



SURROUND SOUND GIANTS

We line up a quartet of range-leading multichannel amps to beef-up your music and movie enjoyment

The multichannel amplifier is the barometer of audio progress, constantly changing and evolving to take maximum advantage of developments in both movie and music sound technology. Compare this year's new crop of

surround designs with models of only three years ago, and you'll find a staggering array of added-value features and sound enhancements, from additional inputs and sophisticated remotes through to extended-surround,

seven-speaker, full-on listening potential. We've got four of the most noteworthy manufacturers' new flagship designs together for a real heavyweight showdown – so let the battle of the big boxes commence...

WHAT'S IT GOT?	Denon	Kenwood	Onkyo	Rotel
THX certified	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
THX standard	Ultra	Ultra	Select	N/A
Dolby Digital Surround EX	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dolby Pro-Logic II	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
DTS-ES Matrix 6.1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
DTS-ES Discrete 6.1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
DTS Neo:6	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
HDCD decoding	No	Yes	No	Yes
DACs	24/96	24/96	24/192	24/96
Channels of amplification	7	5	7	5
Power	125W	130W	110W	100W
Six-channel input	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Seven-channel preout	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Component video ins	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Digital inputs	8	8	7	5
Phono stage	Yes	Yes	Yes	No



With an astonishing spec list, typical Denon family good looks, fabulous performance and solid musical ability, the AVC-A11SR will take some beating

Denon AVC-A11SR

Multichannel amplifier £1800 ★★★★★

Let's start with the obvious: this Denon's specification list is astonishing. Whatever you're comparing the AVC-A11SR to, it's easier to list what it doesn't do: HDCD decoding. No complaints on the spec count, then.

Or, indeed, on the build front. The AVC-A11SR looks like the AVC-A1SE, the AVC-10SE and all its other forebears: big, chunky, gold and gorgeous. A fold-down fascia flap conceals additional controls, should you mislay the remote, while the rear panel is logically, clearly laid out, with plenty of space for the many speaker terminals.

We say many because this Denon boasts provision for all seven speakers in an extended-surround listening set-up, with ample amplification (125W per channel) for each speaker. In fact, you can wire up no less than nine speakers if you like: uniquely, Denon offers two alternative surround speaker options, allowing you to get the best results with multichannel movies and with music. Duplicated sets of main surround speaker outputs allow you to wire dedicated home cinema surround speakers for movies, and

hi-fi style speakers for multichannel music; the amp switches between them to suit the audio you're listening to. Sounds lovely, if not exactly easy on the eye, domestically...

Basic set-up is easy, with superb on-screen displays and a straightforward but effective remote. And it's a fabulous sonic performer, with all the characteristic warmth, fullness and scale of other THX-Ultra approved kit; films sound full, dialogue has weight and presence, and the soundfield has space and scale.

It offers alternative surround speaker options

Planet Of The Apes is a tough test – its very, very loud score is rendered too hard by many systems – but it's no problem for the Denon. Dialogue is clear, the surrounds are well-used, and there's no short-changing on the bass. The 32-bit SHARC processors – the most advanced currently available – shift sounds around the room with exemplary speed, an effect intensified by the added rear-speaker depth and spaciousness from

the seven-speaker arrangement. And note that the Denon is easily set up to provide processed surround audio to all seven speakers – you won't be paying for a set of unused centre-back surrounds.

The AVC-A11SR is a solid music performer. The proprietary 24-bit ALPHA processing system renders it overly smooth, but we prefer smoothness to brightness, and the Denon is surprisingly musical, capturing grooves in a reasonably firm grip. There's no shortage of muscularity either, so large-scale classical pieces have ample scale and dynamics.

So it's yet another stunner from Denon. We're almost tired of saying it, but there are few companies with a stronger grasp of the latest in multichannel audio. The AVC-A11SR does everything most of us could ever need, and it does it rather well, too.

Kenwood KRF-X9995D-S

Multichannel receiver £1500 ★★★★★☆

Like Denon, Kenwood has its very own house 'style', in this case a soft-edged organic look that Kenwood has adopted for some time. You either like it or you don't, but there's no denying that it's different...



The Kenwood KRF-X9995D-S only has five channels of amplification, but in all other respects it's packed with brilliant features and performs well

The Kenwood has THX Ultra certification and all the necessary processing and decoding. To get seven rather than five channels of amplification, you'll need £300 more for the KMX-9000 power amp, but that's not bad given the receiver's relatively low price.

Besides, it's specifically designed to be more user-friendly than most rivals. It includes a sophisticated touch-screen remote handset, with a large display window, that can perform several functions at the touch of a single button. If you wish to take advantage of the video switching capability (see *Hooking It All Together*, page 88), it's capable of converting all incoming video sources, regardless of quality, into a common higher-quality video output – a neat way to simplify your video connections while enhancing lower-quality video systems. Which is nice.

The Kenwood's sonic stride is fuller and more confident than some of the company's older designs. It has considerable weight and extension at the low end, coupled to ample scale, though the balance isn't as rich as the Denon. Instead, the Kenwood substitutes an exciting degree of bite; it attacks the gunfight sequences in *Final Fantasy* with enthusiasm,

spitting out laser blasts from the front with real intensity. Effects shifts are confidently handled by the 32-bit SHARC processor; add a power amp and the Kenwood locks on to the DTS-ES Discrete 6.1 score of *The Haunting* (on import) with ease. Surround ambience is excellent, the creepy groans and moans of the haunted house a constant and eerily effective sonic companion.

So is it better than the Denon? The Denon is more refined, but some might prefer the Kenwood's adrenaline-rush presentation, and it certainly isn't short of features.

However, you do get a little let down on the stereo front. Despite the presence of the Pacific Microsonics HDCD filter and decoder, it's not the most musical or articulate listen in stereo; rock sounds raucous, rap a little too spiteful. We've no quibble about the outright drive on offer, or about the bass weight, but all the same, this isn't the most high of fi.

It spits out laser blasts from the front with intensity

WE TESTED THEM WITH

REFERENCE SYSTEM

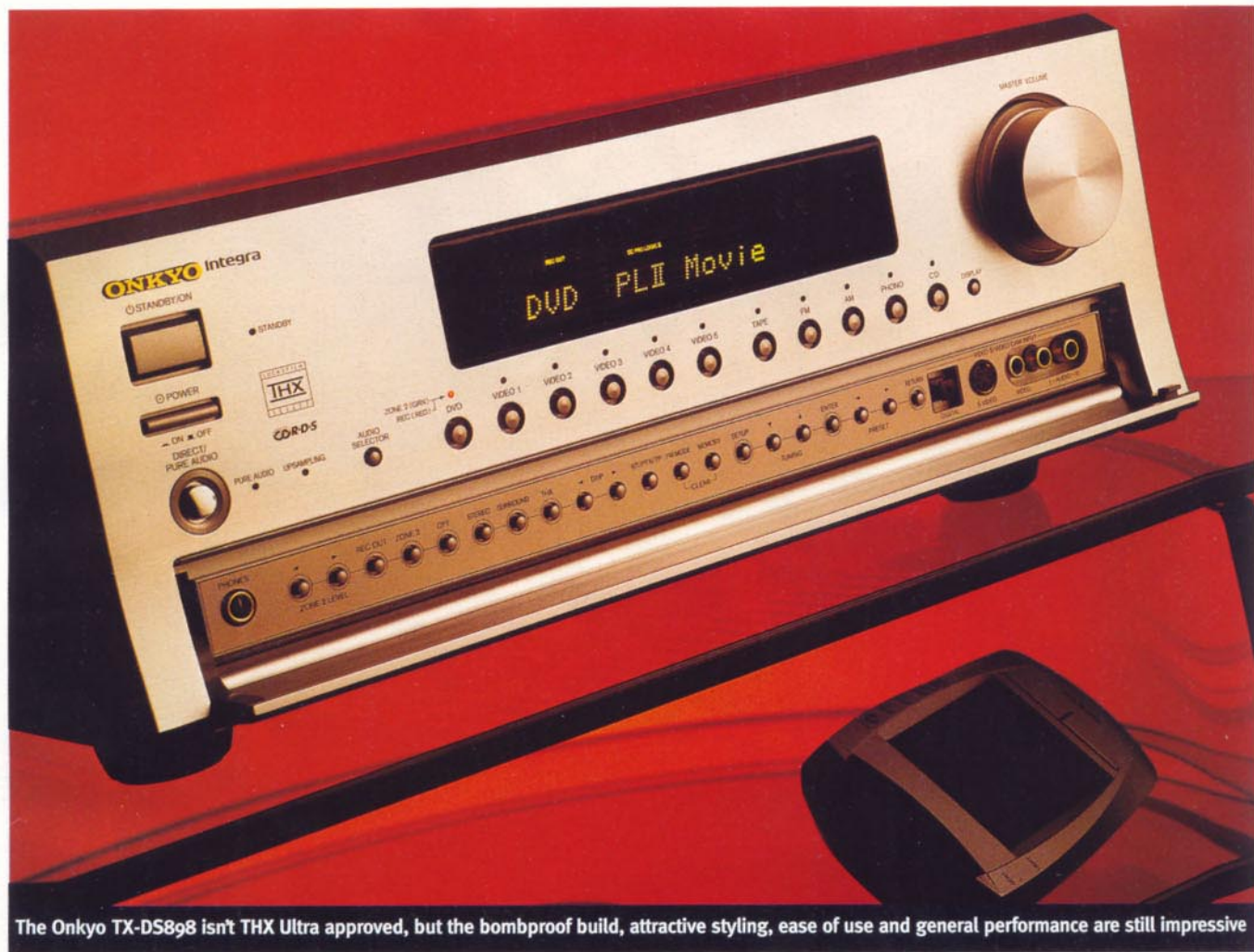
Projector **Selec SVD-500**
 Filmscreen **Stewart Electrismask**
 DVD player **Arcam DV27**
 VCR **Panasonic NV-HS950B S-VHS**
 Speaker system **M&K S-150THX**
 Cables from **Monster**

That said, we suspect that many of those interested in this specific receiver won't particularly care. It's easy to live with, it's easy to use, and in home cinema terms, it performs very well. The price is reasonable, the feature count is strong, and that video-connection feature is a real boon. The KRF-X9995D-S is well worth a look.

Onkyo TX-DS898

Multichannel receiver £2000 ★★★★★

Onkyo was the first company to produce an integrated THX one-boxer (the TX-DS919) and more recently introduced the all-singing, all-dancing TX-DS989. The new '898 is effectively similar in concept to its bigger brother, with all seven channels of amplification for a complete extended-surround entertainment



The Onkyo TX-DS898 isn't THX Ultra approved, but the bombproof build, attractive styling, ease of use and general performance are still impressive

system, while a THX badge adorns its fascia, though the small print reads 'Select' rather than the '989's more illustrious 'Ultra' badge.

THX Select is a revised Lucasfilm spec designed to take account of modern living rooms and houses. For receivers like this, the key issue is that Select certification allows for less amplifier power, and in turn a lower maximum output level in a given room.

Now we're not talking bargain-basement here: 'less' THX means 'stacks' to everybody else. The '898 delivers 110W per channel into seven speakers, and it's chock full of processing niceties like Dolby Pro-Logic II, DTS-ES Discrete 6.1 and THX Surround EX. You also get 24-bit/192kHz digital to analogue conversion for every channel and ample connections on the rear panel. In fact, the Onkyo even turns composite video into S-Video quality (but not all the way up to component, as does the rival Kenwood).

Throw in Onkyo's trademark bombproof build quality, attractive styling, and the pretty touchscreen remote handset, and all is fine and dandy. And Onkyo is developing a fine reputation around these parts for ease of use – you can be up and running very quickly.

There's little to give away the Onkyo's theoretically lower-calibre specification. It has a full balance, it captures the muscularity of action movies with no obvious stress, and it goes very, very loud. The drama of *Final Fantasy's* opening sequence is immediate, the sense of movement behind your head exemplary; being seven-speaker-capable, there's plenty of depth and height behind

Pans of information sound thoroughly exciting

you, and pans of information sound thoroughly exciting. So do you really need THX Ultra? It depends on how meaty you like your movies to be. Through our (THX Ultra certified) reference speaker package, the Onkyo gives away very, very little to the similarly-powerful and similarly-priced Denon. Perhaps the AVC-A11SR has a bit more authority in the lower-midrange, but that's about your lot. Having said that, the 'lower-spec' TX-DS898 is, somehow, £200 more expensive than the 'higher-spec' Denon. Figure that one out...

In stereo, the Onkyo's high-quality DACs and solid amplification should stand it in good stead, but it's not particularly thrilling. It's composed and smooth at the top-end, but a little confused lower-down, with less snap and pace than is ideal. It's listenable, but we'd expect more musicality in a true all-rounder. Engage the multi-speaker music modes (DTS Neo:6 Music and Pro-Logic II Music), though, and things improve.

This is another highly capable receiver. It's not entirely rounded, but as a mainly movies machine, it works very well. Our only real gripe is the price: the similar, if not superior, Denon is notably more affordable.

Rotel RSX-1065 Multichannel receiver £1800 ★★★★★

Everyone knows Rotel kit comes in black. Forget champagne-gold metallic, stuff silver: it's heavy-gauge black-painted metal. But even for such a macho heritage, the all-new appearance of the new RSX-1065 receiver is still something of a shock. This beast exudes attitude: whoever styled it was leafing through a brochure on Stealth bombers at the time. While listening to Motorhead.



The Rotel's rugged exterior may look like it was designed by a Motorhead fan in a bad mood, but the sound that emerges from it is exquisite

Those massive fascia grab-handles make it easier to manoeuvre. With five 100W channels of output, it isn't exactly a lightweight, but it's right on the cutting-edge of surround sound processing and decoding technology. And while it might only include five (rather than seven) channels of amplification, like the Kenwood, Rotel can offer a matching power amp to achieve seven-speaker ability, but with the 130W RB-1070 costing £500, the pairing is a wallet-melting £2300.

There can be no complaints about the sonic performance, that's for sure. This is an excellent receiver; it captures big dynamics with some ease, and has particularly fast transient response. Effects shifts are quick, too, making some action sequences a veritable roller-coaster. Adding a power amp is undoubtedly worth the effort (and outlay) if you can; the additional depth and focus you get, especially with a DTS-ES Discrete 6.1 score like *The Haunting*, is exceptional. Perhaps, as the only non-THX design here, the Rotel sounds a little less smooth than its rivals, but the RSX-1065 does at least fit a Re-Eq mode (effectively, a tone control) which does a very similar job to THX.

WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION		says			
	movie sound	music sound	features	build	verdict
Denon	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Kenwood	★★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆
Onkyo	★★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆
Rotel	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★

But the Rotel has still to play its trump card: stereo performance. In stereo, from CDs, the RSX-1065 is the best-sounding one-box receiver we've yet heard. It's meaty when called upon, tight-sounding, and musical whatever the genre. The Denon AVC-A11SR runs it close, but falls away by being just a little too smooth; the Rotel, by contrast, has the energy and timing to capture fast-paced beats crisply, defining each note cleanly in the mix. It rocks, it rolls and it shakes its funky derriere: you can't ask for more from a product of this type.

So, a summary? The RSX-1065 is an enthusiast's delight. We love the way it looks, we respect the features it carries, and boy, does it sound good. It's a little pricey, especially if you take it to the full seven-speaker level, but you so need to hear this.

Verdict

Picking a winner from this little lot is hard – they're all exceptionally good. The Rotel's performance in stereo isn't decisive, because it also costs £500 more for seven-speaker mode. Given that seven-speaker sound is a big reason why you'd want to buy one of these over, say, a good £1000 design, that's significant. We have to go with our heads, rather than our hearts, and so our verdict goes to the model that best combines value with performance, which means the Denon AVC-A11SR. But hey, listen to the Rotel too...

TURN OVER FOR DETAILS ON HOW TO HOOK UP YOUR AV AMP/RECEIVER