EQUIPMENT REVIEW

AudioControl Concert AVR-9
Audio-Video Receiver

Doug Blackburn

AudioControl is back with an updated AVR, supporting many of today's latest features, including HDMI 2.0a, HDCP 2.2, Dolby Atmos, DTS:X (Q3 2016), and roomEQ and auto-setup via DIRAC Live. Many features like seven channels of cool-running energy-efficient class H amplification, support for automation systems, 5-year warranty, support for loudspeakers with imped-ances as low as 4 Ohms, on-screen displays, ARC, Zone 2 ana-log audio, and HDMI digital audio/video carry over from the pre-vious model.

AudioControl's approach to AVRs is distinctly different from what you get with typical Asian-brand AVRs. There is a distinct absence of features-for-feature's-sake. In a world where the list of AVR features seems to be the main point of competition between Asian brands, AudioControl focuses on including only useful features. They seem to always have an edge in sonic per-formance also. That shows up as better sound quality when you are listening to movies and music. It may not be wildly obvious in casual listening, where your focus is not on sound quality. But when you sit down, turn the lights off, and have a few sips of your favorite adult beverage while listening to an old favorite or something new to you, you will enjoy what is obviously audio-phile-grade sound quality. You hear deeper into the music, are able to resolve the finest details in the recording, hear instru-ments arrayed in space left to right and front to back, and enjoy the performance, with no sense of electronics in the path from the performance to your ears. AudioControl focuses on that sort of immersive sound quality to deliver the best possible experi-ence for your movie and music enjoyment.

Setup And Use

AudioControl AVRs, surround sound processors, and larger ampli-fiers have a unique appearance, with a high-gloss black "picture frame" faceplate that gives the AVR-9 a clean, classy, and very high-end look. The faceplate is not littered with 100 buttons and excessive amounts of lights. You get the information you need without all of the over-the-top front panel lighting. One of the setup menu options allows you to have the AVR-9 turn off the front panel displays, except for the power LED. The display lights up when you change sources or open menus and such, but after a delay, everything on the front panel extinguishes except the power LED.

AudioControl habitually inserts little Easter eggs in their manuals, things slipped in subtly that make you grin, like "Signal to Noise Rhubarb" instead of "Signal to Noise Ratio" on the Specifications page. There are enough of these through the manual that it's obvious these are intentional and aren't autocorrect errors. The manual has only 44 pages, 8.5x11 size, and that includes the front and back cov-ers accounting for four of those pages. Every setting option is cov-ered, without a single inscrutable phrase resulting from translation by someone who does not understand the topic they are translating. The font size is substantial also, not the tiny font you see in some manu-als that have scary-large page counts… it's easily read without read-ing glasses by everyone except those who need reading glasses for *Fun With Dick And Jane*.

The Concert AVR-9 menus have the same graphic look as other AudioControl products, going back quite a few years now. Navigation is simple and almost everything is self-explanatory for

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anyone reasonably familiar with AVR setup. AudioControl retains their well-reasoned back panel layout, complete with all the inputs being surrounded with white paint, and all the outputs being surrounded with black finish. There is a cooling fan exiting out the back. I have no idea if it ever runs or not. I never heard it in operation. The class H amplifier circuits may generate enough heat to cause the fan to operate if the volume level is high enough, in enough channels, all at the same time. But if that fan ever did turn on during the review, I never heard it.

AudioControl is focused on system integration features and supports every major control system available. The AVR-9 can be controlled via RS-232, Ethernet, and wired IR. The only video inputs and outputs are HDMI. That means no more composite or component video for Zone 2. The AVR-9 does support HDMI 2.0a, HDCP 2.2, and HDR, with the exception of one HDMI input that is MHL compatible.

One of the areas AudioControl AVRs have lagged behind in the past has been the addition of more capable auto-setup and roomEQ software. This is primarily due to the positioning of AudioControl products in the installer/integrator channel. Installers and integrators will typically go much more technical, perhaps even using AudioControl's own audio analyzer to design a custom sound solution for each installation. But for the Concert AVR-9, AudioControl has added DIRAC Live for auto-setup and RoomEQ. This software runs on your own computer or the installer/integrator's computer. You connect an included USB dongle to the computer, plug the included measurement microphone into the USB dongle, and download the DIRAC Live app from the AudioControl Web site. Run the software to generate auto-setup and roomEQ. When you have what you need, you download the results to the Concert AVR-9. You can enable or disable DIRAC Live on a source by source basis. You (or your installer) may decide to use DIRAC Live for movies but to turn it off for music. Of course, it is easy enough to turn on or off for any source if you have no trepidations about using the AVR-9's menus. I wasn't able to run DIRAC Live here due to technical issues, but if those are overcome in the near future, I will write a brief summary of the results in a future *Widescreen Review* issue. But having used DIRAC Live before with Datasat gear (two surround processors selling for well over $10,000), I expect the results to be at least competitive with other roomEQ and auto setup options found in other top-of-the-line AVRs.

The AVR-9 starts up from standby very quickly, something you appreciate when you might be turning your system on and off ten times in an hour… there is nothing pretty about reviewing home theatre gear! Switching inputs and navigating menus is also quick and frustration-free. The whole time the AVR-9 was here, a couple of months longer than normal due to a fairly long review equipment queue, it was used extensively in two systems. The family room system consisted of a flat panel TV, floor-standing stereo loudspeakers, and a few source components. In the main system, the AVR-9 drove 7.1.4 loudspeakers using Atmos and Dolby Surround frequently. I never experienced a glitch or problem with the AVR-9. It just consistently did its job without skipping a beat.

AudioControl includes a multi-component IR remote control for those who aren't using a system controller or other integrated control system. It can control up to eight components and has both pre-programmed code sets and a learning mode. The 55 buttons are all backlit and it has an auto-shutoff mode should it become tightly wedged between cushions that are pressing buttons that would run down the batteries. A rounded, finger-sized depression in the back of the remote aligns your index finger directly below the "OK" button in the center of the navigation "wheel."

SPECIFICATIONS

Features
HDMI: 7 In; 2 Out Main, Zone 2 out; supports HDMI 2.0a, HDCP 2.2; 1 input (STB/MHL) is MHL compatible and does not support HDCP 2.2
Legacy video connections: none
7.1 channels or 5.1 channels with amplified stereo Zone 2
Automatic Setup and RoomEQ with DIRAC Live or Manual setup
Video Support: SD, HD, 3-D HD, UHD (can upconvert 1080p to UHD, other resolutions pass-through), HDR, Rec.709, Rec.2020
Digital Audio Inputs: 4 coax; 2 TOSLink; 1 USB; 1 Ethernet
Line Level Analog Audio Inputs: 6 stereo, RCAs
Line Level Analog Audio Outputs: 7.1, RCAs; Height 1 L&R; Height 2 stereo L&R; Subwoofer 2
Speaker Level Analog Audio Outputs: 7 channels; 1 pair assignable to rear surround or Height 1 or Zone 2
Front panel headphone mini-jack
Power switch: 1, rear panel
Standby switch: 1, front panel and on remote control
Supports major codecs including: Dolby Atmos with DTS:X being released (free update) later in 2016
Automation/Integration: RS-232 port, control over IP; wired IR
Control System support: Control 4; Savant; Crestron; RTI; URC; Logitech
Zone 1 & 2 12VDC triggers
Detachable power cord, IEC socket
Radio antenna connection
Direct mode available for analog stereo inputs bypasses processing
Plays video and audio via USB thumb drive or USB hard disc
Network video and audio support via Ethernet connection
Video Bypass mode disables processing for HDMI video and turns off on-screen displays, selectable per input
Class H, cool running amplifier technology for seven channels
Upgraded power supply supports of lower loudspeaker impedances down to 4 Ohms
Power rating applies to all channels driven at the same time (many AVRs measure only 1 channel driven, which gives unrealistically high power output specifications).

Specifications
Dimensions (WHD In Inches): 17 x 7 x 16.5
Weight (In Pounds): 48
Power Requirements: 110-120 VAC or 230-240 VAC switch selectable; 50/60 Hz
Power Consumption: less than 0.5 standby; 100 typical operation; 1500 max. (watts)
Amplifier Power: 120 watts @ 8 Ohms all channels driven; 200 watts @ 4 Ohms all channels driven
Total Harmonic Distortion: -100 dB
Frequency response: 20-20,000 Hz
Signal-to-noise ratio: 100 (dB)
Channel separation: not specified
THD: -100 (dB)
Warranty: 5 years
Suggested client price: $6200

Manufactured In The USA By:
AudioControl
22410 70th Avenue West
Seattle, Washington 98043
Phone: 425 775 8461
Web site: www.audiocontrol.com
Email: sound.great@audiocontrol.com

Network And USB

The AVR-9 supports music playback over the network and from USB devices. There is no internal video playback capability, but with so many systems having either standalone "boxes" for specific streaming services or TVs or disc players loaded with streaming options, there's really no need to duplicate that functionality in the AVR. I focused on the Network functions using an Ethernet connection and found navigation and playback options to be generally quite usable—except that old DLNA issue of it putting an album's worth of tracks in alphabetical order by the name of the track instead of putting the tracks in numerical order of the track number tag. Nobody wants to listen to *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* with the tracks in alphabetical order, you have to wonder what the heck the DLNA people were thinking. This isn't an AudioControl issue, every
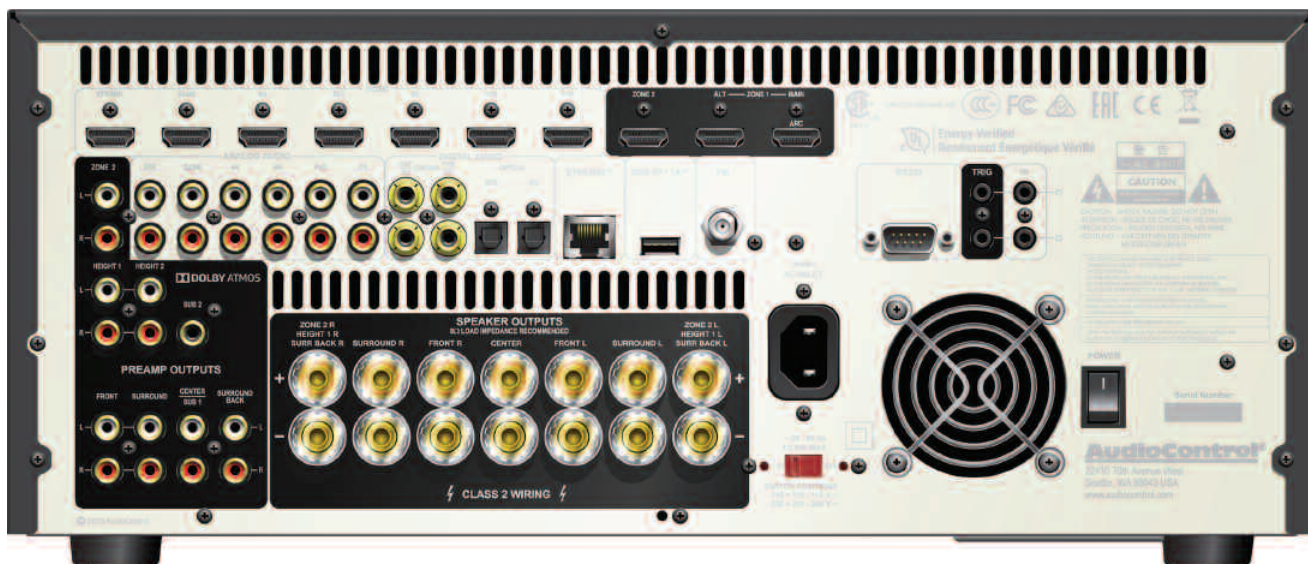
manufacturer supporting DLNA playback of media over home networks has the same problem. Nobody wants to hear "A Day In The Life" first and the two "Sgt. Pepper's…" tracks back-to-back in positions 8 and 9 instead of being the first and twelfth tracks. The speed of navigation using the DLNA interface has ramped up considerably over the years and is actually fine in the AVR-9. Though the only practical mode for navigating large music libraries (like 3,500+ albums by around 900 artists) is the "By Folder" option that retains my alphabetical folders at the top level so I don't have to scroll through 899 artists to get to ZZ Top.

Audio Quality

I found the sound quality of music played back over Ethernet was equivalent to the sound quality from USB, digital coax, HDMI, and analog. All of them provided the same excellent sound quality for music and movies. There aren't a lot of AVRs that do music so well that I can move into "meditation mode" very quickly, but the AVR-9 is one of them. In "meditation mode" my wife thinks I'm asleep, but I assure you, it is not sleep. It is total immersion in the music. Sometimes I feel like I'm a spectator moving through the acoustic space of the performance to focus on one performer at a time. Other times, I find myself building mental images of how the performers are laid out in space. Other times, I find myself examining the sound of one instrument at a time, listening carefully to each element of the instrument's overall sound that add up to what we hear. I hear fingers moving on strings or keys, I hear a bow or hammers on strings, I hear pages of the orchestral score being turned, I hear the body sound of the instrument separate from the sound of the strings or mouthpiece sound. It's an altered state of mind that is much easier to enter when the gear isn't distracting you with some electronic or mechanical character to the sound that shouldn't be there. You've heard about people talking about being "in the zone," but I don't think a lot of people who talk about that have ever actually been "in the zone." I enjoy "meditation mode" and get frustrated if the gear doesn't draw me right in when I'm in the mood. The Concert AVR-9 was a faithful means to that end. It never imposed itself on the music in any detectable way. I consistently got a lovely flow of sound from the AVR-9 that was as natural sounding as well-recorded performances can be. One of the hallmarks of sound quality approaching

state of the art is to be able to hear differences in recording venues… an orchestra playing in two different buildings or a studio recording with tracks recorded in different studios, as examples. The AVR-9 did reveal those differences on recordings like Willie Nelson's *Across The Borderline*, where most tracks were recorded in different studios. The AVR-9 clearly revealed those types of differences without over-dramatizing them. Nothing was better or worse from different venues, it was simply a little audibly different, just as you would expect.

As usual, movie sound achieved the same performance level as music. Dynamics were great when needed, and it was always easy to isolate specific sounds within the soundtrack, whether ambient or localized. As you would want from any good AVR, some of the localized sounds could be so convincing they could startle or confuse. Even when viewing scenes I've seen many times, some of the localized sounds were startlingly present in the room. Even the dog was fooled regularly, and that doesn't happen very often with an AVR in the system. All the crazy alien sounds in *The Edge Of Tomorrow* and the dense mixes during combat scenes were very well defined, elevating those scenes into adrenaline-pumping visceral experiences beyond the capability of lower-cost AVRs. The dirt bike/Harley/cabover semi chase in *Terminator 2* was surprisingly heart-pumping after what must be 60 or more viewings over the years. The bicycle horn after the semi smashes a car carcass into the side of the concrete culvert was right there in the perfect location, in spite of being right in the middle of a very dense mix during that part of the chase. Shotgun blasts were appropriately powerful, especially in close quarters, like the escape from the mall just prior to the chase scene. And the echo/reverb in the alley between buildings, when the Harley pulls in and stops, was exceptionally convincing. But perhaps the most important characteristic is how easy it was to forget listening for problems and just get into full movie-mode, where you just let the system do its thing while you immerse yourself in the entertainment experience.

Since Dolby Atmos is a new feature, it probably deserves some comment, but I really don't have anything new to say about it after using the AVR-9. It works fine at times, but I don't think we are getting the best sound Dolby Atmos can deliver in home systems yet. I don't think Atmos soundtracks are being mixed all that well, and I think Atmos desperately needs controls that adjust the Atmos height

channels for volume and "size" because every Atmos home movie soundtrack seems too inactive in the height channels to provide a true immersive experience—at least that's the way it sounds in my room. The immersive effect relies a lot on the presence of ambient sound in the height channels, but Atmos seems to put little or no ambient sound in the height channels. And as with every other implementation of Dolby Surround for converting stereo, 5.1, and 7.1 sources to use height channels, I remain underwhelmed with Dolby's one-size-fits-all approach… no adjustments to compensate for different sizes of room or for more or less lively acoustics in the room, etc. Dolby Surround sounds "dead" in the upper hemisphere compared to Neural:X (part of DTS:X) and AuroMatic (part of Auro 3-D). This is all in Dolby's court. I haven't been impressed with Atmos, aside from brief moments when objects pan through or hover in the height hemisphere. Atmos is technically sophisticated, but it doesn't seem to be used well so far. DTS:X/Neural:X does a better job, but I'm not sure if it is because the format is different/better or the mixing is better on discs that have DTS:X soundtracks. Auro-3D/AuroMatic still sets the standard, in my opinion, for providing the best immersive sound listening experience. AudioControl is just along for the ride here. They can't make Atmos any better than it is. But if Atmos is improved with an update, no doubt AudioControl will be able to pass that update along to AVR-9 owners via a firmware update. AudioControl will be adding DTS:X decoding and Neural:X post-processing as soon as the update is available, likely in the Fall of 2016. Owners of the AVR-9 and its companion AVR-7 will be able to add DTS:X/Neural:X via a firmware update.

Video

There's not a lot to say about video. The AVR-9 passes through all resolutions below 1080p without doing anything to them. For 1080p, you have the option to pass through as 1080p or upconvert to UHD resolution. Since every UHD TV or projector I've seen has upconversion built in, this additional upconvert option probably won't be necessary in most systems, but it is there if needed.

The AVR-9 switches sources fairly quickly, around 2 to 3 seconds. That's considerably faster than some projectors and TVs, so you may hear audio before you get video, but it's not the AVR-9 delaying the video. There are on-screen displays for setup menus, volume, and mute, so you don't necessarily have to have a tablet-style system controller to see status info and menus.

I used the AVR-9 successfully for streaming UHD and HDR content as well as for playing UHD/HDR/2020 discs. I didn't encounter anything it refused to pass to the video display. Of course, if you have a UHD disc player and UHD video display that don't like each other, the AVR-9 can't fix that, but once you have components that work together, the AVR-9 handles everything.

Conclusion

Someday when I'm a retired home theatre equipment reviewer and I can set up a system once and just enjoy it year after year, I want an AVR just like the Concert AVR-9 anchoring the system. It doesn't glitch-out, it has a 5-year warranty, it's not annoyingly slow to respond to commands, it looks great, it sounds great, and it's not full of stuff I'll never use. Highly recommended. **WSR**