



Pioneer

VSX-74TXVi Digital Surround Receiver

Pioneer sure packed an awful lot of stuff into its new A/V receiver, the Elite VSX-74TXVi, beginning with the mouthful of letters in its model name. Far more engaging is its iPod connectivity: this is the first receiver we've seen to offer fully integrated control for Apple's ubiquitous iPod music player. Then there's its XM satellite radio capability, making it the second XM-ready receiver we've tested after last month's Yamaha RX-V657 (see "The List" on page 79).

Unpacking the receiver reveals a small, cone-shaped microphone that's used for automatic speaker setup and speaker/room equalization. And the up-to-the-minute jack pack includes two HDMI inputs and an HDMI output for digital A/V switching via a single cable, with full video upconversion of all sources to the HDMI monitor output as well as the component and S-video outs.

There's also an i.Link (a.k.a. FireWire) connection for multichannel digital output from some Super Audio CD and DVD-Audio players. The THX Select 2-certified receiver has lots more, of course (see "key features" on facing page), including the ample seven-channel power that's *de rigueur* at this price and a full range of Dolby and DTS surround options.

SETUP

To get XM radio service you need to jack a \$50 XM Connect & Play add-on antenna/tuner module — available from Audiovox and (eventually) others — into the Pioneer's back panel. With the antenna plunked on top of the receiver and aimed toward a southwest-facing window, XM came up almost immediately when I selected the XM/Tuner input. Using the onscreen antenna-strength graph, I adjusted the antenna to lock in the best signal. Reception was rock solid.

Connecting an iPod mini was a simple matter of plugging one end of the supplied cable into the mini's dock connector and the other into a jack on the receiver's rear panel. As long as your iPod has a dock port (all but the early ones do), you'll be good to go.

WHAT WE THINK

This receiver's XM-readiness, built-in iPod control, and excellent audio performance help justify a substantial price tag.

Pioneer's auto-setup routine goes by the awkward acronym MCACC, which stands for Multi-Channel Acoustic Calibration Circuit. When you hit the onscreen Go button, about 5 minutes of noise bursts and clicks cycle through your speakers as the receiver dials in speaker "sizes," levels, distances, and cross-over frequencies. There are also a couple types of equalization, including a graphic EQ adjustment for each main channel. (You can repeat the setup process for different listening positions and store the results, along with speaker setup choices, in six different memories.) The Pioneer's self-selected speaker level and distance settings were accurate, closely matching those I'd come up with using my own sound meter.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

Beginning with stereo CD playback, the Pioneer proved wholly satisfying. Clean, hyper-detailed productions like Steely Dan's classic *Gauche* delivered all the clarity and tonal precision I expected on Donald Fagen's distinctive nasal

whine, plus all the dynamic detail I expected. And the Pioneer produced plenty of power when I cranked things up, like when I played the DVD-Audio version of Steely Dan's *Everything Must Go*. The golden-years funk of "Pixeleen" easily got my furniture a-vibrating without distortion or audible strain.

Turning my attention to satellite radio, XM sounded great through my reference speakers. I can't say that critical listeners won't ever hear artifacts of XM's compression, which is similar to MP3. I heard the occasional tinge of "swirly" background noise on a very quiet passage. But in general, sound was impressively clean and musical. Handel's *Water Music*, heard on XM's serious classical channel (110), was quiet, transparent, and crisply detailed.

Sound from the iPod was just that — iPod sound. Since the dock connection sends the 'Pod's own analog stereo signal to the receiver's input, quality varies based on the track. As with any compressed music, you'll hear glitches on tracks encoded at low bit rates, but if you stick with Apple's AAC encoding at 320 kilobits per second, you'd be hard pressed to tell the difference in direct comparisons with a CD. To spice things up, you can also dial in any applicable surround processing mode that turns stereo into multichannel sound.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

The "Reconstruction" DVD release of Samuel Fuller's flawed but fascinating WW II epic, *The Big Red One*, has several scenes with explosions that drive four, five, and even six channels to peak levels simultaneously. The Pioneer never once stumbled or showed any sign of audible distortion. Sound on Dolby Digital and DTS material was unfailingly clean, detailed, and dynamic.

EASE OF USE

The Pioneer's densely populated universal remote assigns many critical functions a dedicated key — a good thing. But with so many keys, the layout is cramped — not so good. The omission of backlighting or even glow-in-the-dark labels is surprising for a \$1,700 receiver, and the use of dim red and green lettering makes for a lot of squinting. (On the other hand, Pioneer's simple onscreen menus were amply clear and helpful.) If you use the remote to control other components, you'll be doing a lot of switching back and forth between its receiver-controlling mode and the external-component modes. I learned to use it, but I couldn't learn to love it.

Selecting channels on XM is the same as tuning an AM or FM

station: scroll up/down, choose a preset, or enter a channel by number. The receiver's XM display includes only basic artist/title info — but that's a result of the XM datstream.

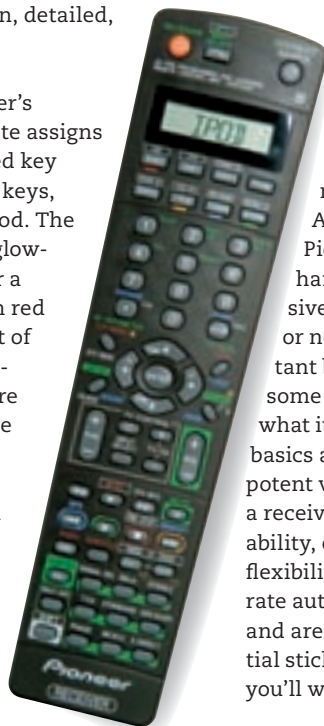
Playback from an iPod was equally simple. Selecting the labeled iPod input brings up an onscreen menu

for selecting Artists, Albums, Playlists, and so on using the remote's four-way cursor keypad. The remote's iPod transport controls work as expected, and the receiver's onscreen display includes full artist, title,

time, and track-number data for the song that's playing and even a nice version of the iPod progress bar. Loading menus and skipping tracks takes a second or two longer than when using the iPod directly, but overall I found the Pioneer's integration intuitive, effective, and a pleasure to use.

BOTTOM LINE

The Pioneer VSX-74TXVi is a very fine performer whose key qualities hold their own against other, more expensive "flagship" A/V receivers, including Pioneer's own. On the other hand, there are *less* expensive models that can match it, or nearly so, in all the important basics (including, again, some from Pioneer). Fortunately, what it has to offer *beyond* the basics are extras of obvious and potent value. If you're intrigued by a receiver with XM radio and iPod-ability, extensive input/output flexibility, and some pretty elaborate auto-setup and EQ functions, and aren't put off by its substantial sticker, then this is a receiver you'll want to check out. **S&V**



PLUS

- Integrated XM Radio and iPod options.
- HDMI source switching.
- Good auto setup.
- Digital multichannel connection for DVD-Audio/SACD.

MINUS

- Densely packed, nonilluminated remote.



The Pioneer delivered lots of multichannel firepower for *The Big Red One*.

key features

- 140 watts x 7 channels
- THX Select 2-certified
- XM satellite radio expansion via \$50 Connect & Play accessory
- iPod integration and control
- Auto-setup speaker calibration and EQ
- Dolby Digital EX, DTS-ES, Dolby Pro Logic IIx, DTS Neo:6, 12 proprietary DSP surround modes including Headphone
- Source upconversion to HDMI, component-video, S-video
- 2 HDMI inputs, 1 output
- 2 i.Link (FireWire) inputs
- 3-zone multiroom capability
- Back surround speaker outputs reassignable to remote-room use
- USB input compatible with MP3 and Windows Media 9 formats
- preprogrammed/learning remote
- IR-control I/O for remote room

test bench

The Pioneer measured as expected for power output, which led a list of generally excellent bench results. Subwoofer-channel distortion, though measuring high on our 6-channel, 0-dBFS torture test (8.6%), was perfectly fine with any real-world combination of channels/levels. No bass management is provided for analog multichannel inputs, but this will be moot if you use the digital multichannel hookup for DVD-Audio or SACD playback.

Full lab results on S&V Web site