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PIONEER DVR-533H-S

Pioneer gets just about everything right with the DVR-533H-S. Despite being no larger than most DVD players, this sleek hard drive/DVD recorder (\$499 list) has a feature set longer than the marquee at a 24-screen megaplex. The main attraction is a premiere for the category: dual-layer compatibility, which allows the deck to record to DVD-R DL media that holds nearly twice as much video (8.5GB) as a standard DVD-R disc. The Pioneer DVR-533H-S packs in numerous other essentials, including TV Guide's free electronic programming guide, easy-to-use menus, 30-second skip, high-speed video dubbing, impressive editing options, and a FireWire input — the list goes on. Although its like-priced competitors include highly



rated decks such as the Panasonic DMR-EH50 and the TiVo-powered Humax DRT800, this Pioneer's combination of features, thoughtful design, and overall value — it costs a bit less than the Panasonic and doesn't require a monthly fee as the Humax does

Editor's rating:

Excellent
8.2
out of 10

— make it the best DVD recorder we've tested so far.

DESIGN

Pioneer's HDD-DVD decks have always been smaller than those of the competition, and the DVR-533H-S is no exception; at 16.5 by 10 by 2.25 inches, its case is about an inch shorter and a few inches shallower than other recorders in its class. The silver-and-black front looks uncluttered yet offers plenty of control to people who misplace the remote; there's full menu control via a five-way navigational keypad and an HDD/DVD toggle control, as well as play/pause/stop and record/one-touch record buttons. Flip open the small door on the bottom right and you'll find a set of A/V inputs for your digital camcorder or other external source, complete with S-Video and FireWire ports.

The Pioneer DVR-533H-S's busy remote is its major design flaw, and it took us a few seconds to find the keys we wanted among all the labels and icons. The clicker might stymie beginners, especially since many keys lack visible differentiation, but advanced users and universal-remote programmers will appreciate the one-touch access to the deck's many functions. We liked the jumbo HDD and DVD buttons that switch the controls from one disc to the other, as well as dedicated keys for input select, which lets you cycle through the recorder's various A/V inputs, and recording mode, which gives you one-touch control over the deck's recording speed without having to dig into the setup menu.

We do wish the oh-so-useful 30-second-skip button was a bit larger, and its functionality may initially throw people used to the standard skip from "hacked" TiVos or DVRs such as the Dish Player-DVR 942. Instead of simply jumping forward 30 seconds immediately, the device pauses for a second, allowing you to press the button repeatedly and add to the skip time, to as long as 10 minutes. The reverse-skip offers similar functionality in different time increments, beginning with 5 seconds. We ended up loving the adjustable skip, since many commercial breaks are exactly 2 or 3 minutes long, and once we got the hang of it, we were able to skip them with dead-on accuracy. Given that many

DVD recorders won't skip at all, this anti-advertising feature is a big bonus.

Pioneer's onscreen display still looks a bit unpolished next to the slick menus of Sony's RDR-HX900, for example, but we found them highly functional and easy to follow. The DVD/HDD navigator, for instance, will display either four or eight titles at a time with thumbnails, and you can easily skip from one screen to the next. There's also a wizard that takes you through the initial setup process and plenty of onscreen help in the form of messages at the bottom of the screen (which expert users are free to disable). We loved both the home menu, which provides a central place to find all of the recorder's many functions, and the step-by-step copying and finalization dialogs, which make burning programs from the hard drive to DVD a breeze. While novices might find all the options bewildering at first, the logical nature of the interface makes using the device to its full potential relatively easy.

FEATURES

The Pioneer DVR-533H-S offers the most complete feature package in its class. Its ability to record to dual-layer media means you can fit nearly twice as much video on one disc. Using the longest-play SEP mode, the Pioneer DVR-533H-S can squeeze 18.5 hours onto a single DVD-R DL; higher-quality SP allows 3 hours, 43 minutes. The downside is that DVD-R DL discs cost significantly more than other media; at one store, we saw prices of \$5.33 per DVD-R DL disc compared to \$4.99 per DVD+R DL and as little as 48 cents per standard DVD-R. But DVD-R DL media just started becoming widely available, and prices will undoubtedly drop over the next few months. Note that the Pioneer cannot record to DVD+R/RW or DVD-RAM formats, but that isn't a huge deal since "plus" and "minus" media cost about the same.

This deck's 80GB HDD is good for about 35 hours of recording in SP mode, and while you can't record live two shows at once — a feature reserved for cable and satellite DVRs — or pause and rewind live TV à la TiVo or Philips's



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1

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HDRW720, you can press record any time to capture what you're watching. To pause, rewind or fast-forward the current recording, you must either press play or find the recording in the menu and engage playback. The difference between always-on recording and manually pressing record is one thing that separates most DVD/HDD recorders from DVRs.

To dub, you simply create playlists of titles to copy them from the hard drive to DVD or vice versa, and you can modify the titles, as well as menu thumbnails and appearance during finalization — Pioneer offers a handful of styles. The High-Speed Copy mode dubbed a 2-hour SP-mode movie to disc in just 15 minutes. Unfortunately, if you want to take a title that was recorded at one speed and copy it at a different speed — for example, to fit a longer title to disc — you'll have to copy it in real time. There also a disc-archiving feature that takes a DVD (menus and all), archives it to the hard drive, and then copies it to a blank disc. The archiving went relatively quickly — it took about 12 minutes to upload a 100-minute movie to the hard drive and 16 minutes to copy it to a new disc — and you can even keep the archive file on the HDD and make multiple copies. Naturally, the Pioneer won't let you archive copy-protected DVDs.

Both the HDD and DVD boast one-touch recording, and you can record to XP, SP, LP, EP, SLP, and SEP (10-hour) modes that offer various balances of video quality vs. drive/DVD space. The HDD offers an additional XP+ mode, which gives you superfine, 15Mbps recordings (or the equivalent of 41 minutes of disk space compared to an hour in standard XP mode). There's also a manual mode that lets you fine-tune the recording speed in 32-step increments, perfect for fitting, say, a 130-minute movie onto a DVD at the best quality possible. It's Pioneer's equivalent of Panasonic's Flexible Recording mode.

As with many non-TiVo HDD decks we've tested, the DVR-533H uses TV Guide's free electronic programming guide for setting your recording schedule. While TV Guide's EPG still won't work with satellite setups, we finally had no trouble getting it to work with our Time Warner New York digital cable box, Scientific Atlanta's 8300HD. We plugged in the RF cable from our controller box; followed the EPG's setup instructions; attached the IR blaster, which changes channels on the cable box; then turned off the deck. About 24 hours later, we were greeted with our local channel lineup, program listings, and descriptions (just for a few days out, mind you, but that's what you get from a free EPG). We're still miffed by the guide's clunky design — only two columns of programming at a time, not to mention sluggish menus — but we're pleased by the new recording options, including weekly recording, custom start/end recording times, different recording speeds for specific shows, and reminders for when a show is about to begin.

The deck has plenty of editing options for HDD and DVD-RW VR-mode recordings, including the ability to change title names, set thumbnails, erase sections of titles or divide them in two (HDD only), and add or remove chapter stops manually or automatically. With DVD-RW discs formatted in VR mode, you can also create playlists that let you edit together recordings without touching the original titles. If you're trying to edit recordings on DVD-RW discs in video mode (as opposed to VR mode; video mode creates discs that are compatible on most playback devices) or DVD-R discs, your recording options are limited to changing the title name and setting the thumbnail; however, you can always do your editing on the hard drive first and copy the titles to disc later.

The DVR-533H brings an impressive set of A/V connections. In the back of the deck, you get a progressive-scan-capable component-video output, two sets each of S-Video inputs and outputs, an optical (but not coaxial) digital audio output, and the standard RF ports, while up front you'll find a complete set of A/V inputs for a camcorder, including S-Video and FireWire inputs. The only real omission is a coaxial digital audio output.

Pioneer also offers a version of this deck with a 160GB hard drive, called the DVR-633H-S. In addition, the Pioneer DVR-531H-S (\$349 list), which is identical to the DVR-533H-S except that it lacks a FireWire port, is available exclusively from Sam's Club and Wal-Mart.

PERFORMANCE

The Pioneer DVR-533H-S scored strong if not exceptional marks in our performance tests. The deck captured about 450 lines of horizontal resolution in the 1-hour XP and 2-hour SP modes, with its resolution falling to a much softer 300 lines in the 4-hour LP mode, pretty much as expected. As we dialed down to the 8-hour SLP and 10-hour SEP modes, our recordings showed fewer than 250 lines, making for an even softer picture rife with MPEG artifacts — again, nothing unusual there.

Switching to our test recordings of *Star Trek: Insurrection*, we noticed our XP and SP recordings of the airborne probes snatching the fleeing peasants looked rock-solid, although the SP recording showed some traces of background blockiness. At the LP setting, the picture looked much softer, and there were distracting, blocky artifacts throughout the rocky backdrop. Its recording quality in 4-hour mode is one area where the DVR-533H-S is soundly beaten by the Panasonic DMR-E50H.

The image became jerky starting at the 6-hour EP mode, and by the time we'd reached the SEP mode, it was well-nigh unwatchable — but we expected as much from this mode. Moving to a darker scene in the damaged bridge of the *Enterprise*, the XP setting did a fine job of handling the tricky smoke and dark interiors, while colors started to look a little less saturated in SP mode. We saw some false contouring with the smoke in LP mode, growing gradually worse as we switched to the lower-quality modes.

In our 2:3 pull-down test, the DVR-533H-S smoothly rendered the jaggy-prone bridges and haystacks during *Insurrection's* opening credits. We also ran the Pioneer through Silicon Optic's HQV benchmark against our reference Denon DVD-2900 and it scored significantly lower — not a huge surprise since Denon uses the SI chip. Overall, there were no glaring issues in its progressive-scan playback performance.

Our quick compatibility tests of DVD-R/RWs created by the DVR-533H-S also went well, but playback of DVD-R DL media — we used Verbatim 4X discs — was mixed. They played back fine on the newer GoVideo VR3930, the Denon DVD-2900, and the Sony DVP-NS975V, but the older Apex AD-600A and Onkyo DV-S525 didn't recognize the discs, and neither did a newer Portable One MX laptop. (To be fair, the laptop wouldn't recognize our Verbatim DVD+R DL discs either.) Compatibility varies widely depending on the media, the recorder, and especially the player, so these issues can't be blamed entirely on the Pioneer. The DVR-533H-S tested well in terms of DVD/CD playback compatibility.