



# Pioneer VSX-1131



**T**rue to its name, Pioneer has always been an early adopter of cutting-edge technology. When multichannel home theatre first emerged, the Pioneer brand was right there, in the front row, and that's still the case today.

The VSX-1131 is by no means the marque's flagship AV receiver, but you'd be forgiven for considering it a top-tier model, based on its mix of generous output, extensive features, versatility and outright performance.

One of the Pioneer's key attractions is the excellent iControlAV5 control app for both iOS and Android. Installed on my iPad, it made the entire process of controlling the Pioneer and accessing its myriad features a simple and intuitive affair. Indeed, the app is one of the best in this genre. Pioneer also provides a remote control handset that's handy for basic use.

The VSX-1131 also offers active equalisation, but I am in two minds about its

impact. During the review period, I found that it could make dull soundtracks sound livelier and beefier, but that it could ultimately become too overbearing. Using it will be a matter of personal taste and experimentation.

This AVR is hugely versatile, with provision for UPnP-based playback from NAS devices, as well as access to Internet radio, playback from USB sources, and even latest-generation Bluetooth. Connectivity options include both 802.11 Wi-Fi and Ethernet, but superior stability means the latter remains the connection of choice.

The Pioneer offers ample inputs and outputs, plus the ability to customise and rename those inputs to better reflect actual system configurations. Its versatility also extends to compatibility with a wide range of audio, video and surround sound formats.

The latter includes the latest object-based surround sound codecs – Dolby Atmos and DTS:X – while audio capabilities

extend to high-res formats such as DSD (2,8 MHz in 5.1 multichannel, and up to 5,6 MHz in stereo), as well as PCM up to 384 kHz/24-bit. High-res audio file compatibility includes ALAC, AIFF, FLAC and WAV up to 192 kHz/24-bit.

In video terms, the Pioneer offers Ultra-HD (4K/60p/4:4:4/24-bit) upscaling and pass-through with HDCP 2.2 compatibility. It's also claimed to be HDR and BT.2020 ready.

For network streaming fans, the VSX-1131 offers integrated access to services such as Deezer and Tidal, as well as the TuneIn Internet radio collection. The receiver is also Google Cast and Apple AirPlay compatible.

Set-up is a quick and fuss-free affair. While the VSX-1131 is undoubtedly a full-featured AVR, it's arguably less intimidating in set-up and use than some of its rivals. That's partly due to an attractive interface that's menu-driven and very easy to use.

The set-up procedure incorporates

automated calibration of channel output levels, delays and distances, using a supplied microphone that's placed in the primary listening position, after which a test tone sequence analyses room conditions, speaker crossover points and speaker placement and sets up the key parameters accordingly.

The auto-calibration is reasonably effective, but the price you pay for its quick and easy approach is that some additional tweaking may be required – I found that the subwoofer level, in particular, needed further experimentation and adjustment. Fortunately, it's easy enough to make those adjustments.

Once up and running, the Pioneer sounded beefy and nicely controlled, with a tonal breadth and presence that benefited both music and movies. Loads of authority and control kept even the most muscular, explosive effects in check, but without robbing them of impact.

The receiver displayed more than enough reserves on the power front, with ample headroom, allowing the kind of listening levels that will rattle windows and upset the neighbours. And yet, it always projected movie dialogues with just the right balance of urge and detail.

The receiver's talents weren't limited to movie soundtracks, though: asked to translate music material, it always sounded vital and exciting. Listening to Eric Clapton's *Crossroads Guitar Festival 2010*, the Pioneer dug deep into the ambience, energy and grit of these performances – and sounded great in both 2.1 stereo and full DTS-HD Master Audio.

Here, the active EQ was definitely too overbearing, but the sound was nicely balanced without it, showing off plenty of energy and thrust, but never shirking its responsibility to pay attention to detail, either.

The sound was delivered with real authority, and the Pioneer made the most of an excellent surround mix. From Jeff Beck to Vince Gill, from Sonny Landreth to the great Clapton himself, the AVR always made the music sound as vital and electric as the original performances.

While the Pioneer always sounded

dynamic and exciting, it also managed to dig deep into the finer details of the performances. It easily exposed and highlighted the different guitar virtuosos on Vince Gill's appearance with James Burton, Albert Lee, Keb Mo, Earl Klugh and a host of others.

Indeed, the sound was lucid enough to make the most of the detailed, precise mix, which faithfully tracked the on-stage action, adding to the overall realism of the experience.

The opening car chase of *Quantum of Solace* is one of the more thrilling James Bond sequences, with the on-screen action

so up close and personal you can almost smell the gunpowder and feel the impacts.

It's also quite sonically challenging, but the Pioneer treated the effects with succinct, precise control, rendering the sound with authority and realism. Indeed, there was an almost tactile quality to some of the impact effects, while the gunshots were precisely pinpointed on the wide, front-biased soundstage.

The medieval horserace in the town square posed sonic challenges of its own, with the densely presented crowd noise creating a sense of chaos, against which the battle between Bond (Daniel Craig)

VITAL STATS

Channels .....	9.2
Power output .....	160 watts/channel (6 ohms, 1 kHz, THD 1,0%)
Surround sound formats .....	Dolby TrueHD, Dolby Atmos, DTS-HD Master Audio, DTS:X
DSP .....	32-bit
Audio DAC .....	AKM AK4458 384 kHz/32-bit
Frequency response .....	10 Hz - 100 kHz (+1, -3 dB – Pure Direct mode)
Signal-to-noise ratio .....	106 dB (IHF-A, line in)
HDMI inputs/outputs .....	7/2
Video inputs .....	2x composite, 1x component, assignable
Audio inputs .....	1x MM phono RCA, 4x line-level RCA, 1x 3,5 mm line in
Audio outputs .....	1x 3,5 mm headphone jack 1x stereo line out,
Digital inputs .....	1x coax, 2x Toslink. 1x USB Type A
Connectivity .....	Ethernet, 802.11 Wi-Fi, Bluetooth v4.1
Bluetooth codecs .....	A2DP 1.2, AVRCP 1.3
Dimensions (WxHxD) .....	435 x 173 x 371 mm
Weight .....	10,0 kg

Price ..... R14 990

Verdict

Always sounds bolder and more authoritative than expected. Loads of pace and energy, linked to excellent surround sound decoding. Equally adept with movie and music material. Intuitive app ensures ease of use. All the bells and whistles that matter, too.

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OUR RATING: 86 / 100





and the rogue agent plays out with increasing intensity.

Again, the Pioneer was able to distinguish between the background din and the specific effects of the tussle between the two agents, with the sound accurately tracking their every move, and drawing the audience into the thrill of the chase in the process.

*Avengers – Age Of Ultron* isn't my favourite movie, but the fight sequences between comic book heroes The Hulk and Iron Man against the backdrop of downtown Johannesburg is worth watching, for both the effects, and the South African interest.

The Pioneer easily reproduced the sheer density and force of the explosions, while remaining sonically agile and accurate enough to not become bogged down by the sheer onslaught of effects. Dialogue remained clearly rendered, and there was ample attention to finer, subtler details to enhance the overall sense of realism.

I was particularly impressed by the way the Pioneer retained its poise and control, even under high sound level duress. It always seemed to have more than enough in reserve, with plenty of headroom, while the surround sound image was believably painted, with a real sense of air and dimension.

I'm pretty sure that most AV receiver



buyers will be focussing on surround sound material, but it's worth noting that the VSX-1131 is more than adept at two-channel music playback. It effortlessly accessed the WAV and FLAC files on the Synology NAS linked to our network, and did a fine two-channel job of making stereo music sound engaging and accessible.

Steve Tyrell's *That Lovin' Feeling* (44/16 FLAC, ripped) is an easy-listening collection of soft-jazz crooning, but it's slickly performed and pristinely recorded. The Pioneer presented its wares with a smooth, coherent assurance that made for involving and entertaining listening.

By comparison, German rock act Scorpions sounded explosive and hard-edged, but with enough melodic content and easy hooks to get feet tapping and fingers snapping. The Pioneer used its inherent urge and muscle to inject the music with just the right amount of momentum.

There is a lot to like about the Pioneer VSX-1131. It has all the important features without requiring a PHD to operate it. It's Ultra-HD 4K capable, has ample inputs and outputs, plays high-res audio (including DSD), and easily links to streaming services or UPnP devices. Bluetooth and AirPlay make connecting mobile devices easy, too.

The receiver displayed more than enough reserves on the power front, with ample headroom, allowing the kind of listening levels that will rattle windows and upset the neighbours.

Software



- Quantum Of Solace (Blu-ray)
- Avengers: Age Of Ultron (Blu-ray)
- Various – Crossroads Guitar Festival 2010 (Rhino/Warner Blu-ray)
- Steve Tyrell – That Lovin’ Feeling (Concord 44/24 FLAC rip)
- Scorpions – Return To Forever (Sony 44/16 WAV rip)

Associated Equipment



- Marantz SR-6003 AV receiver
- Oppo BDP-95EU universal deck
- Atlantic Technology 7.1 surround speaker system
- Optoma HD80 DLP projector
- Synology DS216se NAS

Perhaps most importantly, however, is how good the Pioneer sounds. It has more than enough urge and power to cope with even the most effects-driven soundtracks, yet balances that muscle with a smooth tonality, generous imaging, seamless

surround sound, and an ability to boost realism with fine detail. Add keen pricing to the equation, and you have a winning home entertainment formula.

Deon Schoeman

