

PRO AUDIO REVIEW

Finally, a Pro MiniDisc Portable!!

by Frank Beacham

personal
audio

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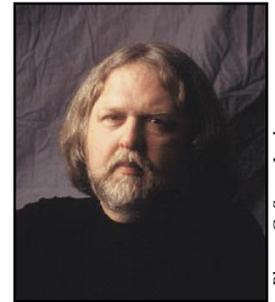


Photo: G. Steve Jordan

For MiniDisc field recordists, the first truly professional portable recorder has been a long, long time coming. It seems like a gazillion months ago that Marantz Professional announced — but didn't deliver — its PMD650 pro MD recorder. Now, with the first units trickling into the United States, the promise is reality.

The good news is the Marantz Pro PMD650, with a list price of \$1,399, packs the most impressive feature set ever included in a MiniDisc portable. It's a solidly built professional deck (over three pounds with batteries) that should live up to the reputation of rough-and-tumble reliability that Marantz's analog cassette decks have enjoyed for years.

From the recorder's XLR connectors to its record memory cache and backup TOC updating, Marantz designed the PMD650 for protecting the integrity of the recording during hard field use. In keeping with that design goal, the recorder has a unique feature — called the dual mono mode — that can save the day for solo recordists. In this mode, a single input is recorded onto two tracks, with the second track 15 dB lower than the first. This serves as a backup, should level overloads occur on the first track.

Unfortunately, the PMD650 is not perfect. It has a design flaw so severe that I predict some users will have a lot of trouble with this otherwise excellent device. Unless perfectly tilted at the correct angle, the LCD display is so dim and fuzzy that it's difficult to read, even with the built-in backlight.

The display is so poor that I returned our demo recorder to Marantz assuming the display was defective. Not so, I was told. That's the way it is. I'm still scratching my head. How could Marantz let this happen? How could the display on the \$5 calculator on my desk have better visibility than a professional recording device?

Don't get me wrong — you can read the display. It just requires viewing at precisely the proper angle. Even then it's not the best. Off that angle, the display characters become almost unreadable. This is most annoying, I found, when trying to interpret the smallish recording level bar indicator.

Beyond the poor display and the hefty, not-so-portable AC power supply, there's little not to like about the PMD650. Its features cover virtually every MiniDisc function available plus some new ones to enhance portable recording.

The new Marantz has standard MD editing features (divide, combine, move, erase), a 40-second (20-second for two track) audio buffer for shock resistance and three record level control choices: manual, manual with limiter and automatic.



There's one-touch recording with a separate rec-pause button and a two-position Ambient Noise Cancel (ANC) filter for cutting high and low frequencies (band-pass) and low frequencies only (high-pass). SCMS is defeatable.

As for I/Os, the recorder has stereo XLR mic/line inputs, XLR digital output (SPDIF), RCA digital input (S/PDIF) with sample rate converter, a headphone jack with level control and a remote control input. There's no digital optical I/O. Microphone features include 48 V phantom power, variable mic attenuator (0,-15, -30dB) and a built-in mic and speaker.

Another neat feature is LSR, Marantz's Level Sync Recording system. LSR is programmed via the preset menu. When activated, it controls the recorder based on the input sound levels. This is great for unattended recordings of long conferences and meetings. Because the recorder stores up to two seconds of audio in memory while in the record-pause mode, that audio is added to the beginning of the track once recording starts. The old problem of clipped first words in most voice-activated recorders is thus avoided.

The Marantz can run on eight AA-type alkaline cells, an optional NiCad battery pack or on AC with the included AC adapter. Battery life for AA cells is rated at 3.5 hours for recording and 4 hours for playback. With the NiCad pack, the rating is 2.5 hours for recording and 3 hours for playback.

Our informal tests with the PMD650 found the unit has excellent sound quality and a user-friendly ergonomic design, whether worn over the shoulder or used on a tabletop. The new recorder is a big leap forward from the music-centric consumer MD portables that have been adapted for professional use.

Marantz Pro has come tantalizingly close to creating the ideal portable MiniDisc recorder. The PMD650 will remain a flawed masterpiece, however, until the manufacturer fixes the display.

For more information, visit the Marantz Pro Web site at www.superscope-marantzpro.com; call 630-820-4800.

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