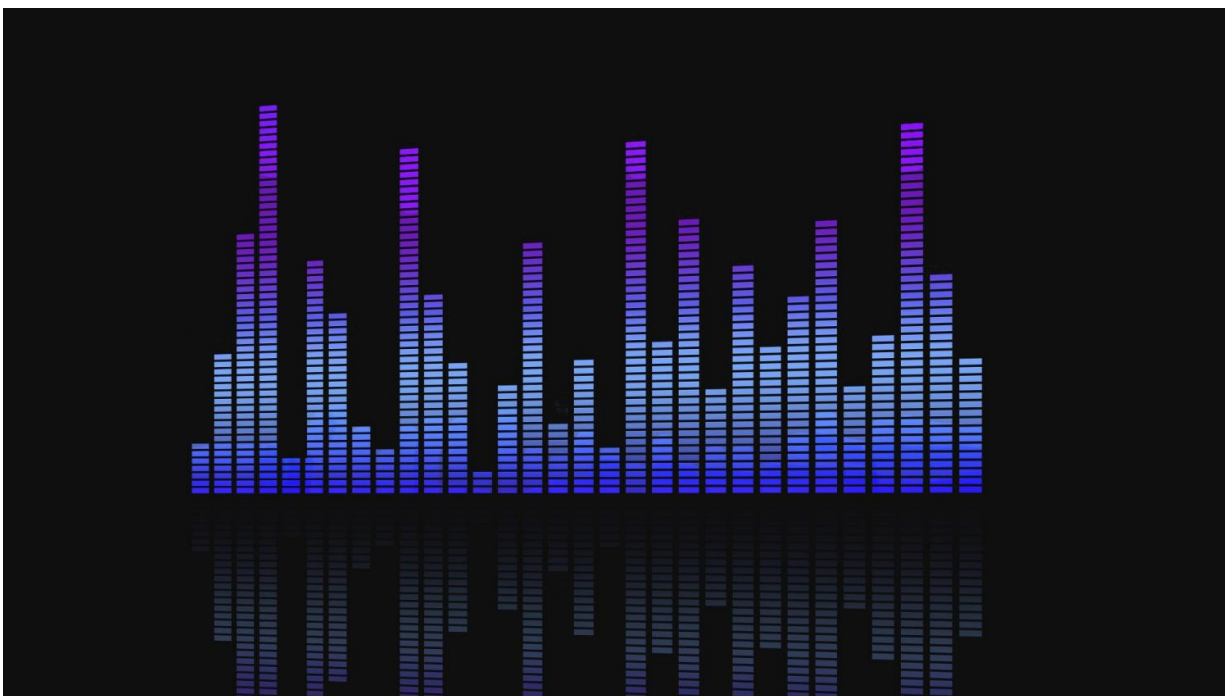


Personalization makes Pandora Premium a worthy Spotify rival

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When it comes to subscription music services, Spotify and Apple dominate the market. But a third big player in the music industry is about to offer consumers another choice.

Pandora, provider of the popular internet radio [service](#), is rolling out its own on-demand music offering, called Pandora Premium. The company

is hoping that by building on its radio service, its new subscription music business will stand out from its rivals.

I like the result. Pandora is offering an easy-to-use, very personalized music service.

All subscription streaming music services offer users the same proposition. Consumers pay a monthly fee - typically around \$10 for an individual listener - to access a universe of music. Subscribers can play any one of millions of songs any time they like and usually can save songs or albums to their devices for offline listening. They can also create playlists or have the service create custom radio stations based on their favorite songs.

Spotify and Apple Music offer those features and so does Pandora Premium, which the company has begun to offer to select users and plans to open up more broadly in coming weeks.

Where the services differ is in how they are customized to individual users. Spotify tailors its service to users as it goes along; the more you use the service, the more it knows about your tastes. Apple Music tries to jump start the process by having users, when they sign up, select genres and artists that they like.

Pandora, by contrast, is building on what it already knows about its 81 million radio listeners, gleaned from all the songs they've listened to, the stations they've created and the songs they've liked.

If you've listened to Pandora radio in the past, there's a good chance that you've tapped its "thumbs up" button. That button allows radio listeners to indicate that they like a particular track and would like Pandora to play more songs like it. Now Pandora is using that information for its Premium service to create playlists.

Pandora sees playlists as a key way to distinguish its service from its competitors. Right now, creating playlists can be time consuming on both Spotify and Apple Music - users often have to build a playlist by adding songs or albums one by one. Pandora Premium promises to automate this tedious process.

Subscribers access Pandora Premium through the same Pandora app they use to get to the company's radio offering. After signing up for the on-demand service, consumers who have listened to Pandora radio in the past will see a playlist dubbed "My Thumbs Up" prominently displayed. That playlist contains all the songs users have ever given a thumbs-up to while listening to Pandora Radio. So, instead of having to search for particular songs or albums or comb through other people's playlists, users instantly get access to a collection of songs that Pandora already knows they like.

For some people who have used Pandora Radio for years, that playlist might be unwieldy. I've been listening to Pandora for about a decade, so mine consists of 974 songs. And since I've created or tuned into multiple stations and liked songs within many of them, those songs don't all go together very well.

But that's OK, because Pandora has ways to easily create more tailored playlists. If you start listening to one of Pandora's radio stations and press the thumbs up button a few times, Pandora Premium will automatically offer to create a playlist based on all the songs you've given a thumbs up to within that station. If you've "liked" a lot of songs in that station in the past, you'll instantly have a large collection of tracks that likely go together better than those in your "My Thumbs Up" playlist.

Alternatively, Pandora will help you create a playlist from an individual song. Spotify and Apple Music give you a similar option. But they

generally expect you to add songs to that playlist yourself. By contrast, when Pandora Premium shows you the new playlist you've created from that song, it gives you the option to "add similar songs."

Tap on that button, and the service will add another five or so songs to your playlist, typically a combination of tracks from both the same artist and from other artists in the same genre. The feature works a lot like one that Apple used to have built into its iPhone Music app called Genius Playlist that would automatically create playlist based on a single song from the music you had on your phone.

With the feature on Pandora, you can manually delete or add songs or keep tapping the "add similar songs" button to fill it out. Company representatives said the feature tailors the selection to each individual user, based on their tastes as indicated by what they've listened to and "liked" in the past. So, if two users create a [playlist](#) from the same song and then click the "add similar songs" button, they likely will end up with very different playlists.

But Pandora is using the data it's collected about its users to personalize its service in other ways. From the app's home page, users can choose to "browse" music. From the resulting page, they'll see a list of new albums Pandora is recommending based on what it knows about their tastes. They'll also see a list of "recommended artists" that's personalized to them.

And the app will do a cool trick, automatically downloading a selection of songs based on your recent listening history so that you can continue to listen to music when you are offline. Pandora will refresh that download music the next you go back online.

Pandora Premium is in its early days and the company is still refining it. So, compared to Spotify and Apple Music, it has some notable

shortcomings.

For now, unlike those services, you can't use it on a tablet or on your computer. Instead, it only works on a smartphone or through devices that connect to a smartphone, like Google's Chromecast or some cars that offer Apple's CarPlay. Pandora plans to add support for other products - including tablets, computers and some digital set-top boxes - in the near future.

Unlike Spotify and Apple Music, Pandora is only offering individual memberships for premium. You can't yet get a family membership or a student discount, although the company says it will offer both in coming months.

Like the other services, there are some songs, like those on Taylor Swift's "1989" album, that Pandora doesn't have the rights to stream on demand. But if you happen to own that or similar albums, Pandora, unlike Apple Music, doesn't offer [users](#) a way to upload it to the company's servers so you can access it from the cloud.

Despite those shortcomings, I liked Pandora Premium, particularly its automated playlists. It's a worthy alternative to streaming music's giants.

Pandora Premium on-demand subscription [music](#) service

Troy's rating: 8 out of 10

Likes: Personalized, automated and easy-to-create playlists; tailored [song](#) and album recommendations.

Dislikes: Only works on smartphones and smartphone connected devices

for now; doesn't yet offer family or student rates; doesn't offer a way to upload and store personally owned songs.

Price: \$10 per month

Web: pandora.com

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