



STEREO RECEIVER

PIONEER SX-10AE

There's Bluetooth here, but otherwise a traditional set of analogue inputs and radio tuners. For the price, however, Pioneer's SX-10AE stereo receiver delivered excellent hi-fi performance.

The Pioneer SX-10AE takes us back. Way way back. Back when we were young, and lived in an entirely analogue world. Yet in today's world, not quite everything is digital. Just about all audio equipment in the middle is. Mid-priced electronics almost always have at least digital inputs, and often network connections, perhaps even Wi-Fi. For pure analogue, you have to look at audio exotica, usually available only at wincingly high prices — or at the entry level.

EQUIPMENT

Which brings us back to the Pioneer SX-10AE. This is a stereo receiver. It's exactly the type of thing that might be forming the power centre of our music system were we to be a young professional, or a student. The SX-10AE is almost entirely analogue — but only 'almost', because it does have Bluetooth. It has four sets of RCA line-level inputs, no physical digital inputs, and certainly not any network ones. Plus there are

aerial connections for the FM and AM tuners (no DAB+). Four inputs are about right in our view.

There are four concessions to modernity. One is the provision of an infrared remote control, very comprehensive. Anything you need to do in the way of control you can do with this remote. Another is a subwoofer output. Such a thing didn't exist in the olden days, in part because there was pretty much no such thing as a powered subwoofer. A third is that one set of line-level inputs is labelled 'Network'. Yes, it's analogue, but Pioneer clearly expects one to plug in some kind of network media player. You could go for a higher-end one, but we figure that the purchaser of a unit such as this will likely go for something at the budget level. And what better at the budget level than a Chromecast Audio, which you can pick up pretty much anywhere for around \$50.

Finally: Bluetooth. We're not sure anyone would dare release a general-purpose music unit these days without Bluetooth incorporated (except Cocktail Audio, as you can see the in next review).

In this unit the implementation involves no visible antenna, and it supports AAC in addition to SBC as codecs for stereo music playback. Apple devices can make use of the higher-quality AAC codec.

And there are some other fairly modern features. There's a nice clear digital display on the front. The FM radio supports RDS and you can enter the names of radio stations, which is particularly useful on the AM band. The letters are big enough for even our tired old eyes to easily read them from three metres away.

The receiver supports two sets of loudspeakers: A, B or A+B. There's a set-up menu in which you should set the speaker impedance to four ohms (from the default of six) if you're using A+B, or if you have just one set of four-ohm loudspeakers. There are line-level stereo outputs.

Finally, on the front panel is a good old-fashioned 6.35mm stereo headphone output, and we say old-fashioned not just because it's full-size not minijack, but because it conforms to older standards: the specifications say that it has a 390-ohm output impedance. High impedance outputs used to be the standard, but their downside is that the frequency response then becomes



subject to the vagaries of any impedance variations by frequency in the headphones. These days there are few headphones even approaching that impedance level, so results with headphones are likely to be unpredictable. Audiophile headphone amps typically keep their output impedance at one ohm or less. (That said, it's great Pioneer tells us, which is rare, and at least you know where you stand. There's plenty of equipment that doesn't tell you it has high impedance outputs.)

Signal processing is minimal: just bass and treble controls (digitally controlled), with a 'Direct' tone override.

PERFORMANCE

As mentioned, we used a Chromecast Audio device on the 'Network' input. And we connected, in turn, a Samsung tablet and then an iPhone 8 to the receiver by Bluetooth. Finally, we also used a turntable. Since there's no phono pre-amplifier in this unit, we used the modestly priced Rega Fono Mini A2D pre-amp with our Rega turntable.

Is 45 watts enough? Well this reviewer, as a youngster in pursuit of his first amplifier, lucked into a 40W-per-channel amplifier, back in the days when ten or twelve watts was the usual entry level for people of his age. That proved very satisfying for a good decade. A later switch to a higher power unit (55W) was not for the power but for greater refinement from newer technology. Remember, going from 45W to 90W adds, at best, three decibels of output. Just don't choose ridiculously mismatched loudspeakers.

One little but weird anomaly appeared during operation. We were playing some Blue Oyster Cult from a tablet via Bluetooth when we decided to go full-on analogue. In preparation, we cleaned our turntable's stylus and thought we heard a scratchy noise from the speaker. We turned down the Bluetooth source and repeated the cleaning. Yes, there was some breakthrough of the distinctive stylus cleaning noise, but it was inconsistent. We suspect that it may have only come through when it was overloading the input. Moral: don't clean your stylus while doing critical listening with Bluetooth. As if one does.

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We confess, we spent several days with this receiver just having sheer, retro fun. We used a pair of KEF R300 bookshelf-sized speakers. They're small, but their bass is solid down to 40Hz, and their sensitivity only slightly lower than average.

With modern digital music, the results were punchy and musical, and very, very clean as we pushed the volume levels high. And remarkably smooth with classical music. Feeding music via Bluetooth, especially from the iPhone, also delivered fine-sounding music.

But what we most enjoyed was disc after vinyl disc. The Pioneer SX-10AE seemed to delight especially in this analogue content. From the first modulations on Devo's album 'Freedom of Choice', through to the closing strains of Stravinsky's *Firebird* (Dorati/Detroit Symphony Orchestra/Decca 410 109-1) the performance was one of unending delight. There was excellent bite on all the instruments, and a lovely hovering stereo image, surprisingly wide (given the poor channel separation of vinyl). Rhythm was brisk and precise. It made us want to move back to a time when things in life were a little simpler.

Now, what about the subwoofer output? We could easily imagine, with this receiver, starting with the highest quality compact speakers we could afford, and then later adding a neat subwoofer to fill in some missing deep bass. Do you need to take anything special into account?

We're used to AV receivers which typically do all manner of processing to signals. That isn't the case with the subwoofer output on this unit. There are no facilities for setting a crossover frequency, for example. But the manual wasn't really informative about it. So we played some pink noise through the amp and recorded the output from the subwoofer pre-out to see what was being delivered.

It turned out that it was a simple mix-down from the left and right channels, unfiltered. In other words, it was the sum total of the entire signal, treble and all. So you will need to use a subwoofer which has its own filtered input, and set its filter at an appropriate frequency that works with your main speakers.

We did just that, redeploying a lovely little Krix Seismix 1 subwoofer that normally completes our desktop computer audio system to do duty with this receiver. We also changed to small, extremely high quality speakers — KEF LS50 — which are weak only in the lower bass. Truth: this combination sounded as though it could have cost ten thousand dollars. The receiver delivered a superb signal quality.

And then there are the line outputs. Are these so you can add an external power amplifier in order to upgrade performance? No. They are fixed-level outputs, with no option to put them under the control of the volume knob. As the instructions indicate, these allow you to 'connect a recording device, such as a cassette tape deck.' That got us wondering. Can you even buy a new cassette deck these days? Turns out you can, though not from any brands you'd have heard of in the day. But you could plug these into a digital recorder if so desired.

CONCLUSION

If the inputs suit your needs for stereo music and you have a limited budget, do have a listen to the Pioneer SX-10AE stereo receiver. It delivers high-quality sound, and may be just what you're after. ■



Pioneer SX-10AE stereo receiver

- Fine analogue sound
- Subwoofer output
- Bluetooth
- No phono or digital inputs except Bluetooth
- Turning the line outs into pre-outs would probably make them more useful

Price: \$599

Quoted power: 2 x 45W into 8 ohms (0.08% THD, 20-20,000Hz, both channels driven)

Inputs: 4 x analogue stereo audio, AM & FM antennas

Outputs: 2 x pre-out, 1 x subwoofer, 6.5mm headphone, 4 x pairs speaker binding posts

Dimensions (whd): 435 147 321mm

Weight: 7kg

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