Tascam MD-350

Already regarded as something of a mature technology, MD remains a relative unknown to a lot of end users. With this in mind, Tascam remains a core supporter of the entry-level MD machine.   **ZENON SCHOEPE**

OPINIONS REMAIN DIVIDED on precisely how pro the much maligned MiniDisc is for real life applications. If you can bring yourself to come to terms with the fact that its recording format is a tad on the lossy side for all-out audiophile scrutinising, and concentrate on its value and convenience, then, presented with a decent example of the species, it would be a hard man that could not be won over by the appeal.

The MD-350 is the latest representative at the budget end of Tascam's MD range. Those who are acquainted with previous incarnations of Tascam's machines will experience a little *deja vu*. Visually and operationally the MD-350 is a dead-ringer for the MD-301 mkII that it replaces, which itself bore enormous similarity to the MD-501 that it undercut in price. This then seems to be the latest in line of MD machines that have effectively built on the foundations of their predecessors and added a feature here and there.

Most significantly, and good news for us all, the other constant is that the price has decreased with every generation, so who's complaining? The MD-501 was a good machine but then so was the MD-301 mkII, and the MD-350 is a little better than it.

The key unique inclusion in the MD-350 is that of varispeed in play mode. Activated from a front panel switch, and set within the machine's menu to +/-12% in fine intervals, it adds a useful bell to the MD-350's belt. Much of the rest of the machine is extremely similar, if not identical, to the MD-301 mkII.

Build quality is excellent and the box is refreshingly hefty for a technology that so often gravitates towards the flimsy and lightweight as it matures and ages. Disc handling is impeccable, with a positive grasp of the disc on loading and a controlled expulsion on ejects.

An input selector chooses between the balanced XLR and phono analogue, and rear and front panel optical connectors. Outputs are on balanced XLRs, phono and optical. Analogue record level is controlled on a single pot, without the balance control that the MD-501 had, and transport and function keys are located in a cluster to the right of the rather nice main display which, aside from the bargraph metering, also houses mode and status indicators.

Front panel controls cover Stop, Play and Ready (pause) on large keys with Record and Search represented by smaller buttons. Pressing the Record button with no disc in the drive activates a monitor 'through' mode. The Display button activates different timing display modes (elapsed, total, remaining) while a Play Mode switch activates different play modes (shuffle, programmed and repeat between defined points).

Track selection is performed on a dial which increments-decrements with turns to the left-right respectively. A push of the same dial equates to Enter when adding tracks to programmed playbacks, for example. Two buttons accompany this dial marked Edit-No and Yes and concern themselves with access and adjustment of menu parameters. It's here that you delve in to MD's editing functions, name discs and tracks, set start points and select such things as auto track numbering.

Fortunately you can also use a finely sculpted infra-red remote control and dedicated buttons are provided on this for the likes of Insert, Delete, Clear, Title Edit, Character Select and Auto Space.

Together, the front panel and remote interact really well to share duties although it has to be said that the remote offers the most control. Better still is the ability to plug a PC computer keyboard on PS/2 in to the front panel. Doing this takes the tedium out of editing and naming discs and you even get an overlay for the keyboard that reminds you of what functions are attributed to which keys.

Those poor unfortunates who have grown accustomed to, and skilled at, naming tracks on a more rudimentary machine, or who have wallowed in the pleasures of CD-Text on most CD-R machines that can do it, will not believe what the MD-350 can do for you. Get this, you can type titles in using the keyboard. And you will, because it's easy and it's genuinely useful. MD text, like CD-Text after it, proved to be relatively slow burn function of the format. I wouldn't buy an MD machine that didn't have keyboard text entry.

Keyboard Shift keys correspond to front panel controls together with an assortment of the remote's dedicated buttons, while shifting the Function keys accesses the editing functions directly. Character entry is assisted by the usual cursor movement and backspace, delete, and insert functions.

Less fuss is now made about the precise version of the ATRAC algorithm used in MD machines. So little fuss, in fact, that Tascam doesn't actually state which version the MD-350 uses. However, the MD-301 used v4.5 so I have a suspicion that it has been retained for this newer machine. Yes, you can hear things going on in reverb tails but if that's bothering you then you're probably missing the point. Give it some good steady level, speech or mixed material and the results are perfectly acceptable.

This is a very satisfying machine to operate. The transport is actually quite fast at responding to track selection and play commands – certainly faster than many CD players that I've known – and it achieves this without buffers of RAM. Again it offers a wide variety of operational methods: front panel with menu access; the remote; and the computer keyboard. When combined they give enormous possibilities. I prefer the computer keyboard with an extension lead as this gives by far the most comprehensive means of control, including editing, which if we're honest about it, really isn't that elegant on MD. I think I've stated my position on the merits of keyboard naming already.

You get SP, Mono, LP2 and LP4 recording modes and the dubious inclusion of a timer.

Getting around the machine is straightforward and predictable. Performance is solid. Tascam has not attempted to hide the MD-301 mkII origins and that's not a bad thing. If anything, it proves the validity and relevance of the original package. The MD-350 remains a good entry-level MD machine in a market that really doesn't have that many choices at this level. What can I tell you, I like it. With a keyboard, of course. ∎

PROS	Good solid performance; keyboard text entry a delight; varispeed; the definitive entry level MD machine
CONS	You'll have to spend more if you want more features; a timer?
EXTRAS	Similarities of the MD-350 to the MD-301 mkII have been explained but you need to move up to the MD-801 if you're really serious about MD on a Tascam.

This machine boasts 200ms full stroke search time and track start in 100ms. There's an auto locate to specific points and a jog dial and shuttle wheel for manual frame by frame searching and positioning. Pitch control is +/-9.9% and a programmable End-of-Message function gives up to 99 seconds' warning of track ending.

Things get truly pro with a remote parallel port, RS-232C port plus a PS/2 keyboard connection. Options include RAM buffer for instant start, a full-function remote, and a Flash start controller.

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