

PIONEER VSX-915 ♦ £300 (Approx) ♦ 01753 789 789 ♦ www.pioneer.co.uk

Penny pinching Pioneer pretends to be posh



Pioneer's model naming still confuses - a less than logical progression has the VSX-915 replacing the VSX-D814 in its £300 price point. Richard Arrowsmith wonders if it fits the bill

Considering the price ticket, the VSX-915 is equipped with a specification that few other budget receivers can lay claim to, including several improvements over its already able predecessor. An extra channel of amplification has been shoe-horned in, giving the box full 7.1 capability; the brand a power rating of 100W/channel. In our Tech Labs, we measured the VSX-925 at 90W into 8Ω in two channel mode, dropping to 65W when five channels are driven.

The construction of the VSX-915's internal components has an elegant

simplicity. The Thermal Compensation Transistor design integrates all main components into a single circuit board designed to compensate for temperature fluctuations that can produce distortion when presented with high levels of current. All digital processing has been incorporated into a single circuit to shorten signal pathways and reduce radiation. So no matter how close you get you won't turn into The Hulk...

The compact digital core engine features an all-new double precision Motorola 48-bit DSP and naturally accommodates a full suite of surround

processing formats including all the usual surround cinema suspects along with some relatively new ones. Dolby Pro Logic IIx delivers seven-channel reproduction from two-channel content while WMA-9 processing allows you to play 2-channel and multi-channel Windows Media files directly from your PC - a forward thinking feature that's shared with the rest of Pioneer's latest range of receivers. Completing a comprehensive set of surround options there's eight advanced preset modes and useful alternatives like Virtual Surround Back and a 7-channel stereo mode.

SPECIFICATIONS

ITEM	SUPPORT	DETAILS
Dolby Digital	○	Dolby Digital 5.1; Dolby Pro-Logic IIx
DTS	○	DTS ES Matrix, ES Discrete, 96/24, Neo 6
AV Inputs	○	4 composite/S-video/phono 1 rec out)
Audio Inputs	○	6 stereo phono inputs
Component Inputs	○	3 inputs
Tape Loop	○	1 input/output
AV Monitor output	○	2 composite/S-video
Component output	○	1 output (monitor out only)
Video upconversion	○	(composite to S-video only)
HDMI input/output	×	
DVI input/output	×	No digital video connectivity here
Multi channel input	○	1 bank of 6 analogue audio inputs
Subwoofer output	○	1 phono output
Digital Audio input	○	3 optical, 2 electrical
Digital Audio output	○	1 optical
Phono input stage	×	
Speaker out	○	7 pairs large banana speaker outputs
Headphone	○	1 output
Amplification		7 x 110W
Tuner		FM/AM RDS with 30 presets
Dimensions		420(w) x 158(h) x 402.5(d)mm
Weight		9.7kg
Also featuring		Thermal compensation transistor amplifier design; double precision 48-bit Motorola digital engine; 96kHz/24-bit analogue-digital converter; 192kHz/24-bit digital-analogue converter; 5 band EQ MCACC automatic calibration; WMA9 Pro decoding; 9 advanced surround modes; virtual surround back; learning LCD remote

Ease my install

Pioneer, as the name suggests, paved the way with automatic calibration systems. While once reserved for more expensive models, they are now commonplace. The VSX-915 uses an updated version of the MCACC (Multi-Channel Acoustic Calibration System) used on its predecessor, with 5 band GEQ for each channel. All you have to do is position a supplied microphone in your listening position and wait while the

RATINGS

Highs: Affordable and easy to use; features; detailed, spacious sound
Lows: Lacks weight; bright sound doesn't suit all soundtracks

Sound	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

LAB REPORT

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
Manufacturer's Rated Output				
110W per ch into 8				
Measured power @ 1kHz				
2ch driven: 90W into 8Ω		✓		
5ch driven: 65W into 8Ω		✓		
2ch driven: 140W into 4Ω		✓		
5ch driven: 140W into 4Ω		✓		
Fidelity firewall @ 1kHz/2ch				
85W: into 8Ω (0.04%THD)		✓		
Distortion @ 1kHz				
0.005%THD @ 50W (8Ω)		✓		
Frequency response				
20Hz-20kHz +/-0.2dB		✓		



receiver uses a series of electronic sounds to determine the speaker's size, level and delay distances. It's a painless process that only takes a matter of minutes and the subsequent settings are remarkably accurate and can also be customised to any environment. I found that the auto setting tends to result in sound that's a little bright for my tastes, so you might want to de-claw this cat. A Quick Set-Up option is offered but the lack of onscreen menus (unless you own a Pioneer plasma with SR+ compatibility) makes it fiddly.

Connections include a variety of inputs for audio and video sources including 5.1 inputs for multi-channel music formats

like DVD-A and Super Audio CD. And there are three component video inputs for video switching as well as video up conversion from composite to S-video. Like other Pioneer models, the surround back channels can be reassigned to a second zone or used to bi-wire a pair of large front speakers to improve stereo performance. The rear panel arrangement could be better and speaker terminals in particular are difficult to reach but a removable panel on the front conceals standard AV inputs and an optical connection for flexible access. Build quality is pleasingly upmarket. The bevelled, brushed aluminum fascia is carefully finished and

Pioneer has included a learning LCD remote for extra poshness.

Tells you how it is

The VSX-915 has an upfront character that's been typical of entry-level Pioneer receivers over the years. The clean, crisp sound is immediately engaging, enlivening film scores with energy and excitement; a bright balance emphasises detail to reveal a spectrum of subtleties, which suits some soundtracks but leaves others sounding brash and overly aggressive. However, while the sound is full of clarity and resolution it comes at the expense of scale and weight.

Despite the power claims made by Pioneer's on-paper specifications the resulting sound struggles to fully stamp its authority on demanding soundtracks. There's still enough oomph to satisfy most rooms but the lean balance leaves you yearning for a little more. The automatic calibration system does a fine

job of finding tonal consistency, and this leads to fast, accurate steering. Dialogue is detailed and pronounced but unless you're careful in set up, can be compromised by brightness.

Music performance, especially in stereo, is surprisingly adept. Bi-wiring your front pair of speakers and embracing a pure direct analogue pathway which bypasses all digital circuitry improves stereo performance. Detail and dynamics are joined by a lively sense of timing that extends to multi-channel music formats.

Conclusion

Pioneer's VSX-915 tries hard to deliver a lot of kit for a small amount of money. The detailed, spacious sound is a tad more refined than its predecessor but I feel still lacks a little weight and errs toward brightness. However, at this price the VSX-915 represents solid value for money ■

'There's still enough oomph to satisfy most rooms but the lean balance leaves you yearning for more'



The front panel has an optical input as well as the regular AV ones



Another premium is the Learning LCD handset



Options on the backside include 5.1 inputs for multi-channel music and the facility to bi-wire front speakers or use a second zone