



Pioneer SX-N30

For more than a decade now, receivers have been associated with home theatre. In fact, it would be fair to say that AV receivers have been the backbone of the home entertainment market since Dolby and DTS launched surround sound formats that made it possible to enjoy an immersive movie experience at home.

It could also be argued that the rise of multi-channel home cinema was achieved to the detriment of traditional stereo hi-fi, which largely became the preserve of specialist and high-end brands as demand from the broader public swung towards home theatre.

One of the victims of multi-channel's rise was the stereo receiver – a device that used to be popular in the heyday of stereo. No self-respecting hi-fi brand could afford not to include one or more stereo receivers in its product catalogue.

The multichannel AV receiver brought an end to that trend, and the stereo receiver simply faded away, never to be seen or heard again – or so we all thought.

As they say in the classics, though, the only constant is change. Over the past two years, there's been a resurgence in demand for stereo gear, while the home theatre market has softened.

The reasons for this reversal in trends are hard to pin down. The increasing, perceived complexity of home theatre,

driven by the demands of object-based formats like Dolby Atmos and DTS:X, may have played a role – all those speakers need to be placed somewhere, after all! And they cost money.

But it's also true that living spaces are getting smaller, and that for many, a 2.1 system – left and right front channels plus a subwoofer – delivers a surprisingly satisfying audio experience for both movie and music material, without the complexity of multichannel.

Perhaps even more importantly, streaming has become a new buzzword, driven by the increasing use of streaming services such as Tidal and Deezer, while physical media like CDs are being replaced by downloaded music purchased on-line, and stored on portable drives, flash drives or network-attached devices.

No wonder then that network playback components are popping up left, right and centre. The Pioneer SX-N30 links the old with the new by combining the roles of stereo receiver and network player in a single device. The result is an extended list of capabilities that makes the SX-N30 something of an audio jack of all trades.

Because the SX-N30 is a stereo receiver and network player rolled into one, it offers analogue and digital inputs, together with network connectivity, an FM/AM tuner, and compatibility with dedicated wireless formats such as Bluetooth and Apple AirPlay.

The Pioneer looks functional and businesslike, but even then, there's more here than meets the eye. A large alphanumeric display dominates the





front panel, while a clear control layout allows easy manual operation.

Rotary controllers look after volume, input selection, bass, treble and balance, while a quartet of pushbuttons acts as a cursor control to navigate the various set-up and function menus. As is customary, there is also a full-featured remote control handset.

However, if the SX-N30 is connected to a network (wired or wi-fi), the best way by far to control it is to opt for the dedicated iOS app (an Android version is also offered). The full-colour app, with its intuitive structure makes set-up, status and checking and operation a lot easier.

That's just as well, because for all its apparent simplicity, the Pioneer is a multi-talented machine. It offers both analogue and digital inputs, as well as access to streaming services like Deezer, Spotify and TunesIn.

In addition, the Pioneer supports DLNA, UPnP, USB, Bluetooth and AirPlay. It even includes a moving magnet-compatible phono stage, affirming the growing resurgence of the once vilified vinyl record.

I won't waste too much time running you through the set-up procedure, except to say that the app makes it all as simple as swiping your way through the menus, adjusting and confirming what you need along the way. The process is quick and

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intuitive, including the network bits, and you'll be up and running in no time.

The Pioneer was partnered with KEF LS50s for much of the review period, although it also enjoyed the company of the beefier KEF R500 floorstanders. Source signals were provided by our regular Oppo BDP-95EU universal deck and the Primare CD22 reviewed elsewhere

in this issue, while the Pioneer also had access to a variety of material stored on a network-attached hard drive, and several USB flash drives.

The review unit was brand new, and was allowed to settle in for a good 20 hours or so, although it probably needs between 50 and 100 hours to really start coming into its own. Even so, the Pioneer already sounded generous once listening began in earnest.

Immediately apparent was the very wide soundscape – the SX-N30 was able to create a beguiling sense of air and dimension. Imaging was crisply focussed and believably presented, helped along by an ability to pay close attention to the full gamut of detail.

The Pioneer had a real penchant for pace and momentum, easily keeping up with the music's rhythm and urge, and never allowing rapid passages to intimidate it. It certainly never dragged its feet, even when the musical action became frenetic, as on Dream Theater's cinematic *The Astonishing* (Roadrunner 96/24 FLAC).

It approached that set with an exciting, vibrant intensity that spotlighted the receiver's inherent ability, while capturing the energy and atmospherics of the performance with composed ease.

Tonally, the SX-N70 is best described as on the neutral side, with some glazing of high frequencies and a bias towards brightness in the trebles that could make it sound somewhat unforgiving with poorer material, but allowed excellent resolution and detail retrieval.

Mids were smooth and lucid, again affording a bountiful harvest of musical information, but I felt that the bass could have done with a bit more body.

As mentioned earlier, this aspect improved consistently as we spent more time with the Pioneer, and the low frequency response was still gaining presence and punch when the time came to return the review unit. Bargain on around 100 hours before the receiver is fully on song.

The large-scale performance and sonic vistas of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6*, performed by the Boston Symphony

Software

Dream Theater – The Astonishing (Roadrunner)
Leonard Cohen – Can't Forget: Souvenirs Of The Grand Tour (Columbia)
Beethoven – Symphony No. 6 – Munch/Boston Symphony Orchestra (RCA Living Stereo)
Joe Stilgoe – Songs On Film Live (Linn Records)

Associated Equipment

Primare CD22 disc player
Oppo BDP-95EU universal deck
Naim Uniti2 all-in one player
KEF LS50 and R500 loudspeakers

Orchestra under Charles Munch (RCA Living Stereo 88,2/24 FLAC) was presented with an airy, majestic confidence. The Pioneer afforded the performance loads of space, so that the full impact and impetus of the orchestra was believably reflected.

The strings were bright and effervescent but never brittle, while the sonority and timbre of the cellos and double bass section added credibility and depth to the lower registers. The overall delivery was majestic and commanding, with the Pioneer easily keeping up with the music's intricacies, while also paying attention to finer, vital shards of detail.

Leonard Cohen's 'Got A Little Secret', from the marvellous *Can't Forget: A Souvenir Of The Grand Tour* (Columbia 44,1/16 FLAC) had plenty of punch and loads of sparkle. I enjoyed the engaging nature of the recording, which captured the essence and the relaxed bonhomie of the live set, and really drew me into the core of the music.

The Pioneer spread the music far and wide across the soundstage, providing ample space for every member of Cohen's ensemble, yet never losing vital sonic and musical cohesion. The image remained perfectly focussed, with Cohen's gravelly, almost plaintive vocals always in the crosshairs of the lucid mix.

Joe Stilgoe's *Songs On Film Live* (Linn 44,1/16 FLAC) believably reflected the warmth and intimacy of the live club ambience, drawing the listener into the essence and the humour of the performance in a way that made for compelling, riveting listening.

The piano sounded liquid and agile, always sharing centre stage with Stilgoe's cocktail-smooth vocals, while the articulate double bass of Ben Reynolds and Chris Hill's incisive percussion were showcased with a precision that allowed full access to the music and its emotive intent.

The Pioneer rewarded good source material, but wasn't shy to make the most of music delivered via AirPlay or Bluetooth. Jazz drummer Billy Cobham's *Broad Horizon*, accessed from streaming service Deezer via my iPhone 5S, sounded generous and wholesome, with plenty



of energy that made the most of the big band's sassy brass, the articulate guitar and — of course — the riveting stick work of Mr Cobham himself.

Even the Pioneer's on-board Internet radio services were easily accessed, and stations like the eclectic but always entertaining Paradise Radio sounded generous, with good staging and plenty of tonal range.

The Pioneer SX-N30 is an excellent example of a new breed of connected stereo receivers that combine a versatile feature set with strong sonic capabilities and app-based ease of use. Robustly constructed, with plenty of inputs and a pacy, spacious delivery, the Pioneer makes the music come alive, regardless of source.

Deon Schoeman

VITAL STATS

Power output	2x 85 watts RMS (8 ohms, 20 Hz – 20 kHz, 1% THD)
Frequency response	10 Hz – 100 kHz (+1, -3 dB)
Signal-to-noise ratio	100 dB
Analogue inputs	6x stereo RCA, 1x stereo MM phono
Digital inputs	1x coaxial RCA, 1x Toslink optical, USB Type A
Outputs.....	1x stereo RCA, subwoofer out, 2x binding post sets
Connectivity	802.11n Wi-Fi, Bluetooth 2.1, 10/100 Ethernet, Apple AirPlay
Audio format compatibility	MP3, WMA, WAV, AAC, FLAC, OGG, ALAC, DSD64, DSD128
Dimensions (WxDxH)	435 x 327 x 148 mm
Weight	8,5 kg
Price	R14 990

Verdict

Fresh, crisp sonic approach does much to extract a rich bounty of sonic detail. Hugely versatile in both analogue and digital terms. Dedicated Android and iOS app.

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OUR RATING: 82 / 100

