



Pioneer BDP-320
★★★★★ £400

Pioneer VSX-919AH
★★★★★ £500

This fine Pioneer pairing wins the glossy stakes for us, and it also works as a system beautifully

Pioneer

★★★★★

£900

IF YOU'VE DECIDED to buy matching equipment, it's probably because its appearance is important to you. If that's the case, then we reckon this Pioneer pairing makes the strongest showroom case for itself. Your £900 can't buy a glossier look. Nor can it buy a more purposeful pair of remote controls – though they're pretty cluttered and the unlit Blu-ray wand is a swine to navigate in the dark.

Pioneer's MCACC speaker set-up system is equally showy, firing out several minutes'-worth of frenzied squelching noises to its microphone while it (pretty accurately) trims the settings to best suit your room.

A fast, yet focused listen

And there's no let-up in the attention-grabbing when sound is the issue, either. *District 9's* DTS HD Master Audio soundtrack inhabits a large, well-defined soundstage, and the VSX-919AH proves as supple and fast as a panicked gazelle when the going gets hectic.

For all its alacrity, though, the Pioneer manages to remain stable

↑ FOR
Vivid, smoothly detailed pictures; fast, energetic sound; shiny good looks

↓ AGAINST
Remotes could be more straightforward; lively top end means speaker matching is imperative

→ VERDICT
Very sympathetic electronics that work well together and look the business

and focused when moving effects around the stage, and it's particularly accomplished through the centre channel – dialogue is amply detailed and informative. It's substantial and attacking with the lowest frequencies (although the Denon AVR-1910 has even more body) while it has a crisp (though slightly gritty) top end. Integration throughout the frequencies is great, with seamless transitions between midrange and the extremes.

“The VSX-919AH proves as fast and manoeuvrable as a panicked gazelle”

Images from the same film are delightfully detailed and confidently defined. We've long admired the BDP-320 and here it impresses all over again with its inky blacks, bright contrasts and lovely colour balance. Edges are sharp, textures are convincing and skin tones as natural as can be. Only the slightest hesitancy with movement, and this on rare occasions, blots the Pioneer's copybook. Though it's not so much a blot as a faint biro mark. Upscaled DVD images, too, are impressively detailed and neutrally coloured. Contrasts remain strong and,

while there's a degree more picture noise about wide-open shots, the BDP-320 remains assured and poised.

Fewest compromises of the lot

Poise isn't something the Pioneer set-up's short of when talk turns to stereo music, either, but the latent hardness of treble frequencies comes screaming to the fore when playing Jonathan Richman's *I, Jonathan*. It's quick where the Denon pair is sluggardly, but still hardly the best way to enjoy your CDs.

Primarily, though, the Pioneer is the least compromised of all these systems. Picture, sound, looks... it's abundantly talented and a great way to spend £900.

Tested with...



District 9
South African Neill Blomkamp has fashioned a triumphant thriller using a cast of relative unknowns and a meagre (by Hollywood standards) budget of \$30 million. The result verges on genius, and is possibly the most intelligent and memorable sci-fi you'll see this year. The final firefight is a fine test of surround steering, too.