

BY MARK FLEISCHMANN

HARMAN/KARDON'S AVR 225

A BETTER BUDGET RECEIVER

With most receivers, it's the little things that drive you crazy. With the Harman/Kardon AVR 225 (\$549), it's the little things that you appreciate. Foremost among them is the EzSet remote. Oops—make that EzSet™ (patent number 5,386,478). It's designed to take the fuss out of setting a surround system's speaker levels. Press the SPL button on the preprogrammed remote and a built-in microphone senses the pink-noise test tones and automatically sets levels. You're also free to set levels the old-fashioned way, with a sound pressure level meter. The readings may differ slightly, but EzSet is a shrewd way of helping surround virgins get started.

H/K's paternal desire to be helpful shows itself in other comforting ways. This is one of the few manufacturers to follow the Consumer Electronics Association's guidelines on color-coding for speaker terminals: white (front-left), green (center), red (front-right), blue (surround-left), gray (surround-right) and purple (sub). The front-panel inputs include digital audio (coaxial, optical) as well as analog audio/video jacks for the ultimate ease in connecting game consoles, camcorders or MP3 players. And you can walk right up to the front panel and press a button to switch between standby (color-coded orange) and power-on (color-coded green)—you'd be surprised how many otherwise intelligently designed receivers screw up this simple operation by making it remote-only.

The slick remote and colored plastic are fine and good, but H/K is also commendably conservative when it comes to the fundamentals.

In a world where manufacturers routinely specify 100 watts per channel but fail to back those channels up with adequate current to drive the speakers, H/K claims only 55 watts times five into 8 ohms, and 65 watts in stereo. Don't let the numbers worry you—if your speakers have an average sensitivity rating, the AVR 225 can drive them. It weighs just under 27 pounds, a little above average for this price point, suggesting either a slightly larger power supply, a heavier chassis or both.

The AVR 225 had no trouble driving my Paradigm Reference Studio 20s (sensitivity 86 dB, room efficiency 89 dB), or a set of B&W 600 S3 Series speakers that included a pair of floorstanding DM603s (sensitivity 90 dB). Of course, I ran these speakers with the customary 80 Hz crossover, and let my Paradigm PW-2200 and Pinnacle Baby Boomer subs do the rest. (If you have power-sucking, low-impedance speakers, insist on running them full-range, and expect a hefty amount of bass weight; you shouldn't be using a \$549 receiver.) Out of a possible volume range of -80 to +10, the H/K drove the B&Ws to 85 dB—a moderately loud listening level—at -15 on the master volume control.

I've rarely heard a more cannily sculpted midrange at this price. There's a slight boost just above the area where human voices are centered, so you're not likely to miss movie dialogue or song lyrics, but the AVR 225 ducks overt hardness with the adroitness of an Enron executive testifying before Congress. I deliberately picked a test track that I knew had a nasty sizzle on the cymbals; I was sur-



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prised to hear it sound uncharacteristically sweet. There's coloration, sure, but it's good coloration. And you're free to tweak the tonal balance with the front panel's handy bass, treble and balance knobs—an old-fashioned convenience omitted from far too many receivers.

I also sought out a track that turns to mush with most midrange-rich receivers—"Wild Country" from Chris Whitley's *Dirt Floor*, recorded with a single RCA ribbon mic—and felt as though I were right in that tiny backyard shed with Whitley and his National steel guitar. As I switched from the CD to the high-resolution 24/96 Classic Records version, a layer of gauze lifted off the vocal (chalk up one for high-res digital). I was listening in Dolby Pro Logic II's music mode, but for those who want to listen to a high-end vinyl rig in stereo, the AVR 225 provides a pure analog signal path from its line inputs. I tried it and it sounded good.

I haven't mentioned that much of my listening life is done in a post-stereo world. The AVR 225 includes Logic 7, a stereo-to-surround enhancement mode once found only in high-end surround processors. It has a fairly natural sound, similar to Dolby Pro Logic II, and like DPLII, includes both a movie mode and a music mode. DPLII is also included—it's pretty much standard equipment nowadays. The VMaX fake-surround modes bent the tonal balance too far out of shape for my taste.

Moving from audiophile recordings to cheesy sci-fi moviemaking, I listened to both the DTS and Dolby Digital soundtracks of *The Time Machine* (I maintained my sanity by saving the second screening for the next evening). Both are a tad bright, but given the challenge of a roaring, clattering soundtrack, the AVR 225 roared and clattered well. I hiked the volume level a few notches for the sotto voce drama of *In the Bedroom*—a movie that goads you into thirsting for an unsavory character's murder, gives you what you want, then ends abruptly. I backed it off for *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*—not because the receiver couldn't keep up with the

movie's dynamic extremes, but because it was getting late and I was afraid my neighbors would call the police.

Like all other affordable receivers, this one has the usual limitations of its breed. There are no component video ins and outs—you'll have to connect your progressive-scan DVD player and high-def set-top box directly to your DTV. Also, this is a 5.1-channel receiver, and therefore dispenses with the dubious pleasures of 6.1- and 7.1-channel Dolby Digital EX and DTS-ES. Anyone familiar with my previous reviews will know that I do not regard this as a disadvantage.

However, I do have a few quibbles regarding the user interface. While activating DVD menus is easy—the provided menu button is huge—getting into the receiver's own menus requires you to hunt for the tiny OSD (onscreen display) button buried near the bottom of the remote. Setting delay times requires performing calculations. They're simple enough, but most receivers have you key in the distances and spare you the rest.

You may or may not be happy to learn that channel levels and delay times must be separately calibrated for each surround mode, which takes awhile, with or without EzSet. The upside, for advanced surround buffs, is a priceless opportunity to tailor the soundfield for each mode. You can redistribute the center-channel image to make it less (or more) reliant on the center speaker. If the rear-surround speakers are too active, or not active enough, you can adjust them to taste. H/K elected to omit Dolby Pro Logic II's handy side-to-side and front-to-back adjustments, but the flexibility of setting levels for each mode makes that a moot point.

Cheap and feature-loaded receivers are as common as dirt and, generally, that's how they sound. Home theater buffs on a budget can be forgiven for wanting to pay the lowest possible price.

But before you lunge for something that sounds thin and mushy, consider spending just a few dollars more for something clearer, cleaner and classier. I've heard the cheap stuff, and I'd say Harman/Kardon's AVR 225 is a definite step up. ■■

Harman Kardon AVR 225
\$549
55 watts/5 channels
Dolby Digital, Pro Logic II, Logic 7
EZset remote control
Logic 7 stereo-to-surround enhancement mode
www.harmankardon.com