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AVM 50



MCA 50

**“... sounded fantastic ... AMONG THE BEST,
IF NOT THE BEST, FOR THE MONEY.”**

BY AL GRIFFIN

Anthem's AVM Series home theater audio preamp/processors are considered among the best—if not the best—for the money. An earlier enthusiastic review in these pages made much of the AVM 30's THX Ultra2 certification, multichannel analog input with full bass management, and extensive list of surround modes.

Fast-forward 2 years to the AVM 50, essentially an AVM 30 update that adds HDMI switching to the mix to plug in high-def sources. But what's *really* new is a sophisticated built-in video processor based on Gennum's VXP chip. This lets the AVM 50 provide a serious bunch of video goodies, including pixel-based, motion-adaptive deinterlacing of 480i and 1080i-format signals and upscaling of any S-Video or better source signal to the 1080p HDTV format. The Anthem's sleek, silvery brushed-aluminum face contains a large control knob that adjusts volume in half-dB increments, and an equally sizable LED display.

Front-panel controls fully duplicate those provided on the remote, including switching among the pre/pro's three zones. There's also a 1/4-inch headphone output, though I wish it had Dolby Headphone processing for nighttime surround listening. Anthem also sent me its MCA 50 five-channel amplifier, a hefty beast rated at 180 watts per channel (all channels driven!). It features both regular RCA and balanced XLR inputs to accept signals from the AVM 50, and automatic turn-on via the pre/pro's 12-volt trigger.

SETUP

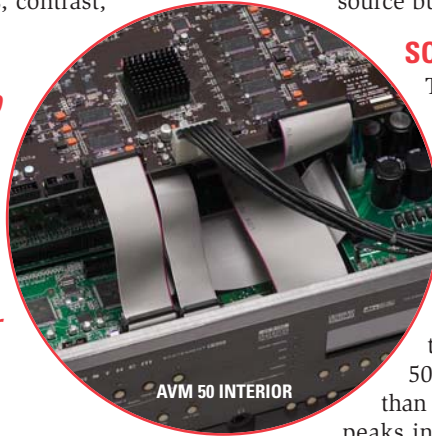
After swapping my AVM 30 and reference amp for the new gear, I connected my HD-DVD player and high-def cable box to the AVM 50 via HDMI. The Anthem's HDMI output fed a Sim2 1080p front projector, though for good measure, I also checked its video on Sony's new 40-inch XBR 1080p flat-panel LCD.

Like the AVM 30, the AVM 50 gives you incredible setup flexibility. On the audio side, you can independently adjust speaker crossover frequency for the left, right, center, main surrounds, back surrounds, and subwoofer channels; select center speaker EQ to compensate for placement atop a TV or inside furniture; and create a custom notch filter to purge boom-inducing room-resonance peaks. You can also set up separate Cinema and Music speaker configurations with bass-management settings customized for source material with and without a low-frequency effects (LFE) track.

For video, you can choose component video or HDMI as your default high-def output, and choose from a long list of signal formats including 1080i/p (at 24, 30, and 60 Hz frame rates) and some unusual ones found on plasma TVs (1366 x 768, anyone?). You can even specify high-or standard-definition color space.

But those are just the basics. A video-processor menu lets you configure source-specific picture settings for each component hooked up to the AVM 50. The options include cropping to remove noise at the picture edges (a common problem with cable TV); 4:3 and 16:9 aspect ratios with various zoom and stretch modes; and a full suite of picture adjustments such as color, hue, brightness, contrast, noise reduction, and detail enhancement.

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One of the Anthem's most powerful tools is its Source Setup/Preset menu, which lets you map any analog or digital audio and video input on the preamp to a specific source and have that preset path come up any time you select that source. Using this feature, I set my HD-DVD player and cable box to run both digital audio and high-def video signals through the AVM 50's HDMI inputs. I then set up additional presets to handle 480i-rez video and digital audio signals coming from both the HD-DVD player and cable box's component video and coaxial digital outputs.

“... a potent pair for movies ... powerful presence ... startlingly full ... a gutsier performance than my regular amp ... sailing through dynamic peaks in soundtracks without audible strain.”

This strategy let me pass 1080i HDTV signals from both sources through the processor essentially unaltered, except to boost them to 1080p. And for low-rez DVDs and cable signals, the AVM 50 applied its magic video enhancements while handling chores such as formatting the aspect ratio of 4:3 TV programs. All I had to do to make this stuff happen was press the corresponding source button on the Anthem's remote. Nice!

SOUND QUALITY

The AVM 50 and MCA 50 proved a potent pair for movies, thanks in part to HDMI switching that let me pull the high bit-rate Dolby Digital Plus soundtracks off HD DVDs like *The Chronicles of Riddick*. In a scene where the Necromongers wage an attack, the surround-effects pans that accompany the ship flyovers had a powerful presence, and exploding projectiles hitting the ground sounded startlingly full. The MCA 50 generally delivered a gutsier performance than my regular amp, sailing through dynamic peaks in soundtracks without audible strain.

Music also sounded fantastic on the Anthem combo. On the traditional ballad "Black Is the Color," by the Philadelphia-based folk group Espers, vocals came across clear and lifelike, while the background acoustic guitar and percussion had a warm, pleasing tone. The AVM 50's AnthemLogic-Music mode helped enhance the presentation of this and every other music track I listened to by subtly widening the stereo image while retaining solid center focus. After living with AnthemLogic-Music for a while, I now strongly prefer it to straight stereo.

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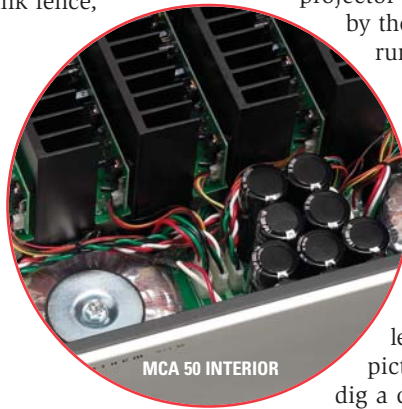


AVM 50 REAR PANEL

PICTURE QUALITY

Watching the *Training Day* HD-DVD on the 1080p-rez front projector with the Anthem upconverting the player's 1080i-format video, complex moving images like an aerial pan of a freeway looked nothing less than completely solid and film-like. And in a tracking shot of Alonzo (Denzel Washington) and Jake (Ethan Hawke) cruising past a chain-link fence, the picture showed no sign of breakup.

"... complex moving images looked nothing less than completely solid and film-like ... no sign of breakup ... I was amazed at the level of sharpness and clarity ... crisp, seamless picture ..."



Moving on to the stop-animated feature *Chicken Run* on HBO HD, I was amazed at the level of sharpness and clarity on the 40-inch LCD. The Anthem's crisp, seamless picture is mainly a result of the Gnum chip's pixel-based motion-adaptive deinterlacing, which selectively culls information from adjacent fields of video in 1080i high-def and 480i standard-def signals to construct the progressive-scan image. Unlike processors that discard one field from a video frame and line-double the other to create a progressive frame, the Gnum approach keeps the picture sharp even on fast motion.

"... A SWEET DEAL ... I've got nothing but deep, unabashed love for this Anthem combination."

It's no secret that regular 480i pictures from DVD and cable/satellite need help to look good on any big screen HDTV. The Anthem's noise reduction let me eliminate grain in standard-def pictures, while judicious application of its detail enhancement helped pump up edge transitions without adding an unnatural "ringing" effect. With both the front projector and the LCD, standard-def signals processed by the AVM 50 looked noticeably better than those run straight in to the TV.

BOTTOM LINE

While the AVM 50's price might seem hefty for anything but a huge flat-screen, it's actually two state-of-the-art products in one. That officially qualifies it as a sweet deal. Do I have any complaints? Well, its remote control could be updated with additional buttons to let users quickly switch aspect ratios and access picture controls—things that you now have to dig a couple of onscreen menus deep to get to. Outside of that, I've got nothing but deep, unabashed love for this Anthem combination.

Snapshot

The stack's great performance and versatile features—including high-end video processing—make it tough to beat.

Plus

- Crisp, clean 1080p video upconversion,
- Generous selection of stereo and surround processing modes.
- Analog multichannel audio input with full bass management.

Minus

No direct remote-control access to video features.