

# AUDIO ESOTERICA

HIGH PERFORMANCE AUDIO FOR THE MUSIC LOVER



14  
REVIEWS  
INSIDE



BOWERS & WILKINS

## WORLD FIRST!

Biomimetic Spider

MAX STAX  
HEADPHONE HIGHS



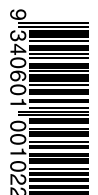
AURENDER

## ALL YOU NEED?

Streaming made simple



FUTURE



02

ISSUE #2 - 2021

AS\$12.99 / NZ\$14.99

# A NEW ERA FOR MULTICHANNEL MUSIC

ATMOS AND SURROUND MUSIC LISTENING  
WITH YAMAHA'S AVENTAGE RX-A8A

Reviewer Jez Ford





◀ THE TRONDHEIM SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA PERFORM STÅLE KLEIBERG'S CONCERTOS AROUND 2L'S AURO-3D/ATMOS MICROPHONE ARRAY.

**H**ey wait! Don't turn the page! I'm guessing that all the stereo hi-fi-loving readers of *Audio Esoterica* are wondering what the heck an AV receiver is doing slap bang in the middle of the magazine. For sure it's a top-of-the-line integrated model from a company with a long heritage in stereo as well as multichannel equipment. And of course AV receivers are built to play music as well as movie soundtracks. It's just unlikely that many of you *Audio Esoterica* readers will be doing so, I'd guess.

But here's the thing. We've been listening in two-channel stereo since, what, 1958? Yet we've had quadraphonic sound for nearly 50 years; Pink Floyd released 'The Dark Side of the Moon' in quad in 1973 (on LP, cassette and 8-track indeed). Some of you may once have had four speakers and a quadraphonic decoder, and wasn't it fun?

Well those days are back. Multichannel music is going mainstream again. Apple Music and Tidal are serving up songs in Dolby Atmos from their streaming services. Increasing numbers of today's new releases are getting Atmos mixes as standard.

Even more exciting, for my subscription money anyway, is the great many major remastering and remixing projects which are now emerging with not only 24/96 stereo mixes but surround and/or Atmos mixes too. 'Sgt Pepper', 'Abbey Road', the new 'Let It Be/Get Back' release, Steven Wilson's Yes and Rush mixes, Kraftwerk's 3D collection, even the likes of Elton John and Marvin Gaye — many classics are being reissued with all the information required to energise your room from every angle. On disc, too, the highest of audiophile jazz, classical and acoustic labels — the likes of Norway's 2L and Mark Waldrop's AIX — are now focused on surround and Atmos recordings as much as on high-resolution sound.

### HEADPHONE ATMOS

With Apple and Tidal driving the uptake, it seems unlikely that this will eventually prove a '3D-TV' fad which rises for a while, then falls. Yet its mass-market implementation is built on the questionable assertion that all this additional information can be effectively delivered using headphones.

Head to Apple's primer article "about Spatial Audio", as it calls Atmos tracks, and you'll find it begins with how to listen to Atmos on your iPhone or iPad, using AirPods or Beats headphones or even, dear Lord, *the built-in speakers*.

Impressive for their size as the built-in speakers are on, say, the latest iPad Pro or MacBook Pro, they are not what Dolby envisioned

when it created the hemispherical sound-field of which Dolby Atmos is capable.

It's true that Dolby Atmos does not define or require any particular speaker layout — it adapts to what you have. So you can play Dolby Atmos in mono if you like, or in stereo. When you play Atmos using the 'Spatial Audio' of Apple's excellent AirPods Max headphones, the mixes deliver a forward-facing soundtrack with impressive wrapping to the sides, as compared with a more over-the-head stereo heard with the standard files. But while there's sometimes the impression of a 'behind you' element in the mix, don't expect to hear things whizzing around your head. It's not going to happen.

For that, you need a proper surround sound system and an AV receiver. Then you can play Apple Music on your MacBook, say, and send multichannel audio out via HDMI, or — far easier — use the Music app on an AppleTV 4K, with that plugged into the receiver. Which is what I've been doing. And then the sound... oh goodness!

### BEST TOOL FOR THE JOB

I could not have hoped for a better tool for this job than Yamaha's Aventure RX-A8A, which is the very topmost integrated receiver model in the company's latest Aventure range, a series longer than usual in the waiting, delayed by the pandemic.

This is Yamaha's 10th series of Aventure receivers, celebrating a decade of this premium range originally launched back in 2010, then being the result of rethinking every element from circuit layout to chassis, from component selection to grounding techniques. It was a grand reset for a new decade — 'AV entertainment for a new age': Aventure — and an instant success, followed each year by iterative improvements that have maintained the momentum through the addition of Yamaha's MusicCast streaming multiroom platform, Dolby Atmos height channels, and the endless other pieces and abilities that go to make the very model of a modern receiver. Their success can be gauged by an Aventure receiver having since won the top *Sound+Image Magazine* receiver award not every single year since, but every year that a new range-topping model has arrived.

Now we have a new decade, marked by a significant redesign in visual terms: big volume knob now central, input selector now a smaller knob on the right, joined by the valuable addition of four Scene buttons to instantly recall a preferred scenario — one

for movies, one for music, others (as we'll see) perhaps for experimenting with different layouts and processing. There are in fact eight Scene memories, with the other four directly selectable using the remote control.

The first of the new 10th-anniversary Averages to sit in my reference system was the entry point, the RX-A2A, with seven channels of amplification, each rated at 100W into eight ohms (when using reasonably hi-fi-level parameters, across 20–20kHz with 0.06% THD, two channels driven). So that channel count is good for either 7.1-channel surround, all on the floor, or for 5.1 on the floor and an additional two channels for height.

As fine value as the \$1599 RX-A2A offers, the \$6299 Aventure RX-A8A is clearly the boss breed of beast in the range. The A8A offers 11 channels of amplification, the first Yamaha model to do so since the famed RX-Z11 back in 2007, when the whole Aventure concept was still a twinkle in the eyes of its engineers.

With all 11 channels and two subwoofer feeds available via pre-out sockets as well as via 13 sets of speaker outputs, that's vast flexibility for the main system you choose to set up — including, for the audiophile-inclined — the option of running front left and right preouts through preferred stereo power amps or even pre-powers, to maintain a purist stereo performance. I ended up that way during a full AV review of this receiver (see *Sound+Image* Nov-Dec 2021, also [whathifi.com/au](http://whathifi.com/au)), but for most of this surround listening I had the Yamaha's amps powering the full system in either 5.1.4 or 5.1.2. The additional height dimension allows full enjoyment of not only Dolby Atmos but also DTS:X, and even Auro:3D, though a lack of material prevented much listening with DTS:X, while a future firmware update is required to enjoy Auro:3D on the Aventure RX-A8A. I anticipate that arrival greatly, in order to enjoy the highest resolution mixes from the 2L discs (see panel).

### MOVIE MOMENTS

I did, of course, spend plenty of time playing movies through this top-level Aventure — why wouldn't!! Whether swooping Nazgul over Osgiliath or the more delicate atmospherics of a star base in 'Star Trek: Beyond', the Yamaha's effects steering and dynamic power delivery proved impeccable, creating an immersive soundfield which effectively made the 5.1.4 speaker system invisible: those Nazgul swoops were a single sonic motion,

not sounds from separate speakers. For maximum assured purity, I kept full-channel mixes in 'Straight' mode, or better still in 'Pure Direct', which shuts down every unneeded piece of electronics, including the front-panel display.

### A CENTRAL CHOICE

But my focus here, unusually for a receiver review, is music. And particularly this relatively new world of mass-market Atmos music.

One of the Yamaha's abilities proved particularly useful for the best enjoyment of surround music, and that's the simplicity of switching between different speaker configurations. Doing this via the 'Scene' memories, you can easily recall all your preferred audio settings for a particular input, or for a particular type of material — stereo vs. surround, say, or movies vs. music.

Yamaha now allows you to create four entirely different speaker patterns to switch between. For stereo music, for example, you might set up a 2.1-channel pattern in addition to the default stereo playback, so that your speakers gain subwoofer support.

For Atmos music, I'd also recommend trying a 4.1.x speaker pattern, especially if you have a system where the centre speaker is not an exact acoustic match for your front left and right speakers. This is a very common situation. Even when the centre comes from the same manufacturer's range as the left and right speakers, the centre is often smaller, the driver count often lower. Or your screen position may dictate that the centre speaker, especially its tweeter, is not positioned on exactly the same plane as the left and right.

Or those with huge audiophile left-right speakers, purchased for music listening, may wish to use them also within their surround system, but will be very unlikely to go out and buy a third one, or would have a hard time working out how to position it if they did. Only those with speakers behind an acoustically-transparent projection screen can really hope to achieve a true three-in-a-row, and even then I can imagine audiophiles debating long into the night over the true acoustic transparency of screen materials.

With movie soundtracks, you can get away with a certain degree of imperfection in this regard. The centre is often dedicated to dialogue, so precise integration is less crucial. The most common betrayer of the problem will be an effect moving across the front — a car driving from left to right, say — which may tonally contract slightly as it passes the middle. But with a subwoofer keeping low

stuff solid, even this rarely breaks the spell. Move to multichannel music, however, and it very much does. Listen to a mix where some lunatic — and I'm looking at you, Flaming Lips — starts panning an instrument full circle around your floor speakers, and any tonal differentiation becomes excruciatingly clear. And it's very common that a lead vocal is allocated to the centre speaker, where any deficiency in size will then weaken an essential element of the mix.

In stereo, of course, we're used to the centre image being virtualised from the left-right speakers. Yamaha's variable speaker patterns allow you to do that for surround as well as stereo. Simply copy your normal Atmos layout from Speaker Pattern 1 to Speaker Pattern 2 and then remove the centre speaker.

Even though my own centre speaker is large and hi-fi in nature, I ended up using a 4.1.4 layout for most surround music listening, as it removed any trace of tonal difference across the front soundstage. I highly recommend at least trying this delivery of 4.1, or 4.1.2 or 4.1.4 for music — and don't forget to invoke 'Pure Direct' to keep things as pure as possible.

There's another issue with playing music in surround, and that's the size of your rears. In most surround systems designed for movies your subwoofer takes the strain below a crossover at around 80Hz, so that most speaker packages come with relatively small bookshelf-sized rear speakers, larger speakers in left and right front positions, and as noted, a centre speaker somewhere between. But with imaginatively mixed surround music, the best delivery comes from identical speakers all the way around. When the surround mix of The Who's 'Tommy' decides to put Keith Moon's drum kit entirely in one rear speaker, you don't want him shrunk down to standmount size.

I should perhaps note that if you're thinking 'hey my soundbar does 5.1.2 Atmos, I'll give it a go on that', well, please go ahead and play, but that is not the Atmos music experience I am recommending here. Soundbars are riddled with acoustic compromise and furphy processing. Big speakers everywhere: that's the thing we want.

## ATMOS MUSIC

So to the Atmos music revolution. Apple has it under the banner of 'Spatial Audio'. Tidal just calls it Atmos, and indeed Tidal had it available before Apple, and it is similarly able to output in Atmos from its app on an AppleTV 4K. But you need Tidal's pricest 'HiFi Plus' tier at \$23.99 a month to do that, whereas Apple delivers Atmos music at half the price. Tidal's free trials are, however, often more generous if you just want to give



## NORWEGIAN PURE: 2L

Many *Audio Esoterica* readers will know Norway's 2L record label, founded in 2001 by sound engineer and music producer Morten Lindberg, and immediately thereafter garnering a reputation for audiophile-quality recordings, including a focus on high-resolution audio.

So dedicated is 2L to proselytising the joys of high-res, indeed, that it hosts one of the most useful selections of high-res test files in PCM and DSD, free to download from the 'Hi-res Test Bench' section of its website [www.2l.no](http://www.2l.no) for playback on your system — in some cases to see whether your system can play them at all, and in others whether you can hear the difference between them.

2L has recorded in surround as well as high-res since near its beginnings, and more recently has been releasing recordings in not only high-resolution stereo, but also in DTS-HD 5.1 at 24-bit/192kHz, in 7.1.4 Dolby Atmos at 48kHz, and in 7.1.4 Auro-3D at 96kHz.

Mr Lindberg kindly sent me four of 2L's multichannel releases as two-disc Blu-ray/SACD sets (they can also be purchased as files for download). One was acoustic jazz by the Hoff Ensemble, called 'Polarity', the opening track of which is available in high-res and 5.1 for free on that Test Bench area of the 2L website. Second was a collection of hymns and lullabies by the Trio Mediaeval called 'Solacium', and the third, 'Lux', a wildly atmospheric and definitely height-enhanced recording of the Nidaros Cathedral Girls Choir at home in the Nidaros Cathedral of Trondheim.

My favourite, and the most recent release, is of concertos by Ståle Kleiberg, a modern Norwegian composer with whom I confess no previous experience, but whose style in places is not a million miles away from Arvo Pärt, though a heck of a lot busier. It's both accessible and emotive,

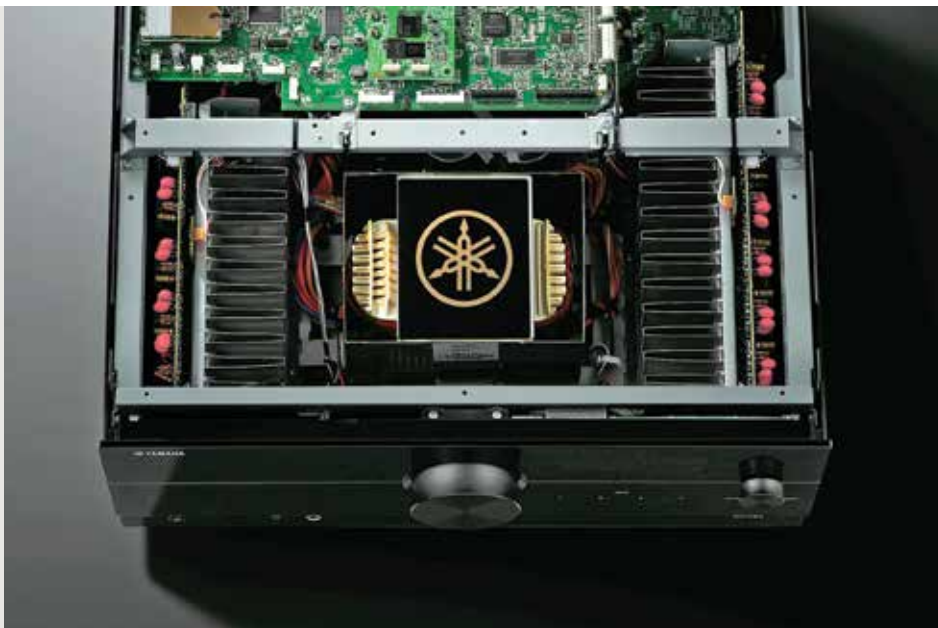
while 2L's recordings of the three Kleiberg works, delivered from the Pure Audio Blu-ray Atmos track, are simultaneously atmospheric and visceral. *The DOPO for Violoncello and String Orchestra* is particularly so, with the tone of the solo cello enriched by the mid-distance miking, a huge presence at the front with hall reflections spreading to the rears and above, but then with the dynamic full orchestra sections wrapping right around, as if you're crouched listening right in that central mic position. Those used to stereo concert recordings will take a while to adjust! But once accustomed to the space it's mesmerising stuff, and you yearn for more. This is the quality that has earned Lindberg an astounding 18 Grammy awards for best surround or immersive recording since 2007 (along with another 18 for Lindberg and 2L in other categories).

One nice piece of geekery is that the sleeve notes (available in full online) and the website for each release include both a layout diagram for the orchestra, and photographs of the recording set-up (see above, and this article's opening image).

"If you enlarge the proportions of this microphone array, you have the exact configuration of speaker placements for Auro-3D," Mr Lindberg explained to me via email. "Each microphone capture goes discreet to its according speaker for release. Time of arrival and intensity is perfectly preserved. No mixing required."

I await the release of a firmware update for Yamaha's Aventure which will let me hear the Auro-3D mix, not that I have the full three-level speaker system to fully replay this higher-resolution version. But the Atmos was impressive enough.

"We simply use the Dolby Atmos codec as a carrier for our 7.1.4 channels," explained Mr Lindberg, "where the 7.1 is defined as the bed and the four heights as objects localised in its outer upper corners. I find that our recordings translate freely between Auro-3D and Dolby Atmos."



## POWER & PLUGGERY

The 11 channels of power from the AVENTAGE RX-A8A will fully serve a 7.1.4 speaker layout, with seven channels on the floor, and four for height (or as Yamaha would prefer, 'presence'). If you run a smaller system, you can divert the unused power to run extra zones and other options.

If you have two subwoofers, the RX-A8A can deliver genuinely differentiated bass signals to these as either left/right or front/back, making a true 7.2.4 system.

More to the point, this is no lowly receiver built around a set of Class-D amplifier chips with inflated power ratings. The amplification here is proper Class-AB, quoted at 150W per channel into 8 ohms full-range with two channels driven and 0.06% THD. Yamaha also makes much of a doubling of the slew rate compared to the previous generation, so that it now matches the company's MX-A5200 power amplifier, a benefit especially for high-resolution performance, while the capacitor reserves peak at 22,000µF in the A8A.

There are two transformer windings on this model, with separated wiring for the current amplification part (for the output stage) and the voltage amplification part (for the input stage).

While there's a fair amount of plastic on show externally, including a perforated ABS plastic cover on top, underneath is a new perforated metal cover on a cross-braced chassis which Yamaha says doubles the structure's rigidity from previous AVENTAGES.

The feet are iron, and only this top AVENTAGE model gets a new brass section added to its Anti Resonance Technology (A.R.T.) wedge — the famous fifth leg. This has previously sat underneath at the dead centre of each AVENTAGE receiver, and it still does on the A2A, but on the rest of the range it now moves forward to front centre, as has the large transformer within — all the result of new vibrational analysis, says the company. A new metal transformer support is now one of five metal parts dedicated to dispersing any vibrations through the chassis.

A new processor, the Qualcomm quad-core QCS407, has almost seven times the processing power of those in previous models, and ESS ES9026PRO DACs handle all channels, these sitting on a four-layer PCB that includes discrete layers for power and ground, while symmetrical signal paths reduce crosstalk which, along with low-noise low-impedance design, goes toward Yamaha's 'True Sound' and accurate tonal balance.

As for inputs, this top receiver is, of course, positively festooned with them.

There are seven HDMI inputs, all 4K 40Gbps capable, plus 'legacy' video inputs that are converted to HDMI output: one component video with a choice of RCA analogue or coaxial digital audio, and two composite video inputs, one with a choice of analogue or optical audio in, the other just analogue. The RX-A8A has a main HDMI output with eARC to play audio from a connected TV, a second HDMI output which has no ARC or HDMI control, and that third HDMI output for an additional zone.

There are also five audio-only inputs — one optical digital, one for either optical or RCA analogue, one for either coaxial digital or RCA analogue, a pair of balanced XLR inputs (there are also XLR pre-outs for front left and right output channels), and finally a phono input for a turntable, with earthing post. In addition to Ethernet, trigger and IR connections, there's a DAB+/FM antenna connection (and tuners within), while on the front is a headphone socket. The only USB is a Type-A slot also on the front; there is no USB-B connection for computer replay.

Also within is Yamaha's MusicCast streaming and multiroom platform, offering both control and many streaming delights. Note while it has Tidal built into MusicCast, you can't get Atmos out, only stereo.

Once you're all plugged up, Yamaha offers its YPAO (Yamaha Parametric room Acoustic Optimizer) using a supplied microphone to automatically adjust speaker distances, volumes and other acoustic parameters for the listening position. Whether you invoke this will depend on how much you like to play with settings, compared with how much you like a system to do it for you. We preferred to use the RX-A8A's on-screen menus to do everything manually, learning the system so we could then manipulate it more easily! When we did later test the YPAO, it made remarkably little difference, hopefully an indication of this care and of room quality.



it a go! (When on Tidal, incidentally, don't be distracted by the Sony format also there supported, 360 Reality Audio, which seems to take a soundstage, throw it up in the air and let it land where it will, IMHO. Though I should state that I have not taken a photograph of my ear, which apparently delivers best results for 360 Reality Audio, so who knows.)

Searching for 'Atmos' on Apple's Music app reveals a 'Spatial Audio' category with a bunch of curated Atmos playlists and featured albums. Other than those featured in this way there seems no way to isolate what's available in Atmos: Apple's advice is to "play a track and see if the Atmos symbol comes up" — i.e. guess and good luck.

If you backtrack from a playlisted Atmos track to its full album, sometimes the whole thing is in Atmos, sometimes only one or two tracks. This can be a disappointment — Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* is gorgeous when cranked nicely in Atmos, the strings spreading deep, the harmonies and rent-a-crowd chatter filling out the 3D soundstage. This is a gapless album on vinyl, but here only the title track is in Atmos so it fades before the start of *What's Happening Brother*. Mmm.

Still, once found, some of the Atmos recordings sound spectacular. Kraftwerk's '3D' album is a fun place to start, downright hilarious in places. *Numbers / Computer World* opens with its German counting sliding between the speakers, then the electronica enters to be spread all around the 3D soundstage, with most of the weight kept to the front, which will benefit those with smaller surrounds and a front sub.

Rush has been the subject of extensive Steven Wilson 5.1 mixes but Apple seems to offer very few in Atmos — a relatively uninspiring mix of *Spirit of Radio*, but two great mixes from 'Moving Pictures': *Limelight*, and particularly *Tom Sawyer*, where the sub-supported weight is huge, and the synths fizzy enough to clean your carpet.

There's all of 'Let It Be', 'Abbey Road', 'Sgt. Pepper' (now undergoing an Atmos remix, we gather, as the original wasn't intended for near-field listening), and Harrison's 'All Things Must Pass'. The Atmos Harrison mixes are significantly more enjoyable in Atmos than in the new stereo remix, indeed — which, as Michael Fremer notes, "zeroes in on the trees, but completely loses the forest". In contrast the Atmos version is so far distinguished from the original that you're less likely to make the comparison. *Apple Scruffs*, for one, just leaps to life in Atmos.

Tidal requires its top plan for Atmos, as noted. Search for 'Atmos' there and you can scan down to a series of good lists by decade. A lot of the songs are the same as offered by Apple, but I hadn't heard Elton John's *Rocket Man*, an impressively clean Atmos mix with harmonies and guitars moved to the rears, and here you really need full-range rears, not satellites, in addition to a perfectly matching centre-channel, or else none at all. On the whole, when comparing streams of what is presumably the same source file, such as the new Atmos mix of *The Long and Winding Road*, Apple Music seemed the clearer provider, though volume matching was hampered by the Apple tracks emerging a good dozen decibels louder than Tidal from the AppleTV 4K's HDMI output.

### THE CONCERT EXPERIENCE

There are two ways to present a concert in surround or Atmos. The first is to simulate the concert-going experience, usually imagined from one of the front rows (though of course in the real world you'll do better in balance terms to hang near the sound desk). The other option is for the sound engineer to abandon the actuality and put the listener in the middle of things. AIX disc releases are notable in offering both options as separate mixes, so you can make the choice yourself.

The 'Roger Waters The Wall' concert film from 2015 is mixed in Dolby Atmos for the Blu-ray, and it follows the first of these two options — though the Floyd's long history of using surround in the venues themselves means the rear speakers do get more than just crowd noise. And while the height is used primarily for atmosphere, the Yamaha-led system delivered full immersion and such a thunderously enjoyable level of distortion-free performance that we ended up sitting spellbound for the whole movie.

As a reminder that you often don't miss the height of Atmos at all, perhaps my most played concert DVD for surround sound is the 2006 production of 'Jeff Wayne's War of the Worlds'. This tends to the more immersive type of live mix, with the sheer size of the band and strings offering more opportunity for imaginative use of the additional speakers than is possible presenting a four-piece like, say, Led Zeppelin in surround (5.1 mixes for Zep have hitherto been fairly uninspiring, I'm sad to report).

So I've already strayed in my listening from the streaming providers to discs. And that's a huge point to make — DVDs have

been serving up 5.1 mixes for decades, with some Atmos mixes more recently on Blu-ray. So don't neglect the legacy of surround music available from disc, although a great many of such 5.1 music mixes under-utilise the possibilities, especially those live recordings which go for stereo or three-channel music up front plus live ambience from the rears.

But find something more thoughtful, and the party begins. Queen was an early pioneer here, its 'Greatest Video Hits' DVDs having marvellously imaginative 24-bit/96kHz DTS 5.1 mixes, from which the Yamaha delivered a whole bonus dimension in musical entertainment, with the layered vocals of *Bicycle Race* popping out from different speakers, bicycle bells ringing all around in the middle eight, and the exit therefrom heralded by a sustained guitar note from each speaker in turn. There was some minor brashness on that track, but not others — *Spread Your Wings* emerged more on the soft side, so that was just the Yamaha being true to the source material.

My music surround listening continued for several months — see the 5.1 panel for more recommendations (and apologies I'm such a hippy that the recommendations lean that way). Genesis's 'The Video Show' DVD gave another opportunity to compare 5.1 Dolby and DTS mixes. Yet again Dolby won for level, but DTS for quality, the superior separation revealing previously unheard details such as the separated doubletracking on *Abacab*. Yamaha's receiver made the surround mix of the 1999 re-recording of *The Carpet Crawlers* a meltingly immersive listen.

Note if you have height speakers attached, the Avenge will default to spreading a 5.1 soundtrack into them, using its setting called 'Surround: AI', which will take any source and upscale it to your full speaker complement. With movie soundtracks with surround but not Atmos, 'Surround: AI' does this impeccably, exceedingly cleverly indeed, and without any apparent deleterious effects to the sound quality or effects steerage.

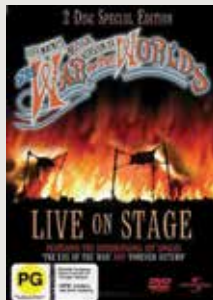
With music, however, you can hear the joins. Higher frequencies are smeared upwards, so that often a little sharpness is added that made me prick up my ears in agitation at something not quite right.

It was far preferable to hit the 'Straight' or 'Pure Direct' option and keep things in pure 5.1. A fine example of the improvement from 'Pure Direct' came from Peter Gabriel's *Red Rain* in 5.1 Dolby Digital, which was rendered with significantly more solidity and clarity once the button was pressed. And if you're really

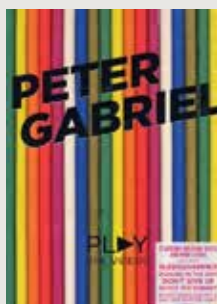
## MEANWHILE, IN MERE 5.1...

**THE BEATLES 'LOVE'**

The stereo mix of 'Love' has never quite convinced, Giles Martin's mash-ups sounding sometimes contrived and constricted. The Cirque du Soleil show itself used surround sound with speakers in every seat back, and given the additional space of 5.1 the surround mix from the DVD in the two-pack release is a riveting listen. It's nicely programmed, too, with an impressive opening sequence including some fine use of surround on *Eleanor Rigby* and *I Am The Walrus*, then a more binary presentation for the earlier songs, the music kept in the forward soundstage with screaming to the rear, then building back up to some truly immersive mixes where the experimental mashing of different tunes brings delight rather than alarm. It's a cert that you'll never have enjoyed *Octopus's Garden* so much.

**JEFF WAYNE'S MUSICAL VERSION OF WAR OF THE WORLDS LIVE ON STAGE**

Once you've set your volume for full richness from the intro monologue emerging from the dodgy hologram of Richard Burton, those first chords — the 1970s' answer to Beethoven's Fifth — should blast you into a bliss that lasts the length of the 2006 concert. It's a blisteringly rich recording, with star session guys such as Herbie Flowers and Chris Spedding reprising their original performances, Justin Heywood and Chris Thompson too, and Wayne's production team making the most of the surround possibilities both for effects and to put you in the middle of that 10-piece band and 48-strong string section. We say 'Uuuu-laaaaaaa'.

**PETER GABRIEL 'PLAY'**

Daniel Lanois and Richard Chappell oversaw a complete set of 5.1 remixes of Gabriel's greatest hits for the videos on this 2004 DVD release, best enjoyed in their quieter but higher-resolution DTS versions. Gabriel's vocals are mixed to emerge from all speakers equally, delivering a genuine in-your-head positioning rare to find in any surround mix, given it assumes a single listener positioned perfectly in the soundstage. It's thereby also revealing of imperfect speaker levels and of any tonality differences around the system, whether in the centre or between front and back. For this reason it's now become one of our test discs, as well as a musical fave.

As for the mixes, Lanois makes them distinct from the stereo ones, as well as imaginatively panned. *Sledgehammer* is an obvious standout, but there's subtlety too in mixes such as *Blood of Eden* and *Red Rain*. The DTS mix is at 96kHz compared with the Dolby Digital's 48kHz, but is about 30dB quieter, so be darned careful to duck the volume when switching between them or returning to the main menu.

**THE FLAMING LIPS 'VOID'**

There's clearly a joystick at work in these surround mixes of the greatest hits (up to 2005) from Oklahoma's finest, as in several places different instruments get circled around the full speaker set to dizzying effect. On *Fight Test* they do this with the drums, which is disorientating enough, then on *Do You Realize (US version)* it's a whole bunch of stuff including the bass guitar, which makes for a challenge in bass steering for subwoofer-based systems. This disc offers real equi-surround mixing, where the rears get as much of a work-out as the fronts, as the sliced guitars opening *Yoshimi* demonstrate beautifully. For the most lunatic delivery of 5.1-channel surround music, this is our clear winner.

**OTHER DVD 5.1 CRACKERS**

- Best of Bowie (double DVD)
- Queen Greatest Video Hits 1 & 2 (double DVDs)
- The McCartney Years (triple DVD)
- The Rocky Horror Picture Show (Blu-ray)

still unconvinced by the joys of surround music, I have one particular suggestion, assuming you have even a passing affection for the Beatles. Take a full listen through the whole DTS 24/96 surround track of

The Beatles' 'Love', the soundtrack album to the Vegas Cirque du Soleil show. It's just 5.1, so if using the Yamaha, keep 'Pure Direct' selected. It's a stunner that regularly leaves us breathless by the end.

**FAKING IT — A CONFESSION**

The vast majority of music remains in stereo, of course, whether you're streaming it, or playing from vinyl or from CD or from rips on your hard drive.



Nearly all AV receivers offer some way of spreading stereo around all your available speakers. Traditionally I have avoided these, and I'd certainly hesitate to recommend most of them to *Audio Esoterica* readers who believe in purity above all. It's one thing to fill a room with an Atmos mix in the way it was intended to be heard, and quite another to fake it with processing, no matter how cunning the 'AI'.

So I feel slightly guilty in admitting that with the RX-A8 I did find ourselves straying into 'All-Channel Stereo' deliberately at times (though I still objected when it arrived by default). With all those amps and speakers, it seemed churlish to listen with only two channels running. The question is how destructive to the music is the processing required to spread the sound, and with All-Channel Stereo, the answer really is not much. Meanwhile you're compensated with far more power and a room filled with music.

Yamaha's long-standing 'sound fields' certainly alter the sound significantly more. These are based on real-world acoustics, some of them measured from actual venues, so that when you input a stereo signal, they output a surround soundfield to your full speaker set which mimics the sound of that venue.

Now I've spent 30 years of hi-fi writing being firmly opposed to even the concept of this. Consider: you are sticking a carefully-crafted recording, already with its own inherent acoustic, through an effects box which adds the acoustic of a second space on top of that. It seems a concept fundamentally doomed to be destructive rather than constructively additive.

Again, I must raise a hand to admit that, even with the lesser A2A, I had been surprised to rather enjoy some of the options, and with the A8A even more so. Perhaps from the better DACs and processing, and the additional available channels, I was further persuaded by the utility and enjoyment available from them.

There are 11 modes listed as suitable for music content, and I tried to match music style to environment, so I selected 'Cellar Club', say, to listen to a vinyl single of Dr Feelgood doing *She's A Wind-Up*, and to a digital file of Thin Lizzy at the BBC doing *She Knows*. In tonal terms the Cellar Club acoustic warmed things up in a satisfyingly solidifying way, and threw a chunk of delayed high-frequency hi-hat from the rears.

I'm not entirely sure if that's what would happen in a real cellar club (all clubs were locked down during this review, so I couldn't pop down to one and check). But it's the spatial expansion that makes it worth the use — the timing of the rear bounce and the spread of the height speakers delivered what really was recognisably

the effect of Dr Feelgood playing down there on a stage to the front while we listened from further back in a larger space. In some respects it's unrealistically perfect, indeed, since any real cellar club would have far worse acoustics, probably an inadequate PA and a load of people making noise. It would be interesting if Yamaha added the sound of drunken patrons and occasional glasses smashing to complete the mood.

For this to work at all, mind you, I needed to be absolutely dead plumb centre, fixing the surround system in place like a pair of headphones, with mere centimetres of movement available before the sound from the rear speakers ceased to be reflection of the hi-hat and just sounded like a mush of noise.

So these programs are not 'effects' to engage for a party — use All-Channel Stereo if you must, but don't throw your guests into an empty cellar bar. But used privately, hell, why not? I successfully put Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell (separately) in a Warehouse Loft, and Hall & Oates in the Roxy Theatre.

Playing with soundfields is also best when playing whole albums, as there's a good chance the next band along won't fit the same acoustic: for example The Police sounded a bit swamped in The Roxy, Sting's vocals pushed back and soft (though not half as bad as they sounded in Telstra Stadium in 2008). The most reliable space expander for my money was 'Standard'.

## CONCLUSION

A late Atmos arrival — the new mixes of The Beatles 'Let It Be' — suggested one possible side-effect of the modern assertion that Atmos can be delivered effectively via headphones. It seemed that the younger Mr Martin and his accomplices have panned elements to a position at the sides halfway between front and rear. On headphones this makes sense — it would be straight into your ears. But with a physical speaker layout that's a localisation requiring precise speaker levels and critical head positioning to work perfectly. Run your rears a dB too hot, or sit back too far in your chair, and all those instruments slip to the rear.

Still, it's easy enough to set things for pinpoint accuracy with the RX-A8A, calling up its onscreen settings temporarily and nudging speaker levels to perfection. Get it right, and a room-filling new world of multichannel music awaits, via an AV receiver and a full set of speakers. Long hours spent blasting Atmos and surround music to my speaker system with Yamaha's Aventure RX-A8A, and the A2A before it, has me thoroughly convinced and converted.

Still listening in stereo, are you? You haven't heard the half of it. **£**



## SPECIFICATIONS

### Yamaha Aventure RX-A8A

**Power Output:** 11 × 150 watts (8 ohms, 0.06% THD)

**Inputs:** 7 HDMI, 1 HDMI eARC, 1 component video, 2 composite video, 1 balanced XLR audio, 5 analogue line-level, 1 phono, 3 optical digital, 2 coaxial digital (some audio inputs are shared), 1 USB-A, Ethernet, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth (SBC, AAC), DAB+/FM tuners, AirPlay 2, MusicCast

**Outputs:** 3 HDMI, 11-channel pre-out, XLR balanced L/R, 2 differentiated subwoofer out, 13 pairs speaker binding posts (11 channels), 1 6.5mm headphone, Bluetooth (SBC)

**Zone:** 2 additional stereo audio, 1 HDMI AV

**Other:** YPAO in, remote in/out, trigger in/out

**Dimensions (WHD):** 435×192×477mm

**Weight:** 21.4kg

**Price:** \$6299

**Contact:** Yamaha Music  
1800 805 413  
au.yamaha.com