



Pioneer

Elite Kuro PRO-111FD 50-inch plasma HDTV

Last year's lineup of Pioneer Kuro plasmas established a new benchmark for flat-panel HDTV performance, with the sets serving up deep-black backgrounds that were unlike anything we'd seen on a plasma or LCD model before — or since. (See the review of the PRO-110FD in "The Great Flat-Panel Face-off" in the February/March issue, also available on our Web site.) Having achieved its darkest dreams, Pioneer then announced plans at the Consumer Electronics Show to redouble its efforts to make blacks even *darker* on its next generation of TVs. To see how well the company fared, we called in the Elite PRO-111FD, Pioneer's new top-dog plasma in a 50-inch screen size.

You'd expect a 50-inch plasma TV that sells for five grand to be packed with bells and whistles, and the PRO-111FD doesn't disappoint. Its Optimum picture mode uses internal and external sensors to make automatic picture adjustments — including brightness, contrast, color, and even color temperature — based on ambient light conditions in your room. And the TV's DLNA certification means it can stream audio, video, and photo files from compatible gear when connected to

a home network via the back-panel Ethernet jack. The set comes with side-mounted speakers, but they can be left off if you prefer a more streamlined look.

Speaking of looks, the PRO-111FD's gloss-black styling originated with Pioneer, so we can forgive the company if its TV now resembles many others. What sets it apart is a substantial metal-and-acrylic stand — also gloss black — with a strikingly minimal footprint. A panel input on the TV's left-hand side offers up a basic set of control buttons as well as an A/V input with HDMI and USB jacks.

Pioneer's remote control, which has a more substantial look and feel than that of other TV handsets, is another nice touch. The keypad is fully backlit — a good thing, since its smallish buttons would otherwise be tough to navigate in a dark room. A set of direct-input buttons at the top lets you quickly switch video inputs, and you can jump between display modes by hitting the Screen Size button. Along with a Dot by Dot option that displays 1080i/p programs with no overscan, there are Full (16:9) and 4:3 modes, as well as a number of picture zoom and stretch options for both standard- and high-def programs.

SETUP

The PRO-111FD's elegant design also extends to its menu system. You can custom-label inputs using an onscreen graphic keyboard and store custom picture adjustments for each input in the Standard picture mode, a setting that also allows the TV to meet Energy Star 3.0 power-saving requirements. The six additional picture presets — the settings for each of which can be custom-tweaked — include a Movie mode that provides a relatively accurate color balance (see Test Bench), and a Pure mode that virtually eliminates all video processing.

And then there's the sensor-driven Optimum mode. While it served up a decent enough picture for casual daytime viewing, I preferred to invoke my carefully honed Standard setting for each input. Also, I found that with the Optimum setting's sensors switched on, picture settings for other presets were affected as well, leading me to turn it off.

The TV's advanced picture-setup options are too numerous to mention all of them, but I'll cover a few that I found especially worthwhile. You get five Color Temperature presets, along with a Manual adjustment (this requires proper test equipment). Of these, Low turned out to be the most accurate setting. A Picture Detail mode will boost or cut high-frequency detail for a hard- or soft-edged look; it

The Short Form

Snapshot

Deeper blacks and a host of refinements make this year's Elite Kuro even better than its award-winning predecessor

Plus

- ⚡ Detailed and deep-looking shadows
- ⚡ Accurate color
- ⚡ Exceptional video processing and noise reduction

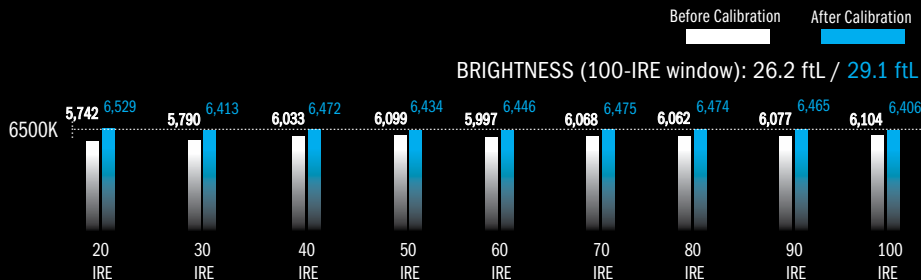
Minus

- ⚡ Sensors used for Optimum picture mode affect other presets

Price \$5,000

Test Bench

Full lab results at soundandvisionmag.com/pioneer111FD



The Standard picture preset delivered the most accurate color when its Low color-temperature preset was also selected. In that mode, grayscale tracking was ± 710 K of the 6,500-K standard from 30 to 100 IRE. Adjustments made to the Manual color-temperature controls improved grayscale tracking to an impressive ± 94 K from 10 to 100 IRE. Color decoder tests in Standard mode revealed a -10% red and -5% blue error on the

HDMI and component-video inputs. Compared with the SMPTE HD specification, the set's red, green, and blue color points were notably accurate with the Color Space 2 option selected. At around 29 fL, peak brightness was low compared with other flat-panel sets in standard mode, but its image never looked dim during normal operation.

Overscan measured 0% for 1080i/p HD signals with Dot by Dot screen size selected, and 3% in

Full (16:9) mode. The set displayed 1080i test patterns with full resolution via the HDMI inputs, although noise was visible in the highest frequency bursts with a component-video connection. A 720p multiburst test pattern looked slightly soft via both HDMI and component video. Slight edge enhancement was visible on test patterns with an HDMI connection and with the set's sharpness control set to minimum, although any related effects didn't show up on regular programs. Screen uniformity was excellent, with picture contrast remaining solid at all viewing angles over a 180° arc. — A.G.

also has a middle option that provides a natural picture with no enhancement.

A couple of Color Space modes are available: one displays colors that adhere closely to the Rec. 709 Digital TV standard (my choice) and the other offers up a substantially more vivid palette. A Color Management menu has basic slider adjustments to tweak both primary and secondary colors. Finally, you can use the remote's Tool button to make before/after comparisons of picture adjustments — a useful feature.

PERFORMANCE

The first season of *Mad Men* on Blu-ray Disc provided me with ideal material for checking out the new Kuro's performance. In a scene where the bohemian girlfriend of ad exec Don Draper (Jon Hamm) drags him to a Greenwich Village coffeehouse, the TV's exceptional rendering of shadow detail brought out the folds and creases in the dark, unkempt clothing worn by the poetry-spouting beatniks, as well as the furniture and knickknacks cluttering the background. Amid this visual chaos, the unflappable Draper's pressed white shirt had a crisp look that cut through the murky surroundings.

Moving from the interiors of *Mad*

Men to the outer space of *2001: A Space Odyssey* so I could check out the Pioneer's handling of really deep blacks, I noticed that the dark star field that the Jupiter Mission ship cruises through was only the faintly lighter than the TV's black bezel. This made the image look both seamless and endlessly deep — even more so than on the PRO-110FD, which was named **S&V's** Product of the Year for 2007.

This Kuro's strong blacks and punchy contrast also helped boost color vibrancy. For example, in a scene from *Mad Men* where secretaries test out lipsticks as scotch-swilling admen ogle them from behind a two-way mirror, the makeup's red, pink, and purple hues came across vividly, as did the red dress worn by office bombshell Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks). The secretaries' skin tones retained a natural look while also displaying a range of subtle variations.

The Pioneer's picture detail was excellent on most everything I viewed. A period drama like *Mad Men* is all about the details, and the TV did a great job of bringing out fine textures like the back of a rattan chair and the weave of the curtains in Draper's office. Video processing and upconversion were also top-notch, with stan-

dard 480i-rez DVDs looking strikingly crisp and high-def-like. Regular cable programs also benefited from the set's powerful noise-reduction settings, particularly its 3DNR adjustment.

BOTTOM LINE

After testing last year's PRO-110FD Kuro set, I didn't think a plasma TV could get any better. I was wrong. The PRO-111FD delivers even deeper blacks, and its natural-looking color, clean video processing, and powerful noise reduction contribute to a picture that's nothing short of breathtaking. At \$5,000, the TV isn't cheap; you could easily score a same-size plasma from another maker that would deliver satisfying performance for half the price. But it won't be a Kuro, and discerning eyes *will* be able to see the difference. **S&V**

Key Features

- :: Optimum picture mode
- :: 24p input mode with 3:3 pulldown (72-Hz display)
- :: DLNA-certified
- :: Inputs: 4 HDMI 1.3; 2 component-, 2 composite-, and 2 S-video; RGB PC; RF Ant/Cable
- :: 48½ x 28½ x 11¾ in; 126 lb (w/stand)

PIONEERELECTRONICS.COM :: 800-421-1404

