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Sony PCM-M10

BY LORENZ RYCHNER



Sony rules the history of on-the-go music listening. At the end of the Seventies, the Sony Walkman cassette player changed the way the general public listened to music. The Walkman fitted into a coat pocket, came with lightweight headphones, and became a cultural phenom, being responsible for the solitary listening habits of generations of commuters, gym rats, and assorted other classes of humans.

At first the Walkman had no record function (although it was based on the Pressman, a mono recorder), but soon enough record-enabled versions of the Walkman followed. Since then, Sony has been bringing us similarly portable recorders of the evolving (and fading) DAT and MiniDisc technologies. Today's recorders are expected to span the range from lowly MP3 to high-end audio at 96/24 as we're reviewing the third—and so far the most portable—of the latest generation of Sony's portable PCM recorders.

Ancestry—D1 and D50

For the immediate ancestry of the PCM-M10, check out our reviews of the PCM-D1 (April 2006) and PCM-D50 (April 2008). In brief: The D1 immediately claimed flagship status, costing around \$2k; it is coat- but not shirt-pocket-sized at 3x7x1.4", records and plays PCM and SBM (Super Bit Mapping) formats up to 96/24 but not MP3, has two built-in electret condenser mics with protruding capsules of outstanding quality (mounted on a swivel), and has USB (for file exchange with a computer only). The only regret I expressed in my review (other than that I couldn't afford one...) was that there is no remote control.

The D50 is priced at around \$500, has two built-in (also protruding but non-swivel) electret condenser mics of supposedly lesser quality (but, in truth, they are quite excellent), is just a bit shorter than the D1, also does 96/24 and SBM (only for 16-bit files), and can play back MP3 files (but not record—they must be imported over USB). Accessories available as separate purchases: a wired remote control, and a module that converts two XLR mic inputs to a single stereo miniplug: the XLR-1, reviewed in our December 2009 Gift Guide.

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ONCE OVER

Sony PCM-M10

And now—M10

At about 2.5" wide and 4.5" tall, the M10 is truly pocket-sized; think a slightly thicker iPhone. It weighs enough to feel substantive, the build inspires confidence, especially the sturdy metal band that goes right around the unit. It lists for \$399 but can be had for well under \$300, also has built-in mics, and it plays back and records MP3, making it a versatile and classy recorder. It's even available in your choice of black or red. Let's look at the details.

M10 features

I'll discuss what it's like to work with the M10, mentioning its main features—but rather than rewriting the (excellent) owners' manual, I encourage you to download it from <http://pro.sony.com/bbsc/ssr/cat-audio/cat-recorders/product-PCMM10%2FB> where you also can see more pictures of the unit and its accessories than we can print in the space we have.

The mics that were protruding capsules on the D1 and D50 are now recessed into the rounded-off top corners, the metal mesh aiming out at 45 degree angles. Between the mics on the narrow top side are the stereo minijacks for external mic and line input.

Next to the mics, on the main surface, in the two top corners, are the LEDs for L and R, green to indicate -12 dB has been reached, red to indicate overs. If the trigger is a transient, then the LEDs stay on for barely a second, probably more useful during soundcheck than while you record since you're not likely to constantly peer at them.

In the main screen below, however, there appears (while using Auto Rec Level mode) a warning in the case of the built-in mics being overloaded ("Level Too High—Set Mic SENS to LOW Or Adjust MIC Position"), and on the dB scale there is a floating marker that remains at the highest level reached in the file so far recorded, and that will be where you learn that, oops, an over has been recorded.

The screen is a beauty for such a small device. It tells you at all times the current level, in record and in record-pause, and the font of the time readout is quite large and easily readable as long as you have the screen backlit. Battery life (presumably with the screen light off) is listed as 19 hours of recording and simultaneous monitoring, at 96/24, so leaving the light on when not using the (included) AC adapter should still yield many hours on one set of (two AA) batteries.

The screen also tells you the expected items like File Folder, File Number, recording format, remaining record time, whether the Limiter and Low Cut Filter is engaged, battery status, etc. The REC mode choices are: Linear PCM (WAV) at 44.1, 48, or 96 kHz at 16 or 24 bits (plus 22.05 kHz/16-bit), or MP3 at 44.1 kHz, 64, 128, or 320 kbps.

The M10 records to a generous 4 GB of internal flash memory, plus you can insert either a microSD card (to 2 GB) or a



microSDHC card (4 GB to 16 GB) or Sony's proprietary M2 Micro Memory Stick (to 16 GB). This all results in exceedingly long record times: With just the built-in flash memory you can record 110 minutes at 96/24, 6 hours at 44.1/16, or 134 hours of MP3 at 44.1/64 kbps. A special buffer can record up to 5 seconds of audio before you actually start recording from Record-Pause (standby) status.

Playback options include the usual looping of an excerpt between two points (A-B) or by track repeating; there's a speed control (-75% to +100%, without pitch change), and a separate (musical) Key Control that transposes playback up or down by up to six semitones.

Despite the small size of the unit the control buttons are easy to use, spaced just right for anyone except maybe possessors of extremely sausage-shaped fingers. The size dictates some compromises, like Line Out and headphones sharing the same single stereo jack—you select one or the other signal type in the menus. The built-in speaker (located on the opposite narrow end from the mics) is tiny, but nice to have for quick "is there signal?" checks. The recording level is adjusted on a single rotary control for both channels at once; the control is nicely knurled and protected, tight enough so it won't creep no matter how you're holding or orienting the recorder.

Other practicalities: The wired remote control allows you handfree operation once levels etc. are set, thus avoiding contact noises when you record from the internal mics. It lets you do the recording basics—Rec, Pause, Stop, and T-Marks (track marks, works only on LPCM files and MP3 files recorded on the PCM-M10). For playback you have to get your fingers onto the main body of the M10. The recorder can be mounted, having a 1/4" thread on the underside that fits camera tripods and such, or mic stands via a thread adapter.

The sound

I took this recorder to several live performances, to rehearsals of a Wagnerian-sized orchestra, and to a piano master class given by a visiting virtuoso. I also used it as a playback device for MP3 files, and I recorded spoken voice via the built-in mics.

The built-in mics sound surprisingly natural and open for being cooped up in this 45-degree arrangement behind a grille smaller than a dime. As can be expected from that arrangement, the capture is of a wider, roomier kind than that of its predecessors. Still, the sense of realism they convey is astounding, and they had no trouble with extreme low-end sources like the orchestral bass drum and timpani hits and such. As long as mic sensitivity and record levels are set carefully, manual recording is possible. But when in doubt, and for less-than-critical audio, it doesn't hurt to switch it to Auto—the AGC is not prone to overreacting. Experimenting is key here; once you know what to expect you'll prepare accordingly.

I also used external mics and recorded line signals, and I can't fault the unit in any respect. The headphone outlet is of acceptable quality, but for playback of critical files, since it is a minijack that doubles as Line Out, you will probably be better off to shoot files over USB to a computer for playback on a bigger system.

The USB function worked just as it should—the M10 simply appears as an external USB volume, and serves not just for musical files, you can store anything you like on it if you need it to be a storage device.

All in all

Sony has once again successfully scaled down a product line while introducing new features, and the result is the PCM-M10, a very capable and versatile recorder. Good built-in mics, a wide variety of recording formats, sturdy design, and many practicalities add up to a recorder that fits any pocket, most budgets, and that can capture sound of a quality that belies its modest size. ➤

Price: \$399 (\$300 street)

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