

Pioneer VSX-918V A/V Receiver

Happy with what you have to be happy with.



BY MARK FLEISCHMANN

Budget receivers are like the cheap seats at Carnegie Hall. They don't provide best-case performance, but if you're living on a tight budget, you're just happy to be there. A budget A/V receiver can also form the basis of a starter system for the hardheadedly practical person who's dubious about surround sound but doesn't want to be left behind.

Pioneer has two receiver lines, the higher-end Elite and a value-oriented line without any special moniker. The Pioneer VSX-918V hails from the value line where it is second from the top. At \$349, it won't strain anyone's budget. Although it doesn't have onboard decoding for the latest lossless and

other surround codecs, it can accept a high-resolution PCM signal from a Blu-ray player that does its own decoding. As you'll see later, that comes in handy.

I'm going to depart from the norm and tell you my conclusion up front. The VSX-918V outperformed my expectations. This is quite a fine-sounding budget receiver. So keep on reading.

Roll Me a PHAT One

The VSX-918V is a black box with a volume knob on the right and a matching source-select knob on the left. The front panel, however, is not entirely flat. It also has an angled panel where the source-select buttons reside. With the remote, you've got three, count 'em, three ways to pick sources.

A large, bright-orange MCACC logo gaudily celebrates Pioneer's auto-setup and room-EQ features. I rarely use auto setup. My SPL meter is virtually an extension of my hand, and I need to know how amps sound in their virgin state. But MCACC will get the surround newbie up and running with minimal fuss. If you prefer to tweak your receiver manually, Pioneer recommends that you run the auto setup, then copy the settings to the custom menu and take it from there.

The VSX-918V is rated at 95 watts of continuous power times five (not seven). The 120 watts that Pioneer's Website lists uses a more lenient specification method. As always, our test report contains the most credible numbers. This receiver and its two lower-priced siblings include new Pioneer Hybrid Amplifier Technology (PHAT). The name conjures up a very relaxed late-night meeting between engineers and marketers:

"Duuuude, let's make up a name so that the acronym is PHAT."

"Awesooooome!"

According to Pioneer, PHAT includes hand-selected parts, automatic temperature compensation, and power modules that minimize internal and external electromagnetic interference. This receiver sounds noticeably cleaner than the last similarly priced Pioneer receiver I reviewed, so maybe there's something to it.

The receiver supports AM, FM, Sirius, and XM Radio, but not

digital over-the-air HD Radio. The front-panel USB jack accepts an iPod via the Apple-supplied adapter cable. There is no need for a cumbersome extra-cost dock. You can use the receiver's onscreen display and remote to operate the iPod.

There were a few surprises on the back panel. The HDMI output did not pass the onscreen menus; I used the component video output instead. Five of the seven sets of speaker terminals were like the collared binding posts you see on most receivers. However, the "B" speaker terminals were wire clips, which emphasizes the fact that they share amps with other channels. The "5.1-channel" analog inputs only serve the center, sub, and surround, while the DVD analog inputs serve the front left and right channels. There are no S-video jacks but plenty of composite video. Also, the front-panel mini-jack for the MCACC microphone doubles as an audio input. All of these issues demonstrate the point that, if you want a good receiver at a low price, you live with compromises.

The remote is simple but decent for a budget receiver. The control for master volume is a single horizontal rocker that measures a generous 1.4 inches wide. This simple and thoughtful touch made the remote a pleasure to use. Pioneer also made a modest effort to distinguish the other controls by shape. I counted nine distinct button shapes. Although the menu graphics are gray monochrome, it's forgivable in a budget receiver.

I hooked up the VSX-918V to a quintet of Paradigm Reference Studio 20 v.4 speakers. I set up the speakers to run full range, which is now my standard procedure for receiver reviews. Signal sources included a Pioneer Elite BDP-HD1 Blu-ray player. The player doesn't output a bitstream for Dolby TrueHD and other new surround

codecs, and the receiver has no onboard decoding for them. Still, they got along just fine communicating via high-resolution PCM, a maneuver that allows TrueHD

to live up to its potential. For DVDs, SACDs, and CDs, I used an Integra DPS-10.5 universal disc player. Vinyl ran on a Rega Planar 25 turntable with a Shure V97xE



These listings are based on the manufacturer's stated specs; the HT Labs box below indicates the gear's performance on our test bench.

FEATURES:

Processing Modes: Dolby: Digital 5.1, EX, Pro Logic IIx
DTS: DTS, ES, 96/24, Neo:6
Other: 12 DSP modes

THX Certification: No

Audio D/A Converter: 24-bit/192-kilohertz

Number of Amp Channels: 5

Power Rating
(watts per channel): 95, into 8 ohms

Frequency Response: +0/-3 dB from 5 Hz to 100 kHz

Dimensions (W x H x D, inches): 16.56 x 6.25 x 13.88

Weight (pounds): 17.56

Price: \$349

CONNECTIONS

Inputs:

Video: HDMI (2), component video (3), composite video (4)

Audio: Coaxial digital (1), optical digital (1), 5.1-channel analog (1, including DVD input for front LR), stereo analog (7), Sirius (1), XM (1), AM (1), FM (1)

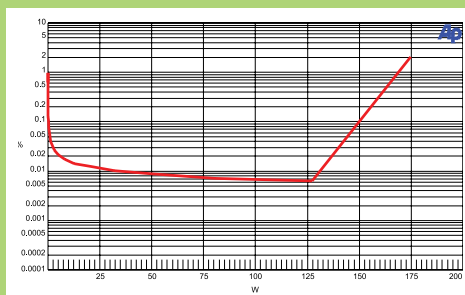
Outputs:

Video: HDMI (1), component video (1), composite video (2)

Audio: Optical digital (1), stereo analog (2)

Additional: IR jack (2)

HT Labs Measures: Pioneer VSX-918V A/V Receiver



- All five channels driven continuously into 8-ohm loads:
0.1 percent distortion at 34.1 watts
1 percent distortion at 36.7 watts
- Analog frequency response in Direct mode:
-0.20 dB at 10 Hz; -0.06 dB at 20 Hz
+0.06 dB at 20 kHz; -2.29 dB at 50 kHz
- Analog frequency response with stereo signal processing:
-2.05 dB at 10 Hz; -0.65 dB at 20 Hz
-0.01 dB at 20 kHz; -54.97 dB at 50 kHz

This graph shows that the VSX-918V's left channel, from CD input to speaker output with two channels

driving 8-ohm loads, reaches 0.1 percent distortion at 149.7 watts and 1 percent distortion at 168.6 watts. Into 4 ohms, the amplifier reaches 0.1 percent distortion at 188.1 watts and 1 percent distortion at 236.0 watts.

Response from the multichannel input to the speaker output measures -0.19 decibels at 10 hertz, -0.06 dB at 20 Hz, +0.04 dB at 20 kilohertz, and -2.37 dB at 50 kHz. THD+N from the CD input to the speaker output was less than 0.041 percent at 1 kHz when driving 2.83 volts into an 8-ohm load. Crosstalk at 1 kHz driving 2.83 volts into an 8-ohm load was -82.71 dB left to right and -82.54 dB right to left. The signal-to-noise ratio with 2.83 volts driving an 8-ohm load from 10 Hz to 24 kHz with "A" weighting was -87.89 dBra.

From the Dolby Digital input to the loudspeaker output, the left channel measures -0.10 dB at 20 Hz and +0.02 dB at 20 kHz. The center channel measures -0.10 dB at 20 Hz and -0.06 dB at 20 kHz, and the left surround channel measures -0.10 dB at 20 Hz and -0.06 dB at 20 kHz. From the Dolby Digital input to the line-level output, the LFE channel is -0.15 dB at 20 Hz when referenced to the level at 40 Hz and reaches the upper 3-dB down point at 118 Hz and the upper 6-dB down point at 120 Hz. —MJP

cartridge and a NAD PP-1 phono preamp.

Songs and Giggles

Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story is a broad musical satire that lampoons *Walk the Line*, the Johnny Cash biopic. The VSX-918V benefited hugely from the Blu-ray and Dolby TrueHD treatment. Sure, the live ambience of John C. Reilly's musical interludes was faked, but it still had an enveloping feel. That's one thing I've noticed about TrueHD's effect on music—it creates a better-defined soundfield. I was pleased to discover that even a modestly priced receiver like this one benefited from the next-gen codec. Lossless surround is for everyone, not just the affluent.

My other two movie auditions were in old-style DTS. The setup menu of *The Golden Compass* noted: "Optimized for home theater. No re-equalization required." This is probably true of most releases nowadays, but it was nice to be told. Roaring bears and whizzing witches abound in this semi-animated fantasy. However, the soundtrack's dominant element is an orchestral score that unceasingly comments on every moment of the action. All movie scores do this, but this one is especially tenacious, and it enhances the already imaginative storytelling.

The recording of the orchestra—some of it at the legendary Abbey Road Studios—is noticeably diffuse. There's no attempt to concentrate it in the

front channels. As a result, every time I leaned to one side of



the sofa, I became aware of the string sound coming out of the surrounds. The receiver delivered dialogue beautifully and prevented the more aggressive effects from becoming strident. It was also revealing enough to let me split hairs about the orchestra's deployment in the soundfield.

If I hadn't already had these two rarefied experiences, I might have attributed *Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem's* more opaque sound to the receiver. Still, despite the aggressively roaring effects, I maintained the same volume setting throughout the movie, which indicates to me reasonably

low distortion for a budget model. It was fun to discover in the end credits that the all-orchestral score had two titles, "The Chopper" and "Grim Discovery."

Vintage Vinyl, Old-Fashioned Strings

Until this point, I knew that the VSX-918V wasn't bad. But was it actually good? A high-decibel session with Led Zeppelin's debut LP provided the answer—an emphatic yes. I played this title at moderate to loud volumes, and the receiver mustered the kind of buttery-smooth, well-focused sound that I associate with low-distortion amps. Robert Plant's vocal on "Babe I'm Gonna Leave You" was imaged precisely between the left and right channels, even with the center shut down in stereo mode and my head weaving in and out of the sweet spot. With mounting satisfaction, I bumped the volume higher and higher with each track.

Guitarist Jan Akkerman's untitled album—his fourth solo

HIGHLIGHTS

- Surprisingly good sound for a budget receiver
- A few connectivity limitations
- iPod input via player's USB cable

record—defines his distinctive fusion of rock, jazz, and classical elements with several longtime staples of his stage set. Akkerman recorded the album in 1977, with a string orchestra substituting for his guitar and keyboard synthesizers. The Pioneer brought out the old-fashioned monochromatic string recording, giving it a pleasing retro feel. With the speakers playing full range, the drum kit and congas sounded tight and had a fair amount of impact. This receiver is no substitute for a good outboard muscle amp, but it can still make drums sound like drums.

The Garden of Cosmic Speculation is a riot of orchestral color, delivered via multichannel Telarc SACD. It's an exuberant antidote to the pofaced seriousness of much newly commissioned music. Composer Michael Gandolfi begins with all-channel birdsong and proceeds through a variety of styles, all of them accessible to non-academic listeners. He gleefully quotes music of every era from Gregorian chant to Bach to Stravinsky to Reich. The Pioneer kept pace with the work's dynamics. I never needed to turn the volume down to avoid discomfort, or turn it up to catch low-level passages.

Enhance Me

I tried a few of Pioneer's proprietary listening modes, most of which you can access via the remote or front-panel buttons.

If you're using two speakers, Front Stage Surround Advance

➤ Mark enjoyed using the VSX-918V's remote and especially appreciated the rocking button for Master Volume control.

General info
VSX-918V A/V Receiver, \$349
Pioneer Electronics USA
(800) 421-1404
www.pioneerelectronics.com
Dealer Locator Code PIO


“provides a rich surround sound effect.” The sound extends from a point between the front left and right speakers toward the center of the room. Two modes vary the faux-surround width. I tried both with Nick Drake’s *Five Leaves Left* CD. The FSS Focus mode made it sound as though Drake’s voice (beautifully recorded by John Wood) was in my head. The FSS Wide mode increased the effect. Overall, FSS produced a bigger sound but not a more focused one. A good recording can hold its own in plain stereo.

Dialog Enhancement “localizes dialog in the center channel,” says the manual. I played the Drake CD in Dolby Pro Logic II Music mode, and this adjustment didn’t affect the voice much. It did collapse the laterally wider guitar into the center channel, though. This might help if your center speaker is deficient and

you don’t mind giving up some soundstage information.

To enhance the five amp channels, Virtual Surround Back simulates rear-surround speakers through your surrounds. I found it dispensable.

Pioneer offers two enhancements for use with portable players. Sound Retriever attempts to compensate for artifacts of lossy audio compression. It seemed to increase the volume and thicken the lower midrange, but not in an unpleasant way. Automatic Level Control evens out the volume levels. It didn’t do much for songs that were recorded at a steady level, but it did up the level for a quiet acoustic guitar track. I enjoyed using the Pioneer with the iPod USB connection. It sounded much better than when connected via analog mini-plug. If I owned this receiver, I’d use this feature often.

The Pioneer VSX-918V is one very good-sounding budget receiver. No, it won’t run power-pig speakers or decode Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio. But it will provide pleasingly clean power to speakers of appropriately high sensitivity. And it accepts Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio from your Blu-ray player’s built-in decoder via high-resolution PCM. Has Pioneer omitted a few features and connectivity options to keep the price down? Sure. But none of the omissions is fatal. This is the rare budget receiver that can provide pleasure with any kind of music or movie. Pair it with a good sat/sub set or stand-mount speakers from our Top Picks list on page 92, and have yourself some budget home theater fun. 

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