

Fostex CD500

Not another standalone CD-R machine we hear you cry, and you'd be right. This one offers BWF and CD-DA functionality in the same box and a build-quality that belies its price. **ZENON SCHOEPE** is suitably impressed.



INITIAL IMPRESSIONS ARE important because they set a tone of expectation. The Fostex CD500 feels and looks surprisingly good and could be described as a CD-R machine that is built the way they used to be built. One of the unfortunate themes of standalone CD-R, which applies to any established electrical item, is that as they became cheaper they also started to feel it. I regard the CD burning process as a mechanical one and obvious mechanical substance makes me feel better about things. The build quality is almost at odds with what we now expect — the switches are beautifully positive, the pots are smooth and tight to the fascia and the metalwork is thick and well fitted.

The front panel layout also indicates that this is a different take on the CD-R theme and if it is a repackaging exercise then Fostex has gone to great lengths to disguise it as I haven't seen another 'pro' device that resembles this box even slightly.

One of the reasons that the choice in standalone CD-Rs is now so reduced is that you can't buy a computer without an appropriate drive installed. The manufacturers have also largely saturated the market and will argue that most people who wanted a CD-R have probably got one now. However, standalone CD-Rs are still valid because they are so self-contained and a good one will also address all your related connectivity issues. Even so a new machine really ought to be offering something truly different to arouse interest and in this respect the CD500 does have an ace up its sleeve. Not only can it do the CD-R/RW thing but it is also first to offer direct Broadcast WAV recording to a UDF formatted disc at up to 24bit/96kHz resolution. This means you can export a BWF disc to a Windows PC for editing.

So it'll record at 44.1/16 for trad CD and for BWF it'll do 44.1/16, 44.1/24, 48/16, 48/24, 88.2/24 and 96/24. Try that on your run-of-the-mill PC CD-R drive.

The setup procedure is straightforward and involves preformatting for BWF and you'll be burning oversampled audio onto disc with ease simply because you can and because unlike hard disk, CD-R discs are pretty blinking cheap for what amounts to an instant archival and transfer medium.

Connectors on the back cover balanced XLR and unbalanced phono I-Os plus XLR digital and a GPI jack socket for fader starting. The front panel houses a (long relegated to the infrared remote) numerical keypad with a Memory Locate function, which means you can dial in and access a particular time on the disc. Not since the early CD-R machine bronze-age have such radical concepts been included.

Larger buttons instigate Record, Play and Stop but



I could not find any approximation of such common CD-R stalwarts as Pause, the indispensable Pause Mute or the ability to mark a track ID on the fly. I don't think that the lack of these features impacts upon the BWF side of the machine because by definition the audio will be going on to somewhere else afterwards. It only compromises the CD-DA operation because in this application I want the option of doing a tidy job just as I can on most other CD-R machines.

It's almost as if the breadth of the design challenge has established a slightly different set of priorities and some features have dropped off the end of the table as a result. But you can skip forward and backward through tracks and enjoy about the best quality Forward and Reverse latching cue I have heard on a CD machine. You can even perform a 'scrub' complete with waveform display using the dial to move along the timeline.

The display is unusual in employing a type of grid for the compartmentalisation of the info. It works well but I had to look hard and although you can adjust contrast you can't seem to adjust the brightness. The metering is fine with adjustable peak hold and you can change the reference level display at the base of the meters from -12dB or -20dB.

You also get centre-detented input level pots and a nice headphone circuit. And there's a USB port on the front for connecting a keyboard that allows direct access to certain menu layers and functions and allows you to name files in a far more comfortable fashion than the front panel keypad — but then the texter generation might disagree.

There are a variety of ways to select a track for playback and a variety of playback modes — All Play, Single Play, Program Play and Memory Play — all of which puzzle me because Fostex has not shirked in this department yet has not joined up all the dots for the complete CD-DA recording functionality experience.

There is nothing wrong with 44.1/16 providing it is done well and in practical terms, for the majority of our target audiences, it is either good enough or already too good for the destination reproduction systems. However, in the professional arena there

are times when you'd like to think you could offer higher resolution and that has traditionally involved hard disk recorders of a permanent, standalone or portable nature. Providing it's stereo, then there's now the CD500 to consider. From a 700Mb disc, at worst you'll get around 20 minutes at 96/24 and some 66 minutes at 44.1/16 BWF compared to the standard circa 79 minutes of CD-DA. You can close your BWFs or finalise the disc up permanently.

The CD500 has been a genuine delight. I was expecting some last of line CD-R dressed up to pull but what I found was a unit that I didn't think anybody was ever going to make and with an unusually high build quality. For the price (UK£339 + VAT), I think it represents outstanding value.

You'll be drawn to the CD500 because of its BWF ability and as such there's nothing that can touch it. I wouldn't have any reservations about taking this box and a pair of pres out for stereo recording — I could live with 40 minutes at 48/24 for 25p. There are of course different ways that you could apply it but at its most basic it's very winning. I would have liked to have had a few more of the bells and whistles included that I have become accustomed to with other standalone CD-Rs, but the omission of these doesn't spoil the CR500 for me, it just means it's not perfect.

I'd go so far as to say that if you're looking for a standalone CD-R at the moment then this is the one you should investigate first and then judge all other contenders against it. ■

PROS BWF functionality; fantastic build-quality; superb package of performance; incredible price.

CONS No Pause, Mute Pause or manual track ident entry lets down the CD-DA side.

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