

Best AV receiver of 2020

We compared affordable, full-featured AV receivers from Denon, Onkyo, Sony and Yamaha. Which one wins?

Want to find the best AV receiver for the money? I've recently tested some of the most popular big black box options from the major brands, and the feature sets and performance levels are impressively high in this middling price range. From Dolby Atmos to Wi-Fi music streaming to voice control -- and, of course, high-quality audio -- these models have everything a home theater enthusiast needs.

Which receiver comes out on top?

Of the current receiver models I've reviewed, **the Onkyo TX-NR696 is my favorite** pick for best AV receiver. The receiver offers easy setup, excellent usability, great surround sound with plenty of headroom, solid looks and, most important, plenty of up-to-date features essential to a stereo receiver. The Onkyo retails for more than \$500, but it's regularly on sale for under that. Even at \$580 the TX-NR696 is a great deal.

The Sony STR-DN1080 also puts in a good show despite being from 2017, as does the 2019 Denon AVR-S750, which offers even more refined performance than the Sony and Onkyo. I rated all three as "excellent," with just a little daylight separating their overall CNET ratings. They're all great performers and, as prices fluctuate regularly, if you can find one that's significantly less expensive than the others, go for it.

Also consider

What to look for in a \$500-ish receiver

AV receivers are notoriously complex, with reams of features and confusing technical specifications. I'm going to sum up the most important ones right here.

4K HDR compatibility

You want to make sure your new receiver can keep up with the latest TVs and video gear. Standards do change all the time, but the bare minimum right now is support for HDR and Dolby Vision (at least HDMI version 2.0 or better). All of these models support 4K and HDR video.



At least four HDMI inputs

With most televisions and set-top boxes supporting HDMI, you should buy a receiver that has as many of these inputs and outputs as possible. Front-mounted HDMI ports are kind of like appendices -- unneeded, because most users don't do hot-plugging of HDMI devices -- making the number of rear inputs what's most important (how else are you going to connect your blu-ray player, Nintendo Switch, sound bar and all your other devices). The Yamaha has the least at four, while the Sony and Onkyo have the most, at six. The Sony also offers a second HDMI-out for Zone 2. You should also be sure you have an extra HDMI cable or two on-hand.

You don't really need Dolby Atmos 'height' speakers

The Yamaha is the only model here that doesn't support Dolby Atmos and DTS:X, but the effects they have on your home theater movie watching can be subtle, or in most movies: nonexistent. In other words, don't worry about missing out on these new formats if you don't install the extra speakers. Mounting rear wireless surround speakers high on the wall instead will get you half of the way in terms of quality immersive sound.

Wi-Fi music streaming

Most midrange receivers have onboard Wi-Fi network connectivity for wireless music streaming. There are plenty of standards for wireless streaming services, but the most universal are Apple AirPlay and Google Chromecast (and sometimes Spotify Connect) built in . If you're looking to build a multiroom system with a variety of AV systems and speakers with wireless connectivity, these are the two flavors to aim for. The Onkyo and Sony are the only two that support both. The Denon models lack wireless streaming via Chromecast but up the ante to AirPlay 2.

For more on what you should be looking for, check out my full AV receiver buying guide.

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