



JBL Synthesis ventures into AV receiver territory with a little help from stablemate Arcam. **Steve Withers** plays spot the difference

Synthesis synergy

JBL has been building sound systems for commercial theatres, screening rooms and mastering suites since the advent of the 'talkies', so it's fair to say the company knows a thing or two about delivering barnstorming cinema sonics. However, its premium Synthesis strand has always been focused on the high-end custom install scene. Until now.

The SDR-35, its first AV receiver model, represents JBL Synthesis spreading its wings and targeting more 'affordable' audio products. It's a new strategy for the brand, even if the hardware itself isn't really. I'll explain. JBL forms part of the Harman Group, and in an example of sensible corporate synergies, the SDR-35 is based on the AVR30 from Arcam (HCC #313), part of the Harman Group since 2017. It's also launched the SDP-55, a new 16-channel

AV processor that's built around the features and performance of Arcam's AV40. While they share the same DNA, the Arcam and JBL Synthesis receivers aren't identical. There are differences, not least that the SDR-35 costs an extra £1,000. Whether JBL's variant does enough to justify that premium remains to be seen, but let's break down how the two differ.

Style makeover
The most obvious change is cosmetic. The display and controls are essentially the same, but JBL's aesthetic is pure minimalism. The combination of matte black aluminium and black glass is reminiscent of the Anthem MRX 740 (HCC #321), resulting in a classy-looking receiver. This is purely subjective, but I definitely prefer the design of the SDR-35 over the AVR30 – it just feels more high-end in appearance. My only complaint is that all the logos are bundled under the display, which detracts from the receiver's understated elegance.

The full-colour LCD display itself is the same one used on the Arcam, clearly presenting info, album art and a full menu system. As with the AVR30 there are no onscreen menus, but the web-based interface is excellent and my preferred method of interaction. The included remote is the standard Arcam zapper (but rebranded JBL Synthesis), and remains as frustratingly idiosyncratic as ever. The front may look different, but the rear is almost a doppelganger, with one major exception. Next to the Ethernet and USB ports, you'll see a pair of CAT6 connectors for the Dante audio network protocol. This is a first for a domestic product, allowing installers to route all 16 channels of processed audio, plus Zone 2, over standard network cable, and ensuring compatibility with JBL's



Dante-enabled amps. It's arguably even more appealing on the SDP-55 processor, where integrators could replace multiple (expensive) XLR cables with CAT wiring. The receiver's HDMI connections are the same seven inputs and three outputs found on the Arcam, and while these support eARC, along with HDR10+ and Dolby Vision passthrough, they are limited to HDMI 2.0b. However, JBL (and Arcam) will offer a paid HDMI 2.1 upgrade path in late 2021.

Another tweak is that JBL has upgraded the DACs, swapping ESS Sabre 9026 devices for ESS Sabre 9028s. The SDR-35 delivers seven channels of Class G amplification to its speaker outputs, but will also process 16 channels, output via RCA. Dolby Atmos, DTS:X and Auro-3D formats are supported, plus IMAX Enhanced. In another bit of group synergy, the SDR-35 adds Harman's proprietary Logic16 upmixer. Based on Lexicon's Logic7 processing, Logic16 is designed to provide 'a heightened sense of three-dimensional realism' from any source, be it two-channel or Dolby Atmos. Chuck in the Dolby, DTS and Auro variants, and you have four different upmixers to choose from.

Just like the AVR30, the SDR-35 supports Dirac Live room correction, but JBL also includes the Bass Control module as standard. This is an optional add-on with the Arcam, and at £350 it goes some way towards justifying the extra cost.

This module allows for correction of bass decline, smoother bass reproduction in the crossovers, flexible subwoofer placement, a visual representation of the predicted bass performance (subwoofer and speaker summation), and bass management for multiple subs.

Setup of the SDR-35 is identical to the Arcam, and for the purposes of this audition I ran a 7.2-channel system to initially evaluate the built-in Class G grunt, before expanding to the full sixteen in a 9.2.6-channel configuration, with a Storm Audio PA16 MK2 power amplifier driving the extra speakers.

Feel the G force
The AVR30 is one of the best multichannel receivers I've tested to date, and unsurprisingly the SDR-35 is equally impressive. The Class G amplification, where the output stage is fed by multiple power rails, enabling more grunt to be introduced to meet demand, comes across like a fist in a velvet glove. It manages to combine room-shaking power with a deft touch and no subjective sign of strain.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Seven-channel Dolby Atmos AV receiver with Dirac Live room correction

POSITION:
JBL Synthesis's only AV receiver

PEERS:
Arcam AVR30; Anthem MRX-740; NAD T 778

1. There's a 3.5mm input and 3.5mm headphone output on the front-panel
2. Primary and secondary Dante audio network ports sit adjacent to the HDMI outputs
3. The handset is identical to that of Arcam's AVR30, bar the changed logo



The seven-channel performance is certainly exceptional, but unleash this beast's processing power on all sixteen and the result is immersive nirvana. The film *Fury* (4K Blu-ray) boasts a brutal Atmos mix that confronts you with the realities of war in a visceral and unflinching manner, or at least it does through this JBL. The soundtrack is always active, from the constant sounds of far-away explosions to fighters roaring across the soundstage, but it's the battle

'Class G amplification comes across like a fist in a velvet glove, mixing room-shaking power with a deft touch'

between three Shermans and a Tiger tank that really stands out. High-velocity shells rip across the soundstage, and smash into the ground with a believable physicality. The Tiger tank's movements are accompanied by a deep, voluminous rumble, which the SDR-35 has no trouble keeping hold of. It sounds terrifyingly large, and alive with menace. Meanwhile, the enveloping sensation the AVR creates when the perspective shifts to inside the titular tank would send a claustrophobic mad.

This receiver's Atmos decoding is exceptional, ensuring a faultless steering of objects and precise placement of effects. Dirac calibration also plays its part here, of course, doing a classy job of helping to eliminate the egregious aspects of the room. Bass Control perfectly melded my two subs. With Dirac activated the entire soundfield sounds tighter and better balanced.

In fact, it's arguably the SDR-35's bass response/integration that raises the biggest smile. With the reference DTS:X soundtrack of *Jurassic Park* (4K Blu-ray), the approach of the T-Rex is described by infrasonics that give the dino a real sense of weight. Moving on to the 4K Blu-ray of *Bad Boys for Life*, and the ballistic finale, this receiver flawlessly renders all the gunfire and explosions with more bass than is probably healthy.

As mentioned, there's a plethora of upmixing options here, and while purists might reject this kind of processing, there's no denying they're effective at giving older multichannel soundtracks a new lease of life. As for which

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY ATMOS: Yes **DTS:X:** Yes **IMAX ENHANCED:** Yes **MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** No **MULTICHANNEL PRE-OUT:** Yes, 15.2-channel **POWER OUTPUT (CLAIMED):** 7 x 100W (into 8 ohms) **MULTIROOM:** Yes, Zone 2 **AV INPUTS:** 7 x digital audio (3 x optical and 4 x coaxial); 6 x analogue stereo **HDMI:** 7 x inputs and 3 x outputs **VIDEO UPSCALING:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 433(w) x 425(d) x 171(h)mm **WEIGHT:** 18.1kg

FEATURES: Class G amplification; Auro-3D support; 2 x 8ch ESS 9028PRO DACs; built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth; Chromecast and AirPlay 2 support; web-based setup and control; Dirac Live room correction with Bass Control; FM/DAB tuner; calibrated microphone; IR input; 12V trigger; Ethernet; USB port; RS232 serial connector; MusicLife iOS UPnP and control app; Dante network audio; HDMI 2.0b; HDR10, HLG, HDR10+ and Dolby Vision passthrough

TESTED WITH



FURY: David Ayer's 2014 mud-splattered WW2 tank drama first rumbled onto Blu-ray with a DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix, but a 4K re-release in 2019 upgraded both picture and sound. The film's new Atmos track is an absolute blast (sometimes literally), with an LFE channel that goes out of its way to rattle your rafters.

is best, they all sounded very similar, so it will probably just come down to personal preference.

Will it win you over?

Whether you feel the SDR-35 justifies its price premium over Arcam's AVR30 will largely depend on individual priorities, as both are accomplished performers. The JBL's aesthetic design, plus inclusion of Dirac Bass Control, would probably swing it for me. Some might be more enticed by Dante audio networking, while others would be happy to save money on an Arcam. Either way, the addition of an AV receiver to the JBL Synthesis lineup is very welcome ■

4. The full-colour LCD display presents album artwork when streaming music

HCC VERDICT



JBL Synthesis SDR-35

→ £6,000 → www.jblsynthesis.com

WE SAY: Differences over Arcam's AVR30 are minor and some are cosmetic, but this is still an awesome Class G AVR. Sound quality is exceptional.

