

IN-DEPTH REVIEW

SUPERSCOPE PSD340



John Bates finds that the Superscope PSD340 Music Practice System, priced at £763.75, is an all-in-one solution for rehearsing, learning and recording music

NO, we haven't turned *Keyboard Player* into a hi-fi magazine! The concept behind the Superscope PSD340 is that it is a music practice and rehearsal tool. As such it is a unique product with no direct rival on the market at present.

It works on several levels. Firstly, it is a rehearsal tool for performers. Any track, or selected part of a track on a CD, can be altered in pitch, sped up or slowed down so that it matches the exact pitch of the player's instrument and then the player can either transcribe or learn by ear that particular section or solo. It is able to copy a selection of these, complete with the pitch and tempo changes to a second CD, thus creating an instant practice tool that can be played back on any standard CD player.

The second main purpose of the PSD340 is to act as an instant recording studio for a rehearsal of, say, the school band or choir. However, a clever variation on this is that a backing CD can be played on the one drive and the sound from the live singer, choir or instrumentalist can be mixed with the backing and simultaneously burnt on to a second CD. Just for good measure, the user can adjust the balance between the signals and also add a variable amount of reverb and delay. This, whilst not having the mixing capabilities of, say, a porta-studio, it is an excellent solution for schools who have to enter a whole raft of students for exams like GCSE music where each student has to send in an individual performance and/or composition on CD.

It has a small built-in microphone that could, at a pinch,

be used for recording as a rough guide. Anything more serious and it would be wise to use a pair of microphones through the XLR sockets. Now that condenser microphones (ones designed to give a higher sound quality) are both cheap and readily available and since this unit can supply the phantom power they need, it would be a wise decision to buy a pair; some cost just under £30 each and are more than adequate for the job. Usefully, the unit also has a small monitor speaker where there is no access to external amplification.

If the name Superscope seems familiar it may be for several reasons. The innovative American company was known originally for a wide-screen film process used on many films from the mid 1950s onwards. It distributed Sony tape recorders in the 1960s. The 1970s,

80s and 90s saw it as the owner, developer and manufacturer of Marantz, the upmarket hi-fi company, using the Superscope name for budget-line products. Having sold off Marantz in 2002, it now focuses totally on products for music education.

Using the PSD340 is quite an instinctive process and the design of the product bears witness to the long history that the company has had in the hi-fi business. So, you find that the little line output volume trim control has a push down function that mutes it: perfect for working in a classroom or when the phone goes. The main input connections are on the front of the unit; much easier than reaching around the back. The central jog wheel has a push function that simply directs the user from one CD drive to the other.

There are two CD drives, one on top of the machine, the other in a drawer positioned at the front. The top CD drive only reads, but it does cope with a wide variety of CD variations that many domestic players will not, such as CD-RW. It will also work from MP3 files on CD and also can work with karaoke CDs. These are known as CD-G, the G standing for graphics: in other words, text. Probably in the interests of preserving the peace with record and publishing companies, the fastest CD copy speed is only twice the normal playing time and the CD-G discs will only copy the backing tracks and not the text.

In copying CDs, though, the PSD340 has some rather clever tricks it can perform. It can be made to copy either a track or a whole CD at half speed. This has the effect of dropping the pitch and halving the playback speed, with the only limitation being 40 minutes of source music.

Another smart feature that impressed me was its ability to copy a long track but, at the flick of a button, insert 'markers' every minute. Thus, when working from the copy of the track, the player can access nine minutes into the track by simply accessing 'track 9' on any ordinary CD player. It can also be programmed to play/record tracks in any preordained order.

Most likely, a player wanting to learn a particular section will first of all mark the part of the piece by using the A/B marker button. This inserts a start and end marker and this section will then repeat endlessly. The end point can be

changed or new A/B sections created by just re-pressing the button. I wondered if it would have been a good idea to have some way of programming or memorising exact repeat points; maybe insert A/B markers onto the copied CD. It would make picking up certain favourite sections to be learnt a bit quicker.

By slowing down the tempo, the notes become easier to find since the pitch has not changed. Usually it only takes a decrease of around 10 per cent for the notes to become much easier to find. When pushed past 50 per cent, the sound gets very metallic and 'grainy'. At the maximum of 75 per cent it is almost impossible to work out.

Although the pitch can be changed, up to an octave, it is most likely that any pitch changes will be done so that either the backing is within the range of a singer or, even more likely, it will be fine-tuned in steps of less than a semitone to bring the recording into concert pitch. Some recordings are just slightly out of the usual concert pitch and, I have noticed, MP3 files seem to often be just a fraction out of tune (perhaps it is something to do with the way the audio data is compressed).

For practising, it has a programmable metronome but more importantly a tuner. This can, first of all, have its 'concert A' pitch tuned to 10 cycles either side of the normal A = 440 Hz. From that, though, the player can then visually see if his instrument is in tune. The reverb and delay units are quite

acceptable, too, although the voice reduction is no better than any of the voice reduction systems on the market at present.

The PSD340 is the latest in a line of similar products from Superscope since its considerable company re-grouping in 2000. It has few, if any, rivals that offer the exact same facilities in one portable and rugged unit. It is, therefore, a highly adaptable teaching and learning resource for a music department, music school or home user.

It is possible, by utilising various software programs, to offer similar facilities on a laptop computer. However, this will not be as fast or convenient and may lack the quality of the results that this unit produces. It will not be as portable, and neither will it have the wealth and variety of inputs and outputs. One would require a mixing desk, lots more leads, an external audio box: a rather cumbersome and more complex set-up.

The PSD340 is a solid and smart tool with a specific market and to this end it is a well-made and professional product that, given the company history, is unsurprisingly hard to fault. Whilst the quality of the product justifies its price tag, it may be just a little too steep for most school and home budgets.

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