



Pioneer SC-LX901

The sheer density of features and functions being packed into today's top-end home theatre receivers is quite astonishing.

These one-box wonders no longer focus just on decoding and delivering a movie surround soundtrack – they also offer an extended list of capabilities spanning an equally broad range of applications.

Take the Pioneer SC-LX901 under review here, for instance. Admittedly, it's quite a substantial piece of kit, weighing in at a disc-slipping 18,3 kg, and sporting sizeable dimensions of 435 x 441 x 185 mm. No wonder it fully occupied a generous slot in our Sound Structures AV stand.

Even so, it's hard to believe how much the folk at Pioneer have been able to shoehorn into that all-metal enclosure, with its handsome, black-anodised alloy faceplate, generous alphanumeric display and intuitive switchgear layout.

The LX901 is an 11.2 AV receiver, which means it's equipped with 11 separate Class D power amps, each rated by Pioneer at 200 watts per channel (6 ohms, 1 kHz,

1% THD, one channel driven). Simultaneous power output, all channels driven, is a claimed 880 watts (8 ohms, 1 kHz, 1% THD).

But don't worry too much about the stats: in use, the Pioneer is an unrepentant powerhouse, with plenty of muscle to match its equally magnanimous features set. This isn't a receiver that's likely to run out of steam in a hurry, and it revels in being exercised to the max.

As I covered the technology underpinning the LX901 in detail in our April 2017 cover feature, this review will focus more specifically on my hands-on experience with the Pioneer flagship. But it's worth summarising some of its key attributes.

The LX901's surround sound processing abilities cover all the bases: not only Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD MA, as well as their respective legacy formats, but also the latest, object-based, three-dimensional formats such as Dolby Atmos and DTS:X. With 11 amplified channels on offer, the speaker configuration permutations are equally extensive.

For those seeking to exploit Dolby Atmos or DTS:X, the speaker layout options include

5.1.4, 7.1.2 and 7.1.4 arrangements, with the last digit referring to the number of height channels allocated. Naturally, some channels can also be devoted to a second, powered zone, only adding to the Pioneer's impressive versatility.

As befits a flagship receiver, the LX901 promises stellar video performance, too. It will upscale 1080p HD source signals to 4K/60p/4:4:4 at 24-bit depth, while passing through native 4K/UHD with support for HDCP 2.2 copy protection. It's also compatible with High Dynamic Range (HDR) and BT.2020 wide colour gamut standards.

All of this is pretty much what you'd expect of a top-flight AV receiver. But in the case of the Pioneer, there's more – a lot more. Let's start with its connectivity talents: the LX901 offers wired Ethernet and dual-band Wi-Fi 802.11, plus Apple AirPlay, Google Cast, Bluetooth, and FireConnect-driven wireless multiroom playback.

Network access allows the Pioneer to stream from on-line services, with integrated support for Deezer, Tidal and Spotify. It will also find and stream content from DLNA-





compliant network devices such as a NAS server, and uses Tuneln to access literally thousands of Internet radio stations.

The Pioneer isn't in the least intimidated by high-res audio files: PCM is handled up to 192 kHz/24-bit resolutions. But even more impressive is its ability to natively accept and play back DSD files of up to 11.2 MHz via USB or network streaming – a rare talent, even in the high-end arena.

Have I mentioned that the Pioneer offers MCACC Pro, one of the best room

correction and system calibration systems in the business, that's both easy to use and astonishingly effective? It accurately measures room and speaker properties, then applies precisely defined digital signal processing to create a seamless, all-embracing surround soundstage.

Finally, the SC-LX901's own remote control handset is augmented by an excellent on-screen control interface, as well as the iControlAV5 remote app (for iOS and Android), which really is

the most satisfying way to access the Pioneer's full spectrum of features.

Setting up the Pioneer was a quick and intuitive affair, entailing little more than linking it to our Atlantic Technology 7.1 speaker system, plugging in a network cable, and hooking up the Oppo BDP-95EU universal player and our Optoma HD80 projector via HDMI.

I ran the MCACC Pro calibration programme in full auto mode, which took about 10 minutes, after which the speaker configuration, channel levels, crossover points and delays were stored. The data, when reviewed, was impressively accurate.

Next, a firmware update was identified and installed via the network. All that remained was to confirm that Bluetooth and AirPlay were operational (they were), that the iControlAV5 app recognised the LX901 (which it did) and that the Pioneer could identify and access the Synology NAS (it could).

The Pioneer was then afforded some running-in time, although deadline pressures meant it was pressed into service a little sooner than I would have liked. Still, the receiver sounded bold, enthusiastic and inviting from the word go.

Pearl Harbour is a good few years old now, but its combination of airborne action, romance and nostalgia makes for entertaining viewing. The way the Pioneer handled all those aircraft sequences – from Tiger Moths, Spitfires and Mustangs to Japanese Zeros – was impressive, to say the least.

The mock battle between Danny Walker (Josh Harnett) and Rafe McCawley (Ben Affleck) during training showed just how accurately the LX901 could steer the sound of low-flying, hard-charging aircraft criss-crossing front to rear and left to right.

I could feel as much as hear the 'planes as they thundered past just above head height. Directional steering was excellent, significantly contributing to the realism of the on-screen action.

Indeed, the special effects were almost tactile in their intensity, but never to the detriment of detail retrieval, nor the receiver's inherent polish and finesse. It not only easily coped with the

Software

Pearl Harbour (Blu-ray)

Men In Black III (Blu-ray)

Leonard Cohen – Songs From The Road (Columbia/Sony Blu-ray)

Associated Equipment

Oppo BDP-95EU universal deck

Atlantic Technology 7.1 speaker system

Marantz SR6011 AV receiver

Optoma HD80 DLP projector

Synology DS216se NAS

soundtrack's volatile dynamics, but impressed with spot-on pace and timing.

The Pioneer displayed an honesty of purpose that highlighted both subtle ambient clues and broad, confident swathes of sound. It was agile and responsive, too, closely tracking the on-screen action. The result was riveting, edge-of-seat viewing.

That same mix of palpable presence and electricity was also prevalent when switching to music content. Leonard Cohen's *Songs From The Road* (Columbia/Sony Blu-ray) makes for particularly evocative listening since the poet laureate of popular music passed away.

The Pioneer easily juxtaposed the exuberance of the audience and the melancholy-tinged performances, taken from Cohen's 2008/09 world tour – and for once, the surround mix sounded more engaging, more vital than the stereo soundtrack.

That's probably thanks to the way the LX901's seamless staging allowed for a consistently rendered, finely focussed surround sound image that transported the on-stage action – and sound – into the listening room.

It was the boisterous agility of the amp, together with its richness of tone and the expansive scope of the sound picture that had me pinned to my seat until the last strains of 'Closing Time' had gently faded away.

Finally, I listened to a DSD128 version of 'House Of The Rising Sun', one of the demo tracks on the Opus label's DSD sampler stored on the Synology NAS. It

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sounded great in 2.1 stereo, with the front stage flawlessly recreated, and the subwoofer adding vital, but subtle, weight. Simulated surround via DTS: Neural was appealing and entertaining, but not quite authentic enough to rival the airy, open stereo rendition.

The SC-LX901 is a worthy flagship of Pioneer's extensive AV receiver offering.

Regardless of format or material, it's never shy to show its exuberance, but tempers that enthusiasm with seamless imaging and a generous tonal range.

Loads of inputs, ease of use, and a lot of scope for DSP-induced tweaking makes the Pioneer a very desirable home theatre proposition.

Deon Schoeman

VITAL STATS

Channels	11.2
Power output	11x 200 watts (6 ohms, 1 kHz, 1% THD, one channel driven)
Surround sound formats	Dolby Atmos, Dolby TrueHD and earlier DTS:X, DTS-HD Master Audio and earlier
DSP chips.....	Cirrus Logic Quad-Core, 32-bit
Audio DAC	ESS Sabre32 Ultra ES9016S
HDMI inputs/outputs	8/2
AV inputs/outputs	2/1
Audio inputs/outputs	6x line-level, 1x MM Phono/2x zone out, headphone out
Multichannel output	1x 9.2 pre-out, 2x subwoofer out
Digital inputs	2x RCA coaxial, 3x Toslink optical
Connectivity	Ethernet, 802.11n Wi-Fi, USB Type A, Bluetooth 4.1
Dimensions (WxHxD)	435 x 185 x 441 mm
Weight	18,3 kg

Price R49 990

Verdict

Wholesome, arresting delivery that mixes substance and pace with a talent for directional steering and a seamless, all-embracing surround soundstage. Poised and truthful with stereo material, too. Impressive connectivity options further boost appeal.

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OUR RATING: 88 / 100

