

Grouptest... Amplifiers



PIONEER VSX-1015

£500 (Approx) ♦ 0845 234 4040 ♦ www.pioneer.co.uk ♦ Overall rating ★★★★★^{1/2}

Pioneer was quick to highlight that the VSX-1015 was the world's first THXSelect2 certified receiver. While Select is the lesser of the THX home theatre specifications it is claimed to offer big scale home cinema in a smaller listening environment.

In fact, THXSelect2 is optimised for rooms up to 56m (cubed) in volume – so what is 'small' in US terms easily covers the average UK living room. The advantages of THXSelect2 are many, claims THX. You get Dolby Digital EX processing, THX cinema, THX games and THX music modes and the assurance that the VSX-1015 has passed the stringent THX AV standards.

But better still than logo-waving, Pioneer plays the technology evolution game perhaps more than any other manufacturer. By introducing its cutting-edge features on the top specified models before rapidly moving them down to less affluent products the following season, the company has been slicing itself an ever larger share of the amplifier and receiver market. Enter the Pioneer VSX-1015, a receiver boasting a good deal of the features introduced on its flagship VSX-AX10, for a fraction of the price.

Talking with TVs

Thus the VSX-1015 gets WMAgPro decoding, the company's Auto MCACC (Multi Channel ACoustic Calibration) system and an SR+ terminal that talks to Pioneer plasma TVs. WMAgPro is the surround sound format accompanying most Windows Media Video High Definition recordings and can run seven channels at a superlative 96kHz/24bit. As such this feature could become essential for those looking to hook up a media PC as well as traditional home cinema sources.

The Auto MCACC will be more universally appealing. Not only does the system offer full automatic set-up of the receiver with regards to your speakers it measures the frequency response from each channel. Interpolating the results (a mix of speaker frequency response and room acoustics) it applies corrective room EQ to each channel at 40Hz, 125Hz, 250Hz, 4kHz and 13kHz with a fairly gentle Q factor. However the MCACC system on the VSX-1015 doesn't apply specific EQ to the sub, which is often the worst offender in room acoustic anomalies.

It's pleasing to note that the VSX-1015 doesn't scrim on power. In two-channel

mode, our Tech Labs rated the output at 130W into 8Ω. This only drops to 95W in 5 channel mode. You can assign the system as 7.1 for Dolby Digital EX or run 5.1 and dedicate the spare channels to stereo configuration in another room. Uniquely (and again grafted from Pioneer's more affluent models) you can also configure the two floating channels to bi-amplify the front speakers for improved stereo reproduction.

Build quality is good, if not quite in the same league as the battleship Marantz reviewed elsewhere, and connectivity is top notch even though there is no video upconversion available. 192kHz/24-bit DACs are to be expected and the only major straying from the peer group spec sheet is the use of a Motorola 180 million instructions per second (MIPS) core processor.

Microphone head

Without doubt the Pioneer's MCACC is the slickest auto set-up system of this bunch perhaps evidence of the fact it takes the longest time. Having placed the microphone at the listening position (on top of one's head is ideal – just don't let anyone see you) the system runs through a series of pulses, clicks and

LAB REPORT

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
Manufacturer's Rated Output				
120W per ch into 8Ω				
Measured power @ 1kHz				
2ch driven: 130W into 8Ω		✓		
5ch driven: 95W into 8Ω		✓		
2ch driven: 210W into 4Ω		✓		
5ch driven: 115W into 4Ω			✓	
Fidelity firewall @ 1kHz/2ch				
120W: into 8Ω (0.05%THD)		✓		
Distortion @ 1kHz				
0.004%THD @ 50W (8Ω)		✓		
Frequency response				
20Hz-20kHz +/-0.06dB		✓		

Tried & Tested...



tones from the speakers with the onscreen menus explaining what the VSX-1015 is up to every step of the way.

The system is very accurate in terms of speaker frequency response (size), distance and level although in my test the MCACC applied almost -10dB to every channel, rather begging the question why it doesn't leave main left and right channels as a reference level and trim the other channels relative to them. You get the feeling it's trying to tell you to turn the volume down even before you start.

A fistful of volume

This Pioneer likes nothing more than a full-bore action movie and a big handful of the volume knob. From the thumping opening soundtrack of movies like *Blade: Trinity* it delivers grunt aplenty with a good dynamic scale that expands effortlessly above and beyond the confines of the speakers. Okay, so it's not going to shake the foundations in the same way as the best £1,000 plus monster amps and the bass is even less subtle than Wesley Snipes' acting but it really does come amazingly close for a £500 box.

Engaging the MCACC room EQ settings is both subtle and profound in equal measure. It is subtle in that the trims applied to each channel are small - just a dB or three here and there, no more - but

the effect is stunning. It strips away the cloudy layer of bass reverberation and low frequency mush to leave behind one of the best auto-EQ balances I have ever heard. In one small but fell swoop it evolves the bass from fat and fulsome to tight and punchy, spring cleans the top end detail and manages to subjectively increase the overall dynamics by a significant margin.

You can fine tune the EQ manually if any facet offends but, with DTS material in particular, the VSX-1015's initial grunt is kept gloriously intact and the balance remains impressively smooth even when the volume is increased. Switching off the EQ suddenly dumps a great wedge of LFE weight and trouser flapping bass bloom into the sound (which you might prefer with some material) although the otherwise finely crafted dialogue becomes relatively congested.

Switch to music with the source direct system engaged to bypass the EQ settings and tone controls and the balance remains fairly weighty. High frequencies also seem to get a boost from this straight through approach which not only brightens up recordings but also makes a meal of hiss on older CDs in equal measure. Compared to the silky sounding Marantz, the music performance is a little artificial but I guess you can't have everything for under £500.

Wrap up

This VSX-1015 is a well specified and great sounding receiver boosted a whole level by Pioneer's excellent (and subtle) MCACC room EQ system. Effects of the EQ will vary from room to room but as this sort of technology and talent would have set you back over £1,000 only a year ago, the VSX-1015 can be considered an absolute bargain.

SPECIFICATIONS

ITEM	SUPPORT	DETAILS
Dolby Digital	○	5.1; 5.1EX; Pro-Logic IIx
DTS	○	5.1; 5.1ES Discrete & Matrix; 96:24; Neo 6
AV Inputs	○	5 composite/S-video; audio (2 record outs)
Audio Inputs	○	4 stereo phono inputs
Component Inputs	○	3 inputs
Tape Loop	○	1 input/output
AV Monitor output	○	1 composite/S-video, component
Component output	○	1 output
Video upconversion	×	None available
HDMI input/output	×	No digital connection
DVI input/output	×	No digital connection
Multi channel input	○	1 bank of 5.1 analogue audio inputs
Subwoofer output	○	1 phono LFE output
Digital Audio input	○	4 optical; 2 electrical
Digital Audio output	○	1 optical
Phono input stage	×	Vinyl junkies beware
Speaker out	○	9 pairs of binding posts
Headphone	○	1 output jack socket
Tuner	○	FM/AM RDS with 30 presets
Amplification	○	7 x 100W (claimed - see Lab Report)
Dimensions	○	420(w) x 173(h) x 465(d)mm
Weight	○	15.4kg
Also featuring		
MCACC (Multi Channel Acoustic Calibration) System; THXSelect2 certification;		
Advanced Direct Energy MOSFET amplification; SR+ communications terminal; auto-set up; WMAgPro audio decoding; 8 DSP sound modes; preset and learning remote control with LCD display; isolation chamber construction; midnight listening mode; source direct function; 3D space frame chassis; dimming display; available in black or silver		

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Conclusion...

Onkyo's TX-SR603 comes to the table with an impressive spec sheet and an excellent set of features. It is technically superb and clearly designed by some very clever engineers... who weren't necessarily movie or music fans. Its sound is supremely neutral but there is a distinct shortage of magic and muscle.

On the other hand, Marantz's SR5500 eschews the fancy auto set-up routines and complex room EQ in favour of audiophile grade components and a seriously chilled out attitude. Sonically it is a sunny Sunday afternoon amplifier happiest with mellow music and movies that your mum would like. Good, but not an amp for all seasons.

The DSP-AX757 is a cleverly stripped-down version of Yamaha's high-end amplifiers and works very well indeed. Its sound is potent and it enjoys big scale blockbusters, but it is equally up-tempo with music. The YPAO Room-EQ system is good but the version on the AX757 is a crude shadow of the full YPAO package.

Pioneer's VSX-1015 is also a 'lite' version of the company's high-end receivers but its MCACC Room-EQ system doesn't suffer such a ruthless feature cut-back and is absolutely inspired. This receiver handles dramas, comedy and all-action mayhem with a sparkle and clarity that sucks you into the film and doesn't let go until the credits roll. As an all-round movie and music entertainer the VSX-1015 is an absolute star and a worthy winner of this group test ■

RATINGS

Pioneer VSX-1015		£500 (Approx)	
Highs: Robust; potent sound boosted by excellent room EQ system; good dynamics			
Lows: Music performance not as class leading as movie sound; lacking a few watts			
Sound	Build	Features	Overall
★★★★	★★★★★	★★★½	★★★★½

Marantz SR5500		£450 (Approx)	
Highs: Rich & warm balance; excellent music reproduction; CSII & Dolby processing			
Lows: A little laidback for action movies; no auto set up or room EQ			
Sound	Build	Features	Overall
★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★	★★★★

Onkyo TX-SR603E		£450 (Approx)	
Highs: Auto set-up; technically adept; clean and refined sound			
Lows: Operationally challenged; quirky; lacks blockbuster adrenaline rush			
Sound	Build	Features	Overall
★★★½	★★★	★★★★	★★★½

Yamaha DSP-AX757SE		£500 (Approx)	
Highs: Muscular sounding high energy sound; auto set up; UK tuned; good for action			
Lows: Short on sonic refinement and delicacy; gung-ho operation of YPAO system			
Sound	Build	Features	Overall
★★★★½	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★

Now try it with these...

Our group test winning Pioneer VSX-1015 deserves equally impressive separates. So we've partnered it with its sibling DVD player, the £600 DV-668AV-S. This universal player is compatible with both DVD-Audio and Super Audio CD high resolution discs and offers a wide range of general playback compatibility (including DVD-R, DVD-RW, CD-R, CD-RW, CD, VideoCD, Super VCD and MP3 files). It also sports an HDMI digital video output, for the best possible video quality. For screen duties, we've selected Samsung's £1,200 LE32R41BD LCD digital TV. This model is fully HD Ready, and so can immediately be hooked up to the Pioneer disc spinner. The LE32R41BD looks the business, thanks to its glossy black screen bezel, and has connectivity to match (including component and PC inputs, alongside two Scarts). Picture quality is excellent (a full review of the screen will appear in the next issue of HCC). A screen this stylish deserves some extraordinary speakers, and the £800 Mordaunt Short Genies don't disappoint. This award-winning sub/sat package offers a highly articulate sound from surprisingly small boxes.



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