

AEQ DR-100

Field recorders have got smaller and smarter just as mobile phones did before them. **NEIL HILLMAN** can't believe that he can't shout 'I said I'm just getting on the train!' into this new offering from Spanish manufacturer AEQ.

IT'S BEEN REMARKABLE to watch the miniaturisation of solid-state field recorders. From the first big models such as the Sonifex Courier, Mandozzi DART or Nagra Ares-C, their progress towards our palm-top has mirrored the evolution of the mobile telephone. Once just a device enabling you to bellow your moment-by-moment homeward transport arrangements to your other half — and to the rest of the passengers — mobile phones are now so advanced that you can routinely listen to FM radio, take pictures, receive e-mails, txt msgs 2 yr m8s, and would you believe it, even converse with other humans in real-time using well-proven voice technology.

The DR-100 (UK£365+ VAT) is claimed by its manufacturers AEQ to be the world's smallest professional digital recorder. The size of a cellular phone, it includes a built-in microphone, an audio editor and an FM radio tuner, and stores high quality audio either to its internal Flash memory or to a removable SmartMedia Flash card. The recorded audio files may be edited on-board, or easily transferred from its internal memory to a PC for editing within another audio program.

The device itself is pleasantly uncluttered to the eye. Taken out of the supplied protective leather cover, its plastic case is conventionally and conservatively finished in silver and gunmetal grey and appears suitably robust for the job in hand. The unit is light, too — just 98g all up, including the 3.6V, 700mA Li-Ion battery that provides up to 10 hours of duty between charges.

The top face of the DR-100 is the busiest, housing a monotone LCD used for navigating through the recorder, editor, player, FM tuner, timer record, USB transfer, file transfer and setup functions; their associated menu options accessed by a centrally located Menu button surrounded by four menu option buttons. These are used for parameter adjustments when the device is in any mode other than record. Two buttons, OK and Cancel, set immediately below the display screen, are used for executing menu commands. The last controls on this top side are three narrow-ellipse buttons, semi-recessed on the bottom third of the top face and used for making A-B play point/Select, Pause/Cut, or Play/Stop choices.

The left hand side of this slim unit has a sliding Record Lock switch and a Record Ready pushbutton at the top; two buttons for Volume up and down in the centre and a master Off, On and Key Lock at the bottom. With all of the DR-100's controls either thumb or index finger operated while the device is in hand-held mode, the texting generation of journalists

are ideally prepared for this recorder.

The right hand side accommodates a mini-FireWire USB socket and two 3.5mm sockets for Line In and Line Out. The top edge houses the tiny built-in microphone perforations, and two further 3.5mm sockets: one for an external mono microphone (stereo signals can only be recorded via the Line In socket) and one for the stereo headphones (the lead of which acts as the antenna for the programmable FM tuner). The bottom edge houses the Nokia battery charger socket and the Remote file transfer RS232 modem socket.

The review version of DR-100 recorded audio using MPEG 1 Layer II, MPEG 1 Layer III (MP3) or G 723 although the imminent production versions will also offer 48KHz uncompressed recording. The internal Flash memory allows for 4.5 hours of material to be recorded using G 723, or 1.5 hours using MPEG layer II.

Only Layer II files can be switched between mono and stereo recordings, or edited with the on-board editor; which in itself is no real hardship because the in-built, non-destructive editing capabilities are very basic: namely Cut, Delete or Merge. Even with the aid of some zooming of the pixels in the display screen, sensible editing would realistically only take place after transferring the recordings from the device to a host PC. This, as it happens was a reasonably straightforward experience using the supplied transfer software and the USB port. Even better news though is that the newest production version will sport another significant improvement — the DR-100 will be detected automatically by Windows XP as a removable drive, bringing into play the increased convenience of simply dropping-and-dragging files for editing.

Remote File Transfer is also possible through the RS 232 port of the DR-100 and an external modem; allowing a point-to-point connection on any standard POTS (Plain Old Telephone Service) line using the low-bandwidth, twisted-pair wiring and associated equipment of the local telephone exchange that provides voice calls and low-speed modem connections. Should a break in the data be detected,

the transfer will automatically resume from the point of interruption; a modern variance of the old radio-hacks trick of croc-clips on the phone-line.

So is it a serious field recorder? The AEQ DR-100 certainly takes its job seriously enough — the integrity of its recorded data is beyond question — but can it be taken seriously by its intended market? Primarily aimed at radio journalists for location acquisition, its over-sensitivity to handling noise in mic mode means that it performs best when fed with an external line source; which therefore requires daisy-chaining in another piece of kit even if that is only an in-line preamp for a decent mic. That could be seen as undoing the convenience of it being a small self-contained package.

We thought it was amazing when mobile phones shrank in size and started to take pictures; I'm just amazed that I can't make a phone call on this one. ■



PROS

Its quirky way of working may well give rise to a new breed of operator — the texting technician.

CONS

Beware of finger and thumb repetitive strain injury, or eye strain from attempting to edit on a tiny screen.

Contact

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