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“FULL IMPACT ... TOTAL PRECISION ...

WORTHY OF ITS PEDIGREE.”

Reviewed by Daniel Kumin

Quick, name a Canadian A/V receiver maker! Yeah, I couldn't either — until now. Anthem, the north-of-the-border firm best known for its “Statement” Series reference-grade A/V preamp (and power amps), has finally merged the two forms into a single new element: the MRX family of A/V receivers.

(Okay, the MRX receivers are actually manufactured in China, but they're designed in Canada. Anyway, I'm sure they ask the Chinese ladies who do the actual building to wear lumberjack shirts to work and to speak Canadian.)

Given my long history of reviewing A/V gear from up north, I'd expect any Canadian design to feature a no-nonsense feature set, sensible ergonomics, ruggedly attractive industrial design, and brick-lavatory construction and the MRX 700 satisfies on every score. Any feature list must necessarily begin with the firm's proprietary Anthem Room Correction system, since Anthem packs the very complete ARC kit

with each receiver. This includes Windows setup/operating software, a quality USB mike, long cabling, and even a rather nice little tripod mike stand (which they won't be getting back, but please don't tell them that). On the ergonomics front, Anthem wisely eschewed any gee-whiz user interfaces in favor of straightforward text-based menus and a simple button-based remote control.

SETUP

The Anthem Room Correction procedure demands a bit more user involvement than the Audyssey MultEQ system we encounter on many competing designs, or most other-brand equivalents. For one thing, you must hook up a PC; mercifully, a long serial cable is part of the kit. You must also install software and operate it. The whole deal will likely take an hour, including installation and setup, but the payoff is a far richer return of data with which the user may interact.

ARC produces detailed response graphs for each channel, showing the measured (uncorrected) response, with “target”

and corrected responses overlaid. My results closely resembled what I've seen from Audyssey and most other systems, but with far more resolution — at least displayed resolution — on the computer screen. (Downside? You must run the PC program to upload or re-run corrections and calibration, or to see the graphs; there's no onscreen display option native to the receiver).

When auditioning the results, I heard no dramatic difference between ARC and what I'm familiar with — aural memory's notorious unreliability aside — from many installations of Audyssey's top-level MultEQ. Both are excellent systems, though as always, in the interests of parity, I did the balance of my listening with the corrections defeated.

PERFORMANCE

Despite its compact size and simple appearance, the Anthem receiver delivered impressive real-world power. I listened first to stereo music full-range on my

average-sensitivity monitors and heard no conceivable shortfall of dynamic ability. The MRX 700 may be rated for a relatively modest 120 watts per channel (fully specified, which is unusual), but its power-amp abilities seemed to me equal, or very nearly, to those of my everyday 150 x 5-channel power amplifier. And critical listening was just as satisfying. The MRX does not stream hi-res audio files (or any others locally, alas), but playback of stereo mixes from my SACD collection — via in-player down-sampling to a PCM bit-stream, since the Anthem does not decode DSD, either — revealed impressive resolution and dynamic seriousness. And a surround SACD like Elvis Costello's ambitious but ultimately cringe-worthy album, *North* (still, all props due a guy who keeps trying to find a third way), reproduced with palpable depth and close-up texture, reiterating that this remains the best-audio recording of ol' Declan's ever-richly inflected voice.

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As for movies, the Anthem held its own with the best A/V receivers I've auditioned on the latest lossless hi-res soundtracks, including *Toy Story 3's* DTS-HD Master Audio example. Film sound doesn't get any clearer, more sharply defined or richly assembled than the conveyor sequence of Chapters 29 and 30 and the Anthem delivered it with full impact and total precision.

“... impressive resolution and dynamic seriousness ... palpable depth and close-up texture ...”

The MRX 700's surround-from-stereo options include Dolby PLIIx, as well as the proprietary AnthemLogic-Music and AnthemLogic-Cinema. These last are subtler than most ambience-recovery modes, with the Music option being 4/6.1-channel (no center channel is used) and the Cinema 5/7.1. I found AnthemLogic-Music

to be a somewhat tighter, “drier” alternative to Dolby PLII Music that is perfect for listening to many reverb-drenched studio productions.

Anthem endowed the MRX 700 with Dolby Volume and Dolby Leveler. The former adjusts dynamic range and frequency response to deliver more balanced-sounding playback at low-volume settings, while the latter adjusts the annoying, occasionally shocking differences in average loudness among programs and sources. Both of these worked quite effectively; when you've calibrated the system using ARC the algorithm “knows” what volume setting relates to what in-room SPL. I'm still not crazy about Dolby Volume's heavy-handed (to my ears) way with wide-dynamic-range music, but I would happily employ it were I ever again required to watch a movie in true late-night, young-parents' mode

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Most upper-echelon A/V receivers today include at least some media-streaming capabilities and the MRX 700 is no exception. The Anthem's, however, are comparatively light: Internet radio via the ubiquitous, free V-Tuner service and playback of music files (photos and videos aren't supported) from a USB memory device physically plugged into the receiver's front or rear USB ports. There's no streaming from a home network and music playback is restricted to MP3, WMA-9/vbr or WAV files (and MP4/AAC, the omission in Anthem's owner's manual to the contrary),

which leaves hi-res/loss-less music geeks out in the cold, at least in terms of direct-to-receiver playback.

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Moving over to the video side, our standard battery of test DVDs and Blu-rays revealed no discrete flaws from the MRX 700's video processor. Up-converted DVDs looked solid and high-def component-video sources that were cross-converted to the Anthem's HDMI output also looked just fine. However, I did judge that DVD images delivered via component video looked barely softer than the same signal viewed via HDMI, though this was only rarely noticeable on real program material.

ERGONOMICS

It's clear that Anthem took considerable pains to keep this A/V receiver simple. On the whole, they succeeded admirably. Anthem's onscreen menus and displays are beautifully plain and lucid. The supplied backlit remote is a paragon of simplicity and readability and its control layout and operation hierarchies are just as thoughtful. The secret to this elegance is that uniquely among high-end receivers, the Anthem's remote is not a multi-component clicker; it operates the MRX 700, period.

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Great stuff, overall. However, there's no direct-connect iPod/iPhone functionality, something found on several similarly costly competitors. (An Anthem iPod dock is “in the pipeline.”) And then there's the MRX 700's single HDMI output. If, like me, you have a setup with both an everyday TV and a

projector/screen for occasional use, the lack of selectable dual HDMI outs is a genuine inconvenience.

BOTTOM LINE

I loved almost everything about Anthem's maiden AVR effort: its audio, its video, its outstanding usability. But \$2,000, or even \$1,500 will buy several other excellent-performing and more heavily equipped A/V receivers. They may not have Anthem's high-end-A/V pedigree or be designed in North America, but one or two may well look and sound just about as good. But it's more than likely that many who encounter the new Anthem MRX's will also fall in love with their just-different-enough Canadian approach. See? It can indeed be done. — DK

“Power delivery was generous: The MRX 700 very nearly doubled output into 4-ohm loads (in stereo mode), which is rare for a receiver, and also delivered a very healthy 94 watts with five channels driven simultaneously, which is far above average.”

