

audition

equipment review

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Arcam DiVA AVR350 AV Home Theatre Receiver



Arcam is carving out quite a nice little niche for itself with its DiVA AV products. Whereas most brands tend to perform first and foremost with DVD-Video material Arcam's approach is to build them for movies and tune them for music. It's a design formula that works.

AV receivers are two-a-penny and if you look at the most popular brands, they're Japanese. The 'usual suspects' are Yamaha, Sony, Denon, Pioneer and Marantz. All except Marantz produce so-called 'mega receivers' which are packed to the hilt with every processing and surround feature imaginable. Don't get me wrong, I'm not criticising this popular

and successful approach, but there is another way.

One of Arcam's most popular designs that bore out this theory was the AVR300. This was an AV receiver that stood out from the crowd, not because it was the biggest or decoded the most - quite the opposite in fact. What it did was simple and that was to handle movies and music with equal measure and without the usual compromise. It gained a lot of fans as a home theatre receiver that was genuinely a cut above the rest. Well, it's been joined by a bigger brother - the new AVR350.

This addition brings the DiVA AV receiver range up to three, plus there's the AVP700/P1000 combination that we reviewed a while ago in issue AVL-155 Arcam also has a top-flight preamp/processor/multichannel amp

**Arcam's new
AV receiver is
built for
movies and
tuned for
music**

By Nic Tatham



duo in its FMJ range and there are DVD players to suit also.

The decision was made some time ago that certain Arcam products were to be built in China and the AVR350's one of them, although there's no way you can tell whether this receiver has been made in the Guan Dong Province or Cambridgeshire, Arcam's ancestral home county in England. In fact the only way of telling is a tiny label on the box that states Made in PRC. Arcam does still manufacture plenty of equipment in its Cambridge factory, which is something I'll be seeing for myself as I'm heading over to the UK soon and will be taking a first-hand look when I visit the factory.

More and more British hi-fi companies are moving their entire manufacturing to China and other parts of Asia, but it's good to know that there's still some traditional brands being made the traditional way.

The AVR350 is a heavy bit of kit and is physically quite big but not to the same degree as the most mega of Japanese AV receivers. Build quality is superb and there's a reassuring solidness about this receiver. Years ago Arcam used a lot of plastic in its products and build quality wasn't exactly one of its strongest points. This is no longer the case and an Arcam product such as this is metal in construction, even down to the aluminium volume knob.

It's inside the AVR350 that counts though and one of the problems that 99.9 per cent of all AV receivers suffer from doesn't afflict this one. It's

usually a good idea to take a big pinch of salt with AV receiver power output ratings but in this case what's stated is actually the truth. The AVR350 delivers 7 x 100 watts per channel and stereo power output is over 120 watts into either a 4 ohm or 8 ohm load. This is called 'real world power' and is rare in a receiver to actually generate the sort of watts claimed - most don't come anywhere near the figure. To muster 700 real world watts you need a very capable power supply and the huge toroidal transformer that's used (and accounts for a large part of the AVR350's 16 kilos) plus the capacitor's 48,000 microfarads reservoir to draw on is how it's achieved.

As far as decoding's concerned the AVR350 covers all the relevant bases. It'll handle all that's currently available; namely Dolby Digital EX, DTS-ES, DTS 24/96 and the latest Dolby Pro Logic Ix algorithms. Future system software upgrades can also be installed via a 2-way RS232 port. Another new feature is HDMI switching plus HDTV compatible Component/RGB switching. The receiver is equipped with two HDMI inputs and one output, however it's only the video that's switchable - the audio is pass through only, which was a deliberate feature by the Arcam designers. It'll still be another year or so before we see receivers bearing HDMI 1.3 with full bandwidth support for lossless next generation surround formats.

Arcam has opted not to include any sort of automated set-up either - it's up to the user to configure everything and although this can be a daunting task for the uninitiated, I pleased to report that it's a fairly simple task on the AVR350. A basic set-up menu appears on-screen and you can get as involved as you like; either simply setting things like speaker size and delay times or you can get more involved and bring out a sound meter and really get stuck into the finer details of its configuration and system integration.

It's also rare to find a receiver that'll cope with 4 ohm home theatre speakers, but this is something else that doesn't bother the Arcam. A small switch on the rear allows you to select either 4 ohm or 8-ohm load and because of its genuine power output the AVR350 is able to cope with

trickier speaker loads. Running my set of KEF iQs it was never going to be a problem for the Arcam - these are 8 ohms across the board, high sensitivity and most AV receivers love 'em. They do demand quality processing and amplification though and are certainly revealing enough to show if the electronics aren't up to the job. Somehow though, I wasn't expecting this to be the case.

Providing the music and movies hooked up an Onkyo DV-SP502 and HDMI-equipped Toshiba SD-6980 DVD players plus I added my Teac VRDS CD transport using the Arcam's onboard digital-to-analogue conversion (DAC). Which uses the best chips in the business - namely Wolfson Microelectronic's 24-bit 192kHz variety. Another interesting technology applied here is Arcam's Mask Of Silence which is something it first developed and implemented in its up-market FMJ products. It works by using ferrite to shield, damp and filter digital noise and by doing so, improve both audio and video performance.

Internally things may be silent, but what comes out of the speaker sockets certainly isn't. Driving my KEF collection I was treated to some of the highest quality surround sound I've

Vital Statistics

Dimensions:

430 x 145 x 433mm

Weight:

16.2kg

Price:

\$3,998

Distributor:

Absolute Audio Vision Pty Ltd
Unit 3, 177 Arthur Street
Homebush, NSW 2140

Telephone:

(02) 9764 5092

Facsimile:

(02) 9764 5304

Website:

www.absoluteaudiovision.com.au

Technotalk

Product Type:

AV home theatre receiver

Power Output:

7 x 100 watts (4 or 8 ohms)

Decoding Formats:

See text

Sampling Frequency:

32, 44.1, 48, 96, 192kHz

Frequency Response:

20Hz-20kHz (+/- 0.25dB)

Signal To Noise Ratio:

100dB (analogue/digital)

Input Sensitivity:

2V RMS Normal, line level)

Total Harmonic Distortion:

0.003% (90dB, 22kHz)

Video Connections:

5 x Composite, 5 x S-Video, 3 x 100MHz Component, 2 x switchable HDMI, 1 x HDMI out

Audio D/A Conversion:

Wolfson 192kHz/24-bit

Technotalk specifications and recommended retail prices are supplied by the manufacturer





“War Of The Worlds and the tripod emergence scene sounds frighteningly realistic with tremendous dynamic crunch and impact. Here the Arcam delivers this bass-laden and frantic few movie minutes with complete and utter control across every channel.”

heard coming out of a single box. The Superbit DVD of *Lawrence Of Arabia* looked and sounded as fresh as a daisy - not bad for a 44 year old film. In DTS 5.1 mode the unforgettable music score is handled well by the Arcam, which doesn't exaggerate the near-distortion levels as the music kicks in. One less able amplifiers, there are a couple of such moments in the film where you're reaching for the remote to turn the volume down.

More modern movie material really shows what the AVR350's capable of. *War Of The Worlds* and the tripod emergence scene sounds frighteningly realistic with tremendous dynamic crunch and impact. Here the Arcam delivers this bass-laden and frantic few movie minutes with complete and utter control across every channel. I've heard this sequence on many AV receivers but the Arcam delivers it with more sonic detail and effects snap into focus better than I'd previously heard. The same was true with *Spiderman 2* and DVD after DVD films just sounded more alive via the Arcam than I was used to.

Putting the 'tuned for music' bit to the test with everything bar two channels of amplification switched off I could have been listening to a quality integrated amp - which in essence I was. Music fares much better on this surround receiver than the vast majority and it really does a fine job in both roles.

Building on its previous success, the AVR350 is a cut or two above your average AV receiver. What it lacks in features compared to the biggest and most brutish Japanese alternatives it more than makes up with traditional British resolve and performance diplomacy. This is one AV home theatre

receiver that bridges any gap between music and movie use and it does so with due attention to both. **AVL**

Ancillary Equipment: KEF iQ Series loudspeaker system, Onkyo DV-SP702 universal DVD player, Neotech Component Video leads, Nordost Silver Flatline loudspeaker cables, Black Box mains conditioner, Concorde equipment support

O p i n i o n

The 'Opinion' expressed here is that of the reviewer, summarised in the form of a 5-star rating system, and should be considered as an integral part of the full contents of this Audition Equipment Review. As such, each category should be judged on its own merits and not necessarily used as a comparison with other equipment reviews in this, or other editions of Audio & Video Lifestyle magazine.

- ★ Shocker
- ★★ Average
- ★★★ Good
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★★ Perfection

“Whereas most brands tend to perform first and foremost with DVD-Video material Arcam's approach is to build them for movies and tune them for music.”

- Performance ★★★★★
- Build Quality ★★★★★
- Compatibility ★★★★★
- Value For Money ★★★★★

