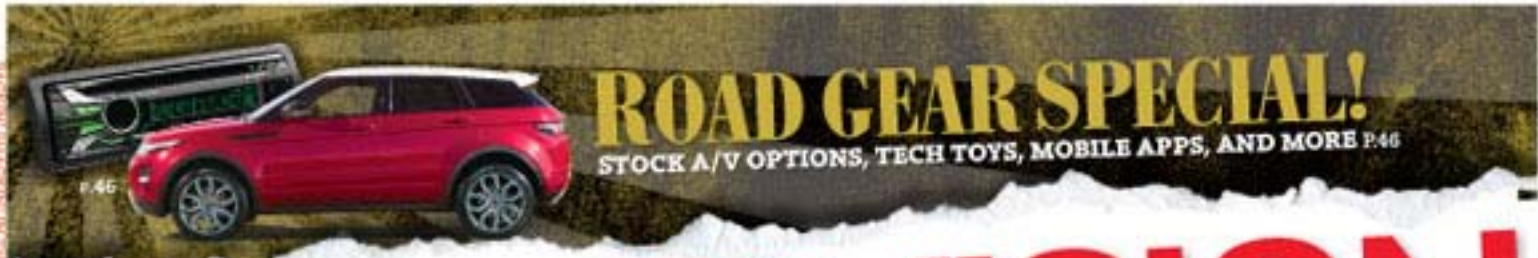


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ARCAM

FMJ AVR400
A/V RECEIVER

\$2,500 BY DANIEL KUMIN

2011
SOUNDVISION
CERTIFIED &
RECOMMENDED



Once, all you needed to enter the receiver business was audio-engineering chops, competence in packaging efficiency, and a sharp pencil over the bottom line.

THAT WAS THEN — before the digital-audio/video revolution and the birth of the A/V receiver as we know it. Today, you need at least as much smarts in the computer, DSP, and software/firmware fields as you do in plain ol' audio, a fact that has thinned, and continues to thin, the herd of receiver makers noticeably.

Arcam is one of the survivors — perhaps due to its early embrace of digital audio, its rational-price high-end-market positioning, or simply its British, bulldog-breed stubbornness. Whatever the reasons, we consumers are the beneficiaries of a new, three-model lineup of handsome, HDMI 1.4-equipped

ARCAM FMJ AVR400

Arcam A/V receivers, of which the FMJ AVR400 is the least costly. The significantly more expensive AVR600 and AVR800 appear to share an entirely different hardware architecture (despite the 400's similar, knob-less appearance), though their feature sets, and even power ratings, are not so very much grander, at least on paper.

SETUP

The days when installing a new A/V receiver required a lab coat and pocket protector are largely behind us, thanks to the simplicity introduced by one-cable HDMI connectivity along with auto-setup routines. Arcam has its own Arcam Auto Setup, which selects speaker size (crossover-point) and level settings, and performs simple room-correction equalization. (I say simple, because it acquires data from just the one primary listening position, which as I understand these things substantially limits corrective precision.)

In the event, setup was a snap. The AVR400 produced the usual sequential noise bursts, and the results, at least in terms of speaker levels and crossovers, proved consistent with my oft-repeated manual measurements of my speakers and room. The final destination was an obviously smoother, warmer presentation, attractive enough though quite different from those produced by other auto-EQ systems I've employed in the same room and system. Possibly, Arcam dials in a classically British top-octaves treble "tilt" by design. Whatever the case, in the interest of parity, I as always performed my extended auditions with the room-EQ feature defeated.

PERFORMANCE

"She's only 50 watts, but they sound like a hundred!" That classic salesperson's line has some truth on rare occasions, and this is one of them. Arcam's receiver, despite its slightly modest ratings, sounded superb from



VERDICT

Arcam's entry-level A/V receiver punches well above its modest power rating. Audiophile-grade sonics and a well-chosen feature set make it a very appealing package.

FEATURES 7



PERFORMANCE 10



VALUE 7



OVERALL 8



the first, and never once suggested that it had a third or so less power than most of its same-price competitors. (In fairness, power differences of less than double rarely do.)

My everyday setup combines a very well-respected 7-channel power amp of 150 watts per, a flagship preamp/processor from a couple years back, and a mixed suite of speakers of somewhat lower-than-average sensitivity. With the AVR400 in its place, I would never have known the difference if a black curtain had been placed to conceal the gear rack. Among the recent additions to my multichannel SACD collection (sadly, a dwindling trickle) is a remaster of a 1970s quad production of the *Saints-Saëns Cello Concertos*, from PentaTone Classics (distributed by Naxos). The production's warm, expansive sound, including the mellow attack of cellist Christine Walevska, were entirely transporting. Realistic, first-section concert levels of the big 19th-century orchestra were no problem whatsoever; Arcam has indeed managed the trick of producing a modestly powerful design that outperforms its ratings, in an integrated receiver that "sounds like separates." (The AVR400 does not direct-decode DSD, alas, so I was listening to my player's PCM stream.)

Tron: Legacy isn't a film I can recommend to anyone not trolling for demo or test material. Thankfully, I was doing exactly that. The Light Cycle race sequence beginning with Chapter 7, for example, let the Arcam display its full muscle to good effect, with the DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack's powerful effects zooming seamlessly across, behind, and around the listener, with occasionally breathtaking impact. Arcam employs upper-echelon video processing in the form of Faroudja's Torino processing engine. Our standard rotation of eyes-on tests revealed no misbehavior, and standard-def sources looked quite clean and solid via the AVR400's upconverted HDMI output.

Key Features



- + 7 x 90 watts (7 channels driven)
- + Streaming Internet radio and DLNA/UPnP, via Ethernet port; local media via USB port
- + 5 HDMI v1.4 inputs (3D-capable), 1 output
- + 8-channel preamp outputs
- + Upconverts video to 1080p via HDMI with video processing addressable by input
- + Decodes Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio soundtracks
- + Proprietary auto-setup/room equalization with supplied microphone
- + iPhone/iPod compatible (with optional dock)
- + Dolby Volume level correction
- + Onscreen overlay displays for setup, info
- + FM/AM tuner with 50 presets
- + Zone 2 AV via composite-video, line or via channel 6/7 speaker out
- + 8-component preprogrammed remote
- + IR in (2, by zone), 12-v trigger (2, by zone), RS-232 serial port, proprietary iRDock (DB9) port

Dimensions + Weight

17.4 x 6.75 x 13.4 in; 34.2 lb

arcam.co.uk



THE ARCAM'S ample power let it deliver realistic, first-section, concert levels when playing a multichannel SACD of *Saints-Saëns Cello Concertos from PentaTone Classics*.

ERGONOMICS

The AVR400 is modestly equipped by some standards, yet it includes basic audio streaming from Internet radio (vTuner) or home-network (DLNA/UPnP) sources via wired connection, as well as from locally connected USB media. All these worked smoothly and reasonably quickly on standard MP3, AAC, and FLAC files, though I encountered the usual navigation annoyance or two. The worst: In a sub-list (say, Albums) when you back up to the previous list (say, Artists), the menu always defaults to the top — even if you simply wanted to move from *Zombies* to *ZZ Top*. Arrgh!

Somewhat more seriously, playback of high-res 96/24 files was only intermittently possible. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes playback would hang. Worse, subsequent media-player "moves" would be molasses-slow, folders containing 96/24 tracks would display files twice (none playable), and networked playback mostly became impossible. Restarting the Arcam and my server (TwonkyMedia on a Mac) restored normalcy every time, and I must observe that Arcam does not specifically claim 96/24 compatibility anywhere I could find.

Otherwise, day-to-day usage was very pleasant as far as the receiver itself went, but the supplied remote won't win many ease-of-use awards. Its many small, round buttons, though mostly well spaced, are identical in size and shape, and the print is too small to decipher without strong light. The handset's own blue backlighting helps here, but it's not enough. Volume/mute and channel keys are lost in the crowd, and even worse, you must first depress one of those miserable "Shift" keys (assuming you can find it in the dark) to access certain occasional functions. More curious still, there's no Standby button on the receiver itself. You can turn the master power altogether off from the front panel, but only the remote can perform the more usual everyday shutdown mode, which strikes me as very odd indeed.

On a more positive note, there are thoughtful nuggets scattered throughout the Arcam's operating

system. One of my favorites: In the Setup menu you can delete surround modes from the rotation so that you don't have to cycle through the useless (to me) PLIIx Game and all three non-"x" PLII modes every time you want simply to toggle between Stereo and PLIIx/Music. And the AVR400's onscreen displays are all made up of lovely, crisp, unadorned text on attractively muted backgrounds. More important, they are all sensibly organized and intuitive to navigate. Best of all, there are one-touch screen-bottom pop-ups for volume, channel trim, and several other adjustments.

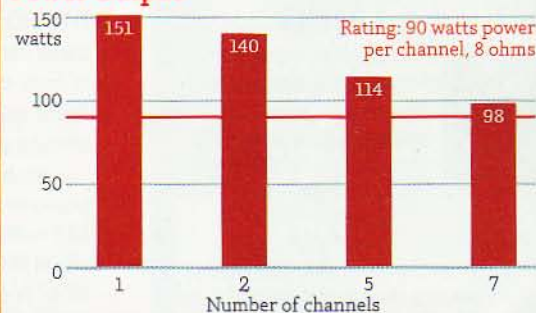
BOTTOM LINE

It seems abundantly clear that Arcam's goal in designing the AVR400 was sound quality first, foremost, and forever, and this it has most certainly achieved. Does the AVR400 "sound better" than a flagship-class receiver from the top Pacific Rim makers? That's a slippery slope I don't much care to scale, but there's no doubt that this British design sounds at least as good, in the audiophile sense, as any single-component solution of similar power I've encountered.

Clearly, \$2,500 will buy you more wattage (at least on paper), more features, and more gross weight from any number of big brands than what Arcam's AVR400 offers. But those who value the peace of mind that comes with knowing their system has true audiophile potential, and the pedigree to prove it, will want to give a close look and listen to Arcam's latest. **SV**

Test Bench

Power Output



Arcam's FMJ AVR400 yielded a Top 10 Test Bench numbers set for A/V receivers, with noise, D/A linearity, and frequency response all essentially perfect and nearly spot-on the theoretical minimums for our real-world performance tests based upon "dithered silence." Power was just as impressive, especially considering the Arcam's 90-watts-per-channel rating. It bested spec by a good 2 dB in most tests and still produced 98 watts, steady-state, with all 7 channels driven to the clip point, without offering to spark, smoke, or shut down. This is substantially more than all but a few receivers I've encountered, including those rated for 150 watts per channel and more. The only asterisk required regards the AVR400's crossovers, the low-pass (subwoofer) side of which displayed a response of 12 dB per octave rather than the de facto 18 dB per octave. — D.K.

Full Test Bench data at soundandvisionmag.com/arcam-avr400