

**£600**

# Pioneer DVR-520H

Sleek, stylish and stuffed with features, this DVD and hard-disk recorder is an enticing proposition, reckons Ian Calcutt

**T**HIS YEAR'S ENTRY-LEVEL DVD/HARD-disk combi recorder from Pioneer is 15 per cent slimmer than the earlier DVR-5100H.

Given that the 5100H was the slimmest DVD recorder at that time, Pioneer is no slouch with miniaturisation. The DVR-520H's styling is attractive and while the remote control is unchanged from before, it's a winning design that works well once you've learned the various functions.

The recorder doesn't skimp on features, even though it's about £200 less than its forerunner. It will write to reusable DVD-RW (or DVD-R for one-offs) and uses its 80GB hard-disk drive (HDD) to great effect. It boosts the high-speed DVD burning function to a maximum of 48x and includes

a handy 'Disc Backup' utility where you can load a disc, transfer it to the HDD and make a new DVD copy in a simple process. Naturally this won't work with copy-protected commercial titles but it's useful for making extra copies of anything else.

A major improvement is the addition of RGB video input via Scart, so you can get the best picture quality from digital TV boxes. Meanwhile, brands such as JVC and Panasonic now include progressive scan on DVD recorders to make them good players as well as recorders. Pioneer believes that more discerning customers will have a dedicated high-end DVD player for movie viewing, so there's no prog scan here, though it will be bringing out a higher quality DVD/HDD recorder with progressive scan and HDMI digital video output later in 2004.

The DVR-520H has four main recording modes that provide from 1 to 6hrs on DVD or 17-102hrs on HDD. You can also specify running times (in 32 different manual steps) to get the most out of discs. In addition, the machine can optimise the picture quality when transferring from HDD so your chosen recording(s) fit to DVD without wasting space.

There is a restriction in using Chase Play (simultaneous play and record) with DVD-RW – you must use x2 or x4 calibre discs and format in the edit-friendly VR mode, which means you can't play the disc in most other players. If you don't want to make extensive edits or Chase Play on the disc, then you can format in the more compatible Video mode.

Although it's advantageous, high-speed copying is also quite restricted. You need to make original HDD recordings at a quality to fit on DVD (high-speed copying cannot alter the recording mode on the fly). Rapid copying to Video-mode DVD-R or -RW also doesn't work if you've added chapters to recordings, so high-speed copies must stay without chapters or be copied to a VR-formatted -RW only.

Because it's more capacious and flexible, the hard-drive is where you should make and amend most of your recordings, then only make DVD copies when you want to keep or share a recording. There are new Disc Navigator tweaks enabling you to manually erase parts of recordings – such as commercial breaks or overruns – more easily. The

#### What we like about this DVD/HDD recorder

- ✘ RGB plus i.Link in and out
- ✘ Extremely compact
- ✘ Excellent user-friendly features

#### What we don't like about this DVD/HDD recorder

- ✘ No progressive scan, component output or HDMI
- ✘ Over-emphasises outlines in lower quality modes
- ✘ No TV programme guide or digital tuner

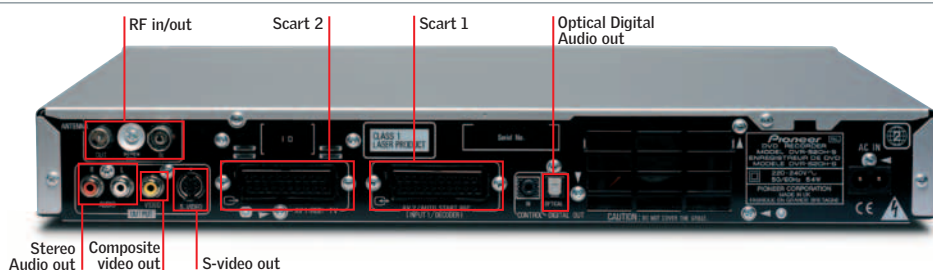




- Key Features**
- ❑ 80GB hard-disk drive
  - ❑ DVD-R/RW recording
  - ❑ Up to 48x high speed copy
  - ❑ Disc Backup utility
  - ❑ Chase Play (simultaneous play and record on HDD or DVD-RW)
  - ❑ Frame accurate playlist editing
  - ❑ CD-R/RW, MP3/WMA/JPEG playback
  - ❑ Easy Timer/VideoPlus
  - ❑ Disc History recording library

- Connections**
- Front**
- ❑ Composite/S-video in
  - ❑ i.Link DV in/out
- Back**
- ❑ 2 x Scart (composite, RGB & S-video in/out)
  - ❑ Composite/S-video in/out
  - ❑ Stereo line in/out
  - ❑ Optical digital audio output
  - ❑ RF aerial in/out
  - ❑ Pioneer control input

- Dimensions**
- ❑ 420(w) x 59(h) x 339(d)mm



As fully featured and highly flexible a DVD recorder as you could wish for



Pioneer is now as uncomplicated to use as Panasonic's classic DMR-E100.

Timer setting is by VideoPlus or manual entry only, so it's no match for GuidePlus as used by Philips. GuidePlus and other onscreen listing systems will spread to various brands but in the mean time you'll be limited to VCR-style programming. You can set up to 32 events, while

fast. One of the drawbacks of the old DVR-5100H (and its siblings in the range) was a tendency to over-emphasise the outlines of vivid objects, even with the Detail enhancement off. There is still some of this ghostly halo effect with the DVR-520H, but it's confined mainly to the lower quality modes. Stick to the Fine and SP modes and it will look acceptable. Playback quality for pre-recorded

**"The Disc Navigator allows you to manually erase parts of recordings, such as commercial breaks, with ease"**

the Easy Timer is a straightforward way of inputting what you need. Although you have to manually add titles to all recordings once they're on disk, the machine gives you visual thumbnails which run with sound when you highlight them with the cursor, making it effortless to work through the menu. The Disc History function also keeps tabs on most titles in your recorded DVD collection.

The DVR-520H uses a new VBR (variable bitrate) algorithm to improve recording quality, especially in the higher capacity modes. This means there's hardly any blocky digital break-up when action gets

movies is crisp, colourful and relatively smooth moving, despite the lack of progressive scan, while audio is clean and precise.

With its RGB input and enhanced menus and picture quality, the Pioneer DVR-520H is the only hard-drive/DVD combi to give Panasonic's range a run for its money. The Panasonics still have one or two key benefits, including progressive scan and auto-programme naming, but if the flexibility of DVD-RW appeals to you more than the largely incompatible DVD-RAM, then the DVR-520H is well worth considering. ♦

**Essential Hi-Fi & home cinema Verdict**

**Pioneer DVR-520H**

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<b>EASE OF USE</b>	★★★★★
<b>LOOKS</b>	★★★★★
<b>FEATURES</b>	★★★★★
<b>PICTURE</b>	★★★★★
<b>SOUND</b>	★★★★★
<b>VALUE</b>	★★★★★

**VERDICT** Superb recording, editing and copying features make this an adaptable but simple-to-use digital recorder.

**Overall** ★★★★★

**BEST RIVALS**  
Panasonic DMR-E85H ★★★★★  
Sharp DV-HR300H ★★★★★  
Toshiba RD-XS30 ★★★★★