anthem MRX 700 is a claimed 120 Wpc (20Hz – 20kHz, 0.1% THD + N). You have to do a little digging to find out that this is accurate for only two-channel mode. With five channels driven, the output spec drops to 90 Wpc. Competitors offer more power per channel for the same price, but what counts is the quality of sound, not the quantity of watts.

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But first impressions matter too, and the MRX 700 looks all business and all Anthem. Its black faceplate has silver buttons, a nice change from the ubiquitous black-on-black of other companies. It looks as if it weighs a ton; instead, it’s easily manageable at 35.4 pounds. The only downside is the cheesy volume control, which has absolutely zero flywheel effect. In any case, it works perfectly.

Around back is almost everything you might want. Four 3D-ready HDMI inputs and one output will be enough for many folks. There’s also a 7.1-channel RCA analog audio output, a stereo output for Zone 2, six assignable stereo audio inputs, two stereo record outputs, three composite-video

ins and outs, three component-video ins and one out, optical and coaxial digital outputs, and two coaxial and three optical digital inputs.

Missing from that list is a phono input—a mistake at this price, I think. Anthem has also eschewed the whole S-video thing. No problem, but imagine—only a few years ago, S-video was the choice for high-end viewing!

Here’s something you seldom see at any price: Anthem provides two remote controls. The first, for complete control, is nicely backlit and easy to grip; a smaller remote controls only Zone 2, which is really mostly for audio. Zone 2 does offer a video signal, but it’s limited to a composite output. 480i anyone? Do you have more than one HDTV? I do.

INSTALLATION

This was mostly an easy affair, except for a few idiosyncrasies that weren’t easy to track down in the manual. Anthem’s MRX 700 perfectly manages the most important functions of a receiver—to provide switching without any signal degradation, clean amplification, and management of a room’s inherent frequency-response anomalies. There are just a few nitpicking problems in the face of what is an outstanding receiver which arise only when the MRX 700 is used to drive a whole-house system and in the rare instance that the consumer installs the receiver. Anthem has one of the best dealer networks in North America, so anyone who buys an MRX 700 will likely have it professionally installed, bypassing each of the issues raised below. Still, I wanted to let you know about these quirks.

“... rock-solid stability ...”

For instance, on page 19 of the manual: “When [HDMI Audio Output is] set to AVR, no audio is sent to the TV. When set to AVR + TV or TV, audio will be sent to the TV by the receiver but the format sent to the receiver by the HDMI audio source will be according to the TV’s capability (e.g., two-channel), not the receiver’s which is normally higher.” Given the fact that there is only one HDMI output, someone might be forgiven for using a splitter to access more than one display. But then the main display will be locked to two-channel audio, unless the HDMI Audio Output is set to the default AVR. But then the other displays get no sound at all. The workaround is to

set it to AVR when in the theater and then switch to AVR + TV to send the signal to other displays.

For folks who use the Zone 2 setting, a statement on page 31 is easy to miss: “During the timeout period after pressing Zone, select Zone 2 source. This routes analog and composite video sources to another part of your home.” That’s great, right? But it means that Zone 2 listening is strictly analog—a digital feed need not apply. Oops! So what do we lose? I won’t be able to use my PS3 to access my home network because it has a digital output. I can’t use a CD player that’s plugged into a coaxial digital input. I might even want to listen to my favorite radio station, KINK-FM in Portland, Oregon. I can get it easily as an Internet Radio station by pushing the Anthem’s Media button, but if I want to listen to it all over the house (and I do), I am SOL because the Anthem classifies its own Internet Radio link as a digital signal.

“Movies came through with authority ... No matter what mayhem happened on screen, the MRX 700 handled it with aplomb.”

There’s a workaround for the PS3 and the CD player: Steal the Aux input so that I can switch between digital and analog. But I wanted to use Aux for my lonesome Rega turntable. I guess I could kill another input, but which one?

Again, if you’re going to use an MRX 700 for just your home theater, no problem. And in terms of workarounds, your dealer will probably figure out all of this for you.

I was most interested to see how Anthem has implemented Anthem Room Correction, and how it differs from the Audyssey system. The main difference is that Audyssey is self-contained aboard the processor or receiver it comes with. Plug in a calibration mike and off it goes. Anthem’s implementation requires that you have a computer (PC or Mac) in the room with the speakers and receiver, and interconnect the computer, receiver, and microphone. If you have a 40-pound desktop in another room, you’ll have to schlep it into your home theater. Hopefully you’ll have a MacBook Pro and it will be easy to move.

More problematic is the fact that the MRX 700 requires that the computer have an antiquated RS-232 port. Mine doesn't, so I went to RadioShack to get an RS-232-to-USB adapter. Which didn't work. Long story short: Make sure you get one from your dealer as part of the package, because the ARC system is finicky about which adapter it will accept.

NOTE FROM ANTHEM: All USB serial adaptors are not created equal. A great many do not load properly when used with our MRX Receivers. Use only the Keyspan USA 19HS High-Speed and USB Serial Adaptor. We extensively tested this brand and are satisfied it works flawlessly with our MRX receivers.

One other point that might slip by if you're in a hurry to hear how great the MRX 700 sounds. You have to use the CD that comes with your calibration microphone, because it relates to the frequency response of your particular mike. A microphone with a perfectly flat response—if it exists—would cost far more than the MRX 700. The only way Anthem can hit their very competitive prices is to invert the frequency response of each individual microphone and store it on the CD. They certainly made the right choice; just make sure you save that CD.

“... with Pixar's films, the best phrase to describe the look, sound, and feel is three-dimensional. That's the way it looked over the Anthem.”

Audyssey's mike looks wimpy compared to Anthem's. Plus, the Anthem comes with a boom stand that sits in the listening seat—a much more accurate way of positioning a mike than the balancing act required by Audyssey. The calibration routine takes a few minutes longer than Audyssey's, and the sequence of test tones is slower, but the procedure felt well designed—and using the computer's power should offer a more robust room correction.

Two more things about installing the MRX 700. First, Dolby Volume comes from the factory set at just about its maximum intensity (we've been told this has been adjusted). As you probably know, Dolby Volume is used to limit the higher volume levels of TV commercials. It works as

advertised, and usually undetectably, but with items that vary widely in volume, the sound will audibly pump. So take your choice: What's more annoying, loud commercials or occasional pumping? Anthem gives you the choice.

“... the MRX 700 just 'disappeared' from the equation. Its effortless sound, coherent picture, and absolute ease of use all enhanced my enjoyment.”

Finally, Anthem lets you adjust the brightness, contrast, and color for each input. You can also probably set these at the source and at the display. My preference is to use the display, but whichever you choose, remember to try to choose just one. Too many cooks will produce the usual spoilage. Ditto for overlaying too many different video controls.

I want to reiterate: these complications are unimportant if you have the MRX 700 professionally installed. Now we can focus on what is truly important: how did the MRX 700 perform in day-to-day use?

PERFORMANCE

Once set up, the Anthem was a pure joy to operate. Given its pedigree for outstanding sound, I began with music. I have a few standard cuts that I always start with, such as the opening of “So What,” from Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* (six-eye LP, Columbia 8163; SACD/CD, Sony M64935). The beginning duet of bassist Paul Chambers and pianist Bill Evans is very telling. The sound through the MRX 700 was delicate, well integrated, and quite revealing. After having lived with Audyssey's system for several years, the difference between it and ARC was not subtle. ARC had a more plummy, woody sound, with just a bit better integration and more solid soundstaging. I could clearly hear the walls of the studio.

The next track I use is Danny Elfman's soundtrack to *Mission: Impossible* (CD, PolyGram 454525). If you don't have this in your collection, you're missing a true audiophile treat—a festival of powerful percussion and deep bass. Whenever I play this disc at shows, everyone in the room jots down its title. Again, the MRX 700 came through with effortless sound that reminded

me of the seemingly endless headroom of my reference Anthem Statement A5 power amp—quite a feat, given the fact that the A5 has twice the power and costs \$500 more than the MRX 700.

Though the MRX 700 lacks the encyclopedic list of soundstage manipulations you find on Japanese receivers, there are still plenty of surround-sound options. Anthem's proprietary AnthemLogic-Music setting is the sort of thing I normally avoid, but given Anthem's reputation, I decided to give it a try. It worked best with recordings in which all the musicians are actually in the same room together, which results in a decent amount of microphone bleed—as in chamber music, folk music, or jazz. AnthemLogic was quite effective at adding depth without making it sound like a spring reverb from a Fender Twin. It did an especially nice job with Nick Drake's *Five Leaves Left* (CD, Island IMCD 8), lending rock-solid stability to the soundstage.

“The Anthem MRX 700 immediately leaps to the top of the marketplace for home theater receivers. Don't miss it.”

Movies came through with authority as well. I went through a pre-Oscar workout with all the available Best Picture nominees. The trajectory of Christopher Nolan's last six films had me hoping that *Inception* would be a masterpiece. Instead, it's a slightly better version of *The Matrix*. But while *Inception* left me cold, there's no disputing its mind-blowing visuals and sound design. No matter what mayhem happened onscreen, the MRX 700 handled it with aplomb. Watching the city fall into the sea was especially impressive.

Toy Story 3 extends Pixar's reputation as the reigning genius of animation. This is not a children's movie, though kids will probably like it. The movie pushes the limits of heartbreak and love to the point where a sensitive child (or adult) may just start blubbering, all the while offering plenty of laughs. As usual with Pixar's films, the best phrase to describe the look, sound, and feel is *three-dimensional*. That's the way it looked over the Anthem.

My pick for Best Picture of 2010 was *Winter's Bone*, perhaps the darkest film ever nominated for that Oscar. The film's images are deliberately washed-out and

claustrophobic, with only a few Ford-like moments of tenderness thrown in to keep viewers from slitting their wrists. But despite its tone of unrelenting dread, *Winter's Bone* does offer some hope. Again, the MRX 700 just "disappeared" from the equation. Its effortless sound, coherent picture, and absolute ease of use all enhanced my enjoyment.

Effortless. Muscular. Coherent. Stable. Rock-solid. Sound like what you're looking for? The Anthem MRX 700 immediately leaps to the top of the marketplace for home-theater receivers. Don't miss it.

