

Anthem MRX-700 Review



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The Anthem MRX700's price tag may seem a little steep, but the ARC room correction setup, superior power and super quiet processing are worth the added expense.

Highs: Spectacular Sound, USB and Ethernet equipped, Excellent GUI, Excellent Room Calibration Results,

Lows: No 7.1 Analog inputs, No S-Video Support, No Bi-Amp capability

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Sophisticated audio processing and outstanding clarity make Anthem's MRX-700 an ideal receiver for audiophiles without the need for fancy design and legacy inputs.

If it has been a while since you last shopped for A/V equipment, then you may not yet be familiar with Anthem. Anthem's beginnings date back to the early 90's when Sonic Frontiers International first began producing high end A/V equipment under the brand name Anthem. In 1998, Sonic Frontiers International was purchased by speaker maker Paradigm and a partnership between the two entities was born. Later in 2001, Anthem gained significant notoriety when they released the AVM 20, a high-end

pre-amp and processor that drew praise from critics for being highly musical and surprisingly affordable. Today, Anthem's preamp/processors and amplifiers continue to earn them a reputation as a top choice for budget oriented audiophiles, but it is their recent entry into the receiver market that has the industry buzzing. Here, we take a listen to Anthem's flagship MRX-700 A/V receiver, chart its place amongst the competition and determine if Anthem has been able to pass their legendary sound along to their line of A/V receivers.

Out of the Box

Typically, our out of the box segment deals with our first impressions of the receiver itself-and we'll get to that, but what struck us as we opened the MRX-700's box was not the receiver, but the unusually large box that was packed along-side it. Anthem's proprietary room-calibration system, known as ARC, isn't just a 2-inch high mini-microphone with a long cord that gets tucked away with the remote control and batteries. In fact, it is a full-on arsenal of room measurement gear. Inside the ARC box we found a boom-style microphone stand, custom microphone clip, a USB mic, USB mic cable, a serial data cable and a CD with room correction/speaker calibration software. Apparently Anthem means business when it comes to dialing things in just right. Next to the ARC box was the MRX-700 receiver packed with a standard size, full function remote control, a compact, zone 2 remote, radio antennae, some batteries and a user manual.

The MRX-700 weighs in at a beefy 35.4 pounds, measures 6.5×17.25×15.25 inches and is designed so that it can be rack mounted with a separate kit. Its facade is somewhat utilitarian. While most receiver manufacturers have been working hard to keep the front face of their products button free and their corners rounded, Anthem has decidedly included a comprehensive set of control buttons all across the front face. It may not be a "clean" look, but the MRX-700 certainly isn't unattractive.

Features

The MRX-700 is rated at 120 watts per channel (2-channels driven) or 90 WPC (5 channels driven) and offers four HDMI inputs and one HDMI output.

[Out of the box, our review sample did not support 3D pass-through, but an update of the unit's firmware is available at Anthem's website right now. We'll get into the update process in our performance section.]

There is also support for coax and optical digital audio, component video and composite video but no S-video support. Sure, S-Video is old-school, but a lot of folks still like convenient connections for their camcorders and other S-Video devices. We're not sure why the industry seems to be ready to abandon S-Video entirely, but it might be a premature move.

The MRX-700, in addition to support for HD radio, also offers an Ethernet port for accessing internet radio and two USB inputs (one front, one rear) for those with storage devices loaded with music. For those who may wish to use external amplifiers, 7.1 analog outputs are provided but conspicuously absent is a set of 7.1 analog inputs, a feature we expect to see in a product of this class and price point. This means no SACD or DVD-Audio playback unless your player can decode it and output it via multi-channel PCM via HDMI and even then, results rarely sound as good as a premium player's d/a converters.



The MRX-700 offers amplified output for 7 speakers and one subwoofer. The sixth and seventh output channels play triple duty as either surround-back channels, front height channels (for PLIIz) or zone 2 output. Unlike much of Anthem's competition, the MRX-700 doesn't offer a separate set of outputs that will help it accommodate more than one of these options at a time nor does it appear that it will support bi-amplification of the front left and right speakers. For the purposes of our audition we chose to operate these "aux" channels for surround-back output.

Anthem offers most of the usual digital surround processors. DTS HD-Master, Dolby TrueHD, Dolby Prologic IIx and IIz, DTS NEO:6 and so forth. For those surround formats that don't support a 6th and 7th channel of sound, the Anthem will co-process the signal with either Dolby EX or DTS Neo:6 to provide some backfill. Dolby Volume is also built in. No THX processing is included but we didn't miss it. We usually don't.

Finally, the MRX-700 does provide video scaling and conversion to 1080p via HDMI. Though we didn't spend much time dissecting Anthem's choice in video scaling chips, we felt that images that accompanied our audition pieces looked excellent.

Set-up and performance:

To evaluate the MRX-700 we connected an LG BD-370 Blu-Ray player, an [Xbox 360](#), a [Nintendo Wii](#), a VIP722 Dish Network receiver, Pioneer turntable with Ortofon OM5E cartridge a USB flash drive and an [iPhone 3G](#). We used speakers and subwoofers from Aperion Audio.

The MRX-700's setup menu is output via HDMI (as well as the other supported video outputs) and is a pleasure to look at. Many manufacturers tend to phone it in when it comes to the user interface, but Anthem's colorful, high resolution GUI was very easy on the eyes. However, we did experience a bit of a learning curve as we dug into the menu, perhaps because we've spent so much time with most Japanese brands of receivers that we've begun to speak their language. That said, Anthem offers a great deal of customization and flexibility. For instance, each input allows the user to select between two different EQ, crossover, LFE and sound mode settings. For the audio tweeker, this is gold. Taking some time to learn the ins and outs of Anthem's menus proved very useful.

ARC Calibration

Anthem's ARC room calibration and correction system came in its own box, so we figured we'd give it its own paragraph in this review. ARC requires that you have a PC (Windows only, sorry Mac peeps), preferably a laptop with a serial port, to run its software (huh? Why a serial port?). After installing the software and connecting the provided serial cable to the back of the receiver, we set up the USB microphone, connected it and proceeded as directed by the software. Our computer recorded the results of individual speaker tests from 5 different positions in the room (it supports up to 10), did some number crunching, established the settings, then loaded them into the MRX 700. Now, to be frank, we initially felt that having to require a computer handy and in the same room as the receiver was a bit much to ask- especially considering that automated speaker calibration programs are usually used by folks that don't necessarily have the time, tools or understanding to perform a proper manual calibration. So, the complexity of the whole operation could be off putting to novice users. But the more we dug into Anthem's ARC, the more it became evident that ARC is a truly useful program. Not only were distances and channel levels set correctly, but crossover levels were right in line with what we would have chosen ourselves and the equalization work that the ARC implemented was top-notch. In our experience, auto-EQ often turns a natural sounding speaker into an overblown, depthless shadow of its former self. The sound we got with ARC engaged, on the other hand, was quiet, full of space and dimension and brought just the right kind of sparkle to the presentation to make movie watching more immersive. For music, we preferred to leave the ARC off, but other listeners are welcome to make their own choice. Since the ARC can be set on or off for each input, users should have no problem customizing their receiver for preferred results.

Once our calibration was completed, we began our listening tests. Our first exposure to the MRX-700's sound came from "Yes We Can, Can" from Marc Broussard's *Save Our Soul* recording. The tune opens with a simple drum pattern paired with picked electric bass, eventually culminating with Broussard's vocal. In the first seconds of the recording we got slapped with the MRX-700's rendering of the picked bass and kick drum. Both were punchy, clean and tight with smooth, well articulated transients. Later, as Broussard and his backing choir entered, we found the room filled a very live vocal presence. The backing choir sounded like they were set into the back of the room- as if they had been recorded with a single mic from a distance. In contrast, Broussard's close microphone proximity played out as the MRX-700 put him dead center in the room, well forward of the band. We lingered on this recording for a while and, track after track, we found ourselves delighted with the depth and expanse of the soundstage.

After some extremely satisfying stereo listening, we moved on to our trusted multi-channel recording of Donald Fagen's *Nightfly* album. Since the DVD-Audio version wasn't playable we opted for the DTS tracks. Having used this recording in countless auditions in the past, we know exactly what to listen for. The most challenging aspect of this recording is the high frequency material and its tendency to sound compressed and overtly bright. Jeff Porcaro's high hat, in particular, often sounds artificial, no matter how warm or balanced the associated equipment may be. In this case, though, we were treated to a sweet, airy and eerily live reproduction of all of the high frequencies. In fact, while we found the MRX-700's work in the bass, mid-bass and midrange regions to be excellent, it was the MRX-700's work in the upper midrange and high frequency bands that really struck us as uniquely well executed.

In addition to the Anthem's super satisfying musicality, we found it to be remarkably powerful and balanced. The multi-channel Fagen tracks we use are highly demanding of the surround speakers. The mix benefits from larger surround speakers as they are programmed with full range information of specific instruments. Without enough power for larger surrounds, the horn section and backing vocals

will often sound thin and under-represented, even at lower volumes. The MRX-700 had no problem providing robust support to the surround tracks. At both low and extremely high volume levels, all tracks were equally rich and highly textured. The performance we experienced was really close to what we've experienced from pre-amp and mono-block amplifier configurations. It would seem that the MRX-700 heartily backs up its manufacturers claims to deliver 90 watts to each channel with all channels driven.

This prodigious power translated well into Blu-Ray movie soundtrack playback. We dug out our copy of Michael Bay's *Transformers* because, as poorly acted as the movie is, its surround tracks are an almost non-stop workout for every channel in a home-theater system. During every action sequence, robotic warbles, crashing demolition effects, shouting dialog and perpetual explosions vie for attention from any receiver's power supply. Often, the resulting sound is distractingly muddled and not just a little bit annoying. The MRX-700 with ARC engaged made the otherwise maddening soundtrack palatable by lending distinction to each effect, clearly yielding dialogue, minimizing bass bloat and maximizing punch. Movement between the front and rear channels was smooth and uninterrupted, yielding a 360 degree soundfield that was immersive and engaging.

Anthem promises an [iPod dock](#) (the MDX1) with on-screen navigation soon. When available, the dock will add that final piece of functionality that rounds out an already considerable feature set. Sure, the MRX-700 doesn't offer 3 zone output with bi-amplification and lacks 7.1 inputs so it may not be the ideal choice for those with massive theaters and whole house audio systems but those who favor musical performance over bells and whistles will find the MRX-700 an excellent match.

Conclusion

The Anthem MRX-700 is every bit an audiophile's A/V receiver. It doesn't cram in as many inputs, outputs and ancillary processors as its competition, but it fills the gaps with hardware that delivers musical, true-to-life sound with an authority and finesse that reels you in and refuses to let go. It's price tag may seem a little steep when considering its feature set against the competition, but the ARC room correction setup, superior power and super quiet processing will be worth the added expense for those who seek the very best sound available in an A/V receiver.