

[Anthem MRX 500 AV Receiver Review](#)

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From a technical standpoint, the most exciting feature of the new MRX receivers is the ARC system, which is the same system that's found in Anthem's high-end components like the AVM 50v/D2v AV processors. The key difference is that the AV processors have twice the processing power of the MRX receivers which allows them to achieve a frequency curve that's closer to the target frequency curve. The other difference is that correction range in AVM 50v/D2v can be manually set up to 20 kHz whereas for MRX the limit is 5 kHz.

The ARC setup isn't as simple as the calibration systems implemented in other AV receivers but it isn't terribly complicated either. I suppose the question is – is the extra effort worth it? The vast majority of AV receivers on the market come supplied with a microphone which plugs directly into the receiver. The receiver plays a series of test tones through each speaker while the microphone listens and then the system determines how to best optimize the sound in your particular room. Easy peasy.

The ARC system supplied with all of the new Anthem MRX receivers is composed of several pieces: a microphone, a microphone stand, a USB cable, a serial cable and the ARC computer software (for PC and Mac running Windows emulation). Unlike other calibration systems, the ARC requires a computer to perform the calibration since it requires much more processing power than can be achieved by chips built into AV receivers. If you own a laptop this won't be a big deal, but if you don't you'll have to temporarily set up a desktop computer in the home theatre. The ARC system requires that you connect the AV receiver to the computer using the provided serial cable. However, most laptops don't have a serial port so you'll likely need to make a trip to a local computer store to pick up a USB to serial adapter. Anthem recommends using the Keyspan (USA-19HS) USB to serial adapter which can be

purchased directly from Anthem for \$25, or Anthem dealers. Once you've got everything connected, the ARC runs just like any other room calibration system – test tones are played on each speaker as the microphone is repositioned a number of times around the room and then the system adjusts the frequency curve for each speaker in the attempt to provide the flattest response. With five microphone locations, the ARC took about 20 minutes to run. Some users may find the documentation supplied with the ARC system a little insufficient, while others may require the help of someone who's computer savvy.

What I did like about the ARC is that unlike most other calibration systems, this one displays a frequency response graph (frequency vs. amplitude) for each speaker. Each graph has three frequency responses plotted on it: measured, target and calculated (by the ARC). Hence the graphs allow you to visualize how each speaker originally performs in your room, what the target frequency response should be and how it is modified by the ARC system. That's wonderful!

During this review, the MRX 500 was connected to the Sinclair Audio Brighton speakers which I just finished reviewing for the Feb/Mar 2011 issue of CANADA HiFi. Following the ARC calibration I listened to a few stereo CDs and found the MRX 500 to offer an excellent audio performance with a soundstage that was large and had great definition. However, I saved all of my detailed note-making for a couple of multi-channel albums: the Rolling Stones "Shine a Light" on Blu-ray and the Dire Straits "Brothers In Arms" SACD. It didn't take very long for me to pick up on the characteristics of the MRX 500 – the sound was highly detailed with a touch of warmth and a perfectly clean background. Keith Richards playing the 12 string guitar on "As Tears Go By" sounded delightfully real, as if someone was playing it right in front of me. My ears could easily pick up the sound of each string as the guitar pick hit it yet all the strings put together played in perfect harmony. Mick Jagger's voice played cleanly in the centre channel and the MRX 500 ensured that all the tiniest nuances of his voice arrived at my ears. The rear channels in the meantime, accompanied the live performance with a well balanced enthusiasm of the audience – they were audible throughout the song but never overwhelming. Livelier tracks like "Some Girls" and "Start Me Up" had no trouble with the dynamics even when I pumped up the volume all the way up to 0 dB. I don't normally listen to anything this loud because it just makes my ears tired very quickly but somehow the MRX 500 wasn't bothering me at this rather silly volume level. And even playing this loud, it sounded like the amplifier section still had lots of headroom.

The first track "So Far Away" on the Dire Straits: Brothers In Arms SACD simply sent chills through my body. The MRX 500 provided a rich, melodic music experience, all in a perfectly balanced soundfield. The synthesizer effects in the intro to "Money For Nothing" swept across from the front to the rear of the soundstage seamlessly, placing me in the middle of an imaginary landscape.

After listening to these two discs, I concluded that the ARC system produced the most balanced sound that I've heard in my room to date. The flattening of the frequency response in each channel resulted in a very accurate, smooth sound from every speaker. Was the ARC calibration worth the extra effort then? I've been turned into a believer.

I listened to a few more discs because I didn't want to jump to conclusion too quickly. Regardless of what I threw at the MRX 500, it never failed to deliver a wonderfully musical, highly involving sound. I have never had the opportunity for an extended listening session with any of the high-end Anthem separates in the past (due to their rather high price points) but I have no doubt that these new receivers utilize some of the lessons learned from their designs. There are many other tests that I will be putting this receiver through, but at this point in the game, I'm tempted to say that this is possibly the best sounding AV receiver I've heard at the sub-\$2000 price point yet. Stay tuned for more comments as the review progresses.

A couple of days later I returned to my home theatre and put the MRX 500 through a barrage of sonic tests with a number of Blu-ray movies, starting with Sherlock Holmes which features a DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack. This movie offers countless challenging scenes for both the video display and the audio system. In addition to dark, demanding on-screen visuals, many scenes in this movie rely on audio to create specific environments. The MRX 500 couldn't be more effective at producing convincing sonic landscapes such as crowded city streets, the prison grounds, the circus training grounds and various indoor scenes. During all of the outdoor scenes in the city, I was surrounded by character voices, horse carriages as they travelled along cobblestone roads, church bells and animals among others. The MRX 500 constructed an enveloping 360 degree soundstage around me, precisely placing various sounds within it. You may be tempted to think that the vocals would be lost in all these layers of audio coming at me from all directions. But this in fact was not the case. Conversations between Holmes and his colleague Watson punched through all the commotion very clearly in the centre and front channels when required. The suspension of disbelief was undeniably present in many scenes thanks to the immersive, well reproduced audio. Everything sounded just as I would expect it to in real life.

While watching Sherlock Holmes I very quickly noticed a difference in the way the bass sounded in my room, compared to what I'm used to hearing. In earlier parts of the movie, bass is used in the soundtrack to create suspense in certain scenes. This bass sounded tighter and better defined than I ever recalling hearing it. Explosive action sequences later in the film confirmed that the ARC calibration system indeed smoothed out the bass frequency response noticeably in all four seating positions in my room. This improvement in the bass earned the MRX 500 some very high points in my book.

Robin Hood on Blu-ray, with its well mixed DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack, was another great test for the MRX 500. From the very moment the Universal and Image Entertainment movie studio animations hit the screen, I knew that I was in for a treat. The quality and impact of the audio that accompanied the animations was just as I'd expect them to sound in a well calibrated movie theatre. In the opening scene of the movie, the wind blew across the soundstage, dry leaves crunched under the thieves' feet and horses' galloping filled in the lower registers. These effects together with the MRX 500's excellent performance combined to produce a dark, suspenseful scene. Then in a warfare scene, powerful blasts rocked my room as the English army attempted to blow up the gate of the French castle. The bass reached great depths, with excellent definition and control. In the chaos of the battle archers shot arrows which zoomed seamlessly from channel to channel and swords made contact with a metallic clang that resonated through the air. The MRX 500 easily handled the dynamics of the battle and never came anywhere close to straining. In fact, regardless of what was thrown at the receiver, it always had more headroom to offer. Yet through all this commotion, the MRX 500 always delivered a clear, easy to hear dialogue at just the right volume.

At the end of the day, I can say with confidence that the Anthem MRX 500 AV receiver is one of the greatest sounding receivers that I've had the pleasure of being entertained by. The on-board Anthem Room Correction system performed a noticeably better job of improving the sound in my room compared to the systems integrated in most, if not all, AV receivers that I've listened to in the past. Its sound signature leans toward the warmer side, yet it offers a very dynamic sound that's filled with rich details. Overall, you might be tempted to think that you're listening to higher-end separates rather than an AV receiver – yes, the sound is that good. The MRX 500 does not offer as many features as other similarly priced AV receivers – you won't find a plethora of surround modes, multi-channel analogue inputs or THX certification. Instead it completely focuses its attention where it matters – on audio performance. The MRX is simply a class act and worthy of being distinguished with the CANADA

HiFi Editor's Choice badge.

Anthem Electronics

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