

Superscope PSD340: Music Practice CD Recording System Superscope Technologies, Inc.



By Dave Miele

At any and all of the finer conservatories and music colleges across the country, fostering good transcription skills is part of the academic program. For any student of jazz, perhaps the most primary means of learning inflection and style is through the verbatim imitation of the masters. It's a simple idea that can be related precisely to learning how to speak. While we all learn to read and write in school, our first command of the language comes from direct imitation of the words—the sounds—we hear around us as we grow. Our first words are ones we've heard our caregivers speak. So our first musical statements are usually ones we've heard our idols "say" before. Trumpeter Jon Faddis teaches an excellent sequence of courses at SUNY Purchase. I've had the pleasure of taking them. These classes are built around transcription assignments. One of my fondest memories of Purchase happened one day in the office of Todd Coolman, director of Jazz Studies. Reviewing a transcription I had done of Miles Davis' "Dr. Jackyll", one of the teachers asked if I had slowed down the recording, to which Dr. Coolman interjected: "He *had* to! You'll go crazy trying to do it otherwise." I felt vindicated—I had certainly slowed down the recording (the tempo is 335 bpm!) using computer software. I was pleased to get this confirmation from my teacher/mentor that slowing down the recording was in no way "cheating". Transcribing from a slower tempo requires exactly the same amount of skill as transcribing notes that are flying by you faster than you can register. The difference is only in the amount of time it takes to transcribe each. Slowing down recordings so as to quickly and clearly understand and analyze them is a beneficial tool that all musicians should be in possession of.

That "Dr. Jackyll" transcription was frustrating. The near insanity-inducing tempo forced me to slow down the track significantly. To make things worse, the computer software I used at the time was less than perfect. While the pitch of the track was not influenced by the slowing-down process, the drums (which I was transcribing) came out distorted as a result of the procedure. I was forced to switch back and forth between the recorded tempo and the slow tempo, double-checking my work as I went. This tune is certainly the fastest tempo I've yet transcribed. Thus it was a perfect tune with which to test Superscope Technologies' new *PSD340 Music Practice and CD Recording System*. I'm pleased to report that the transcription

Superscope PSD340: Music Practice CD Recording System (Continued)

would have been an easier task with the *PSD340*. The slowing-down process is hard on drumset recordings. The digital “space” inserted between the notes, which stretches the tempo (to simplify) can provide an annoying overtone that obscures the clean attack of the notes. Being able to hear clean execution is essential when transcribing drums. While I can not say that the *PSD340* completely eliminated this, it is the best I’ve heard. I was able to slow the track by thirty-five percent without any noticeable distortion. I was still able to transcribe fairly accurately at beyond fifty percent of the track tempo. I was using an incredibly fast tune, remember, and even a (sane) medium to up tempo will probably not require more than a forty percent reduction. If you’re transcribing melody instruments, you’re in even better shape, as this distortion does not apply to pitch. Melodic lines sounded clear and accurate well into the fifty percent range.

This is, however, just the tip of the iceberg with regard to this impressive piece of equipment. There is much more that the *PSD340* can do. Built in are a tuner and metronome. The tuner accurately reads pitches chromatically from the input. The metronome can be adjusted to different time signatures, and the downbeat volume is adjustable. Loops are easily created by pressing the same button when you want the loop to begin and end. The loop is then repeated until you clear the setting. Key signatures can also easily be manipulated by half steps, with no effect on tempo. The tempo range is from minus seventy-five percent to plus fifty percent. Pitch is not affected by tempo reduction or acceleration. The main vocal can also be reduced. This is not an exact process and (particularly with jazz) depends on the mix and balance of the recording. It can be helpful at times. The icing on the cake of this fascinating machine is the included CD recorder. The recording process is quick and easy and offers a variety of ways to record. CDs can be made from the main unit (there are separate recording and playing drives), from the analog inputs, or from a mix of both. Recordings can be made of the slowed down and/or key-manipulated music. The practice CD possibilities are endless.

The *PSD340* is an advanced tool offering the transcriber/musician/teacher a wealth of capabilities with regard to creating useful practice CDs and transcription aids. This is not a hard machine to use. I found myself using most of its features effectively within minutes of opening the box. There is no doubt that Superscope Technologies is offering one of the best transcription aids currently available. The recording possibilities push it over the edge and make it an invaluable asset to any student of music. While the machine is not inexpensive, it’s certainly worth its price tag and will pay for itself with musical knowledge gleaned.