

HARMAN KARDON

AVR 255

★★★★☆

\$1,199

ehifi.com.au

SOUND

★★★★☆

DESIGN

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★☆

▲ FOR

Great looks; rich fulsome sound; excellent upscaling engine; unique features.

▼ AGAINST

A little warm-sounding; no backlight on remote; no iPod dock!

► CONCLUSION

It won't win awards for searing top-end projection, but the balance will really gel with a lot of today's sub/sat speaker packages.

Hi-Def Reloaded

WITH THE AVR 255, RICHARD STEVENSON DISCOVERS STYLE AND SUBSTANCE IN PERFECT, AHEM, HARMONY. SO IS THIS THE BEST \$1,199 AV RECEIVER YOU CAN BUY?

The AVR 255 is Harman's most affordable 1080p-scaling, HD-audio decoding receiver to date, and easily the best-looking \$1,199 receiver on the market.

The features list is right on the money, with Faroudja DCDi Cinema video processing, full Dolby TrueHD and DTS Master Audio compatibility and full-spec v1.3a HDMI s. Okay, there are only three HDMI inputs and a single output (not good for those running both a projector and a flatscreen) but there is a repeater circuit to ensure that the output will drive a full-length HDMI cable. On the downside the Deep Colour and xYCC features of the v1.3a specification are only pass-through, and its HDMI handshaking system means your display device will have to be switched on to get any audio over HDMI input.

Not a problem for home cinema applications, of course, but you will need to hook up analogue interconnects if you want to play audio CDs in your BD player, for example.

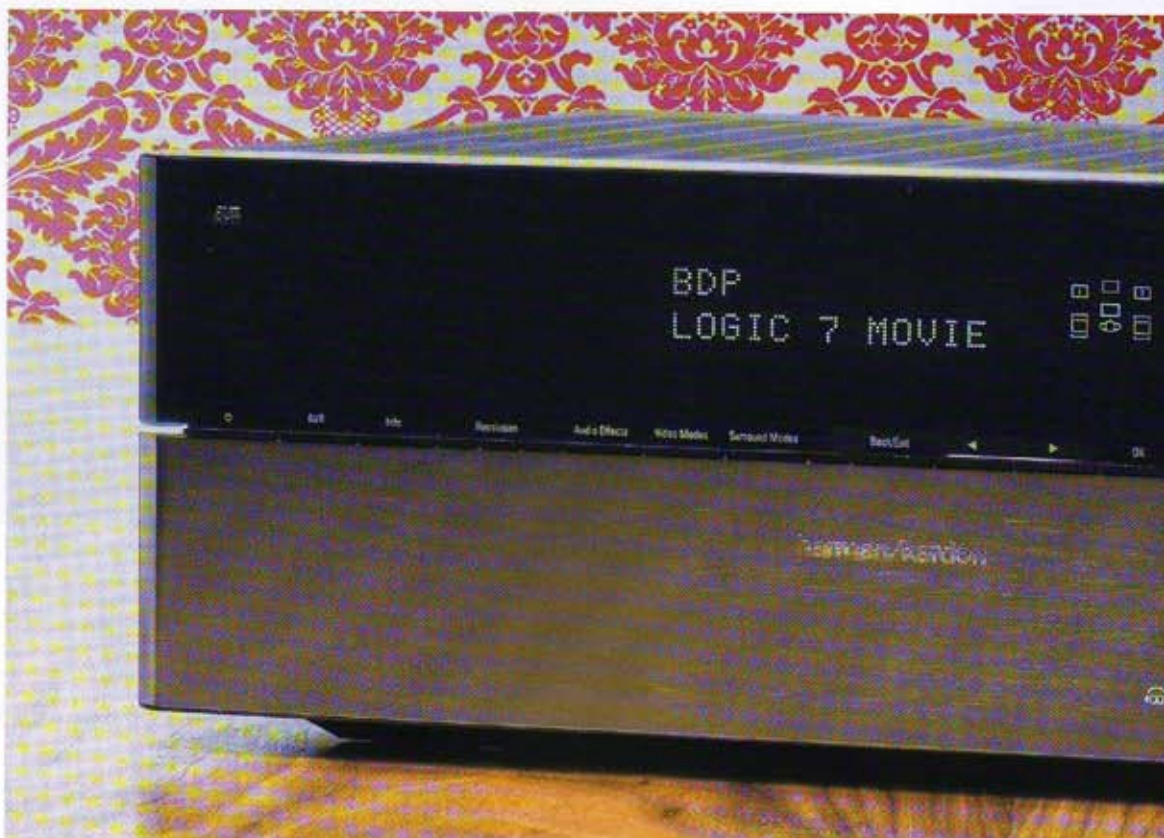
Inside its suave and sophisticated-looking case are seven channels of a claimed 50W a piece. Now this isn't going to set the world afire by current standards, but as I suspected, our Tech Labs' tests show the real figures are above this – measuring 90W per channel into 8ohms with five channels driven.

Partially responsible for this is the chunky power supply – few listeners are going to be left wanting more grunt. Perhaps a more salient omission is a lack of an iPod docking port – which is probably tantamount to making a car without a steering wheel these days.

Just to complete the overall visual appeal, Harman's new GUI is a full-colour 1080p treat, and the pink volume graphic is, er, unusual to say the least. The whole outfit is complete with a large and only marginally stylish remote control with some keys that light-up but no overall backlight. That is seriously not helpful in a darkened room.

The opening fight scene in *The Matrix* (Blu-ray, Trilogy Box Set) is a set-piece born to demonstrate why Dolby TrueHD is the ambrosia of home cinema heaven, and the AVR 255 steps up to the challenge.

The AVR 255 is one of the most affordable HK receivers to feature both Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD MasterAudio decoding, and Faroudja DCDi Cinema video processing to 1080p. Despite relatively modest claims for power output, the 255



acquits itself well, with performance well over spec on most two-channel and five-channel tests, as well as fidelity firewall and frequency response tests. And it looks great presented in the front of the soundstage and free of sibilance.

Yet with female voices the AVR 255 can sound a little too easy-on-ear, robbing voices of high-frequency detail and articulation. The Harman isn't going to suit a speaker package that is more laid back than a sunny Sunday afternoon, but is likely to be just the tonic if your speakers are a bit on the feisty side.

Even at high volumes the sound is never going to get acerbic or harsh, and that certainly encourages you to use all of the AVR 255s power reserves. This ultra-smooth top-end will be ideal for smaller rooms, but those with more space, or perhaps

large floorstanding speakers, might find the overall effect a little tame at the top. Compared to Onkyo's much more in-yer-face sounding TX-SR706 the Harman is positively mellow and it is certainly never going to fatigue in long-term listening.

Nor for that matter will the onboard scaling – because it is superb. Faroudja knows a thing or two about getting a standard PAL signal up to 1080p resolution, and its DCDI technology means that – unless you have a top-flight scaling disc-spinner or very high-end projector – the AVR 255 scaler will give the best result from a standard def source.

The acid test for scalers – the opening scene to *Ice Age*, with lots of block blue sky and white snow – passed muster with a bright, crisp image and barely any hint of colour banding.



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