ARCAM SR250
STEREO AV RECEIVER

REVIEWED: THE PRODUCT YOU DIDN'T KNOW YOU NEEDED
The SR250 is quite a unique product.

Unless you have been hiding under a rock, the name Arcam will have surely come up in any sort of research into a new hi-fi system.

The FMJ-A19 received unanimous critical praise at the entry/mid-fi level and their more ‘serious’ components are often auditioned with the likes of KEF’s Reference Series speakers at trade shows.

Arcam have also targeted the affordable end of the market with products such as the rBlink Wireless DAC and MusicBOOST iPhone DAC/Headphone Amp.

In short, Arcam are making their presence felt.

Arcam, short for ‘Amplification and Recording Cambridge’, was founded in 1976 by two friends studying at Cambridge University.

Over the years, they have celebrated several milestones, including being the first brand to fully design and manufacture a CD Player in the United Kingdom, as well as being the first to patent a standalone DAC.

Nowadays, Arcam is focused on developing technology geared towards modern day use; a good example of which is the subject of this review, the SR250.

The SR250 is quite a unique product.

At first glance, you could be forgiven for thinking the SR250 is an AV Receiver. After all, one look at the rear panel would suggest as much given all the connectivity options, most notably the seven HDMI inputs, Zone 2 HDMI out as well as two other dedicated HDMI outputs.

The front fascia also carries the HDMI, Dolby and DTS HD logos.

The SR250 however is a high performance stereo receiver designed for use in an AV system. To quote Arcam, “It offers the connectivity of a fully-featured AVR with the simplicity of a traditional stereo amplifier.”

I posed a question to Michael DiMeglio, Managing Director of Advance Audio, who recently took over the distribution of the Arcam brand within Australia.

“We are extremely honored that Arcam chose Advance Audio Australia over a very formidable contingent of suitors. Their extensive range of products is a suitable fit into our current brand portfolio. Their strong history of making excellent performing products is second to none and stand alone in this market.”

In a very short time, it’s already evident Arcam is now more accessible to consumers, as a brand with history as rich as Arcam should be.
Features

Let’s start with connectivity. The SR250 has, as mentioned above, seven HDMI inputs, and three HDMI Outputs (including Zone 2 and ARC). All three HDMI Outputs are HDMI 2.0a spec and meet HDCP 2.2 compliance, so if you have just picked up a shiny, new 4K TV, you’re in the clear.

There are six analog inputs as well as a Zone 2 Analog Out. A further four coaxial inputs, two Toslink inputs, stereo preouts for use with an external power amplifier and two subwoofer outputs. Topping off connectivity is an Ethernet port, Type A USB Input and DAB Tuner functionality.

The SR250 is rated to deliver 90 watts per channel into 8 ohms and has a high 110dB Signal to Noise Ratio.

One of the best features of the Arcam SR250 however is the integration of Dirac Live Room EQ.

Dirac Live

Rightfully so, many argue that outside of the speakers, the listening room itself is the single biggest factor impacting the sound of your system. Having moved houses in the past few years, I must say that I can agree with the argument.

For those who are unfortunately stuck in a less than ideal listening space, Dirac Live is here to help.

From Dirac: “Dirac Live® is a mixed-phase room correction technology used in cinemas, studios and luxury cars. It corrects not only the frequency response but also the impulse response, a factor critical for accurate staging, clarity and bass reproduction.”

Setup

The SR250 came well packaged along with instructions, remote, a ‘puck’ style calibration mic and USB interface (required for calibration).

Lifting it from its box revealed a solid, weighty unit. Peering through the top vents I spied a good sized toroidal transformer, this was obviously an audiophile geared product.

The review sample wasn’t brand new having done the rounds as a demonstration unit, evident from some previous Dirac EQ settings, however a quick factory reset and it was ready to go.

I connected four sources to the SR250, my OPPO 103D, PlayStation 4, Apple TV and a Bluesound Node 2.

Assigning and renaming inputs was straightforward enough and the menu user interface was above average.

Setting up Room EQ using Dirac Live wasn’t as straightforward as I’m used to with conventional AV Receivers. Rather than having a dedicated Microphone Input on the receiver, I was required to download Dirac Live for Arcam, which is a free download from the Arcam website.

Upon opening the software (using my 2010 MacBook Pro), it searched my network and located the SR250 right away. I connected the USB Interface to my MacBook and the calibration microphone to the interface. The USB interface is required because Dirac only detects signals via USB.

The process itself took me a couple of attempts to wrap my head around. For example, the software initially set itself to add +20dB gain with a low output volume, but this resulted in a clipped signal error.

After some playing around, I set the gain to 0dB and increased the output volume from 50 to 70, which resulted in a clean progression through the calibration process. There were nine calibration points in total to get through and it took roughly 15 minutes to complete. Be sure to have a quiet environment to do it in or prepare for error messages from Dirac.

Once completed, I uploaded the calibration file to the SR250.

Individual sources could be configured to utilise the Dirac EQ, as well as being able to select running either Stereo L/R or Stereo L/R + Sub for each input, a neat feature.

I set all my connected sources to the calibrated EQ and sat down to listen.

“This is obviously an audiophile geared product”
Listening

I started listening via my Bluesound Node 2 network streamer connected via an WireWorld Supernova 7 Toslink cable, set up as Stereo L/R without the subwoofer engaged.

It was an interesting experience switching the room correction off and then back on again.

Listening to the SR250 prior to room correction, the sound was more than reasonable. Yet, toggling room correction off after listening to a few tracks with it engaged sounded almost messy, as if all the instrumentation was engaged sounded almost messy.

Listening to the SR250 prior and then back on again. It was an interesting experience without the subwoofer engaged.

I started listening via my OPPO.

Switching over to some more music material, I popped in Michael Jackson’s ‘Thriller’ SACD.

To my surprise, the Arcam didn’t decode the DSD information and rather left it to the OPPO to handle. A small misstep.

The production work on this album is exceptionally well handled. A small misstep. The SR250 wasn’t able to work confidence too.

The phantom centre performance, albeit with a somewhat narrower soundstage, still delivers a commendable two channel mix. Even with the excellent Dirac Live’s software isn’t for the faint of heart and does require some technical knowledge. I don’t see it agreeing with everyone, least of all technophobes. So, if you are looking at the SR250 as a viable purchase but aren’t much for technology, I would suggest confirming your local dealer can set it up for you on site. It will be worth it.

Given that the Arcam SR250 is quite a unique product, I don’t feel as though there is anything overly lacking within its feature set.

I did attempt to connect it up to my ELAC dedicated two-channel system, which doesn’t have a display. I was unable to access the critical menu functions such as EQ, speaker setup etc, even via the control app. I believe Arcam are assuming whomever is purchasing an SR250 is going to be using it as part of a dedicated AV system.

Arcam have opted to supply a ‘puck’ style microphone for calibration purposes rather than something a touch more professional like the UMK-1 Microphone that is featured with the Dirac equipped miniDSP units.

Comparisons

While there is nothing like for like that I can directly compare the Arcam to, I can compare various elements of it with my Denon AVR-4520 and my NAD M2.

There was a period where I was running the Donon as part of a two channel AV setup. Even with the Audyssey XT32 calibration, I never had the same quality of phantom centre I’ve had with the SR250.

Recalling ‘Interstellar’, I remember there were entire sections of the film where I struggled hearing anything Matthew McDonough was saying as his dialogue got lost within the mix.

On the two-channel side of things, the Arcam stacks up reasonably well with my NAD M2. This is again mostly to do with the excellent Dirac Live correction. Until I’d heard what it could do, I never realised my room had a problem.

Take that away and the SR250 still delivers a commendable two channel performance, albeit with a somewhat narrower soundstage. I never had the same quality of dynamics were excellent. Seeing the ‘Thanator Chase’ scene, the dialogue. In fact, I could barely tell my centre channel wasn’t connected. The SR250 could clearly handle an even more congested multi-channel mix.

Playing back James Cameron’s Avatar on BluRay, specifically the ‘Thanator Chase’ scene, the dynamics were excellent. Seeing that DTS-HD MSTR pop up on the front panel filled me with confidence too.

The phantom centre created by the Arcam was exceptional, especially when you consider that the Arcam provides nothing in the way of DSP to create a ‘surround sound’ effect.

Watching Brooklyn 99, dialogue in the way of DSP to create a ‘surround sound’ effect.

The Arcam stacks up considerably better.

It is an interesting experience without the subwoofer engaged. With the excellent Dirac Live’s software isn’t for the faint of heart and does require some technical knowledge. I don’t see it agreeing with everyone, least of all technophobes. So, if you are looking at the SR250 as a viable purchase but aren’t much for technology, I would suggest confirming your local dealer can set it up for you on site. It will be worth it.

Lastly, the lack of DSD support came as quite a surprise. I would expect any AV Processor at this price point to be able to decode a DSD Bitstream via HDMI. None of this is deal-breaking and what the Arcam does do, it does so exceptionally well.

More Thoughts

The SR250 stands well on its own, but the Dirac Live room correction takes it to the next level.

Simply, excellent.

Conclusion

Arcam’s SR250 has introduced us to a product none of us really knew we needed. Some may dismiss it simply as a scaled back AV Receiver, but they would be foolish to do so.

I would favour describing the SR250 as a souped up Stereo Receiver designed for all your modern-day sources.

Its target market would be those who have combined their stereo speakers with a television or projector and have no interest in (or space for) a traditional home theatre, but rather a quality 2.1 system.

The SR250 stands well on its own, but the Dirac Live room correction takes it to the next level.

Simply, excellent.