

GETTING Ahead

Andrew Harrison investigates Aiwa's £150 AD-F850 three-head cassette deck.

Given the specification of this deck, and then the price, I found myself doing a double-take.

Less than £150 for a three-head, dual-capstan cassette recorder? But yes, that is the enviable niche this Aiwa AD-F850 fills. Time was when, as a fiscally-deficient student, I was forever scouting the classifieds for a successor to my smoked Teac - the acceptance criteria being great sound, a stable mechanism, off-tape monitoring and discreet looks. And this Aiwa might have been The One, if it had been an option at the time.

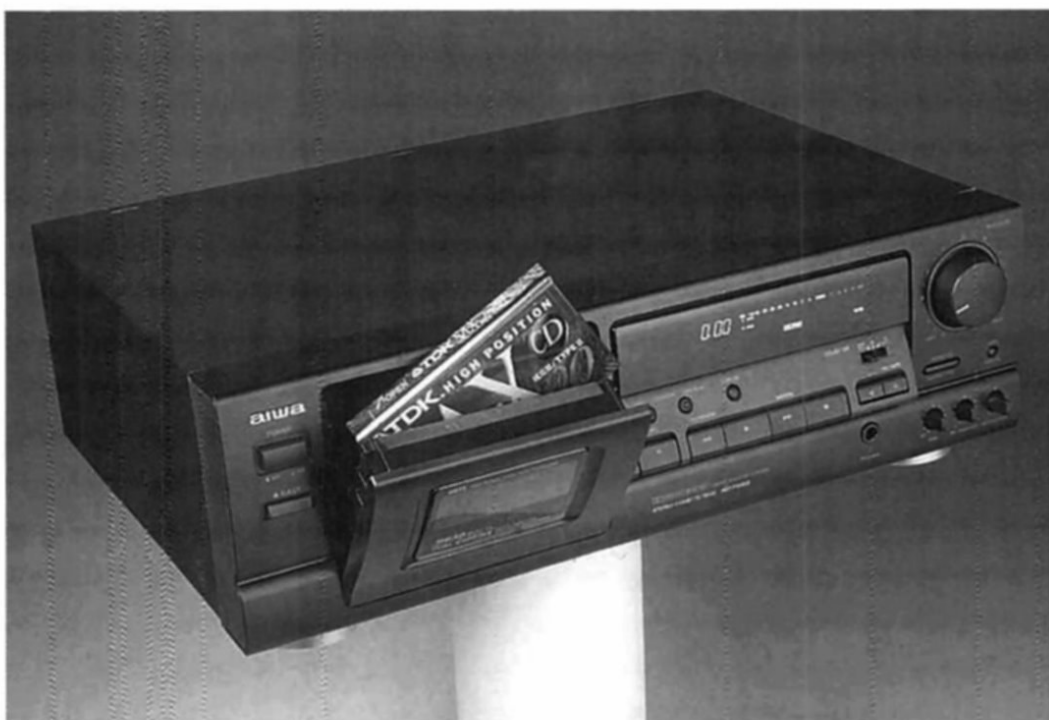
Performance-oriented features this machine can usefully boast include the dual-capstan transport for improved pitch stability; three separate heads for erase, playback and recording; bias tuning for tape matching; and Dolby HX Pro to extend high frequency headroom.

When recording, you'll find that the peak level meters light up to 16 segments a channel (although, typical of 99% of all decks, the 'minus infinity' LED is constantly lit). The entire display can even be switched off. (Purists may like to note that sound quality remained indifferent to the state of illumination).

To keep the vipers at bay, Dolby B and C noise-reduction systems are fitted, as is an MPX filter. I was also pleased to discover a tape counter running in minutes and seconds. Alas, this 'linear counter' is a kind of pseudo-real-time counter which only approximates elapsed playing times. More useful perhaps was a music search facility, an almost compulsory feature for analogue tape in a digital age.

SOUNDING OFF

On pre-recorded tapes the AD-F850 was accomplished. It may not have been as master tape-ish as a high-end machine, but clear, smooth musical renditions were the order of



the day.

Lesley Garrett soared above the Philharmonia Orchestra on her Prima Donna album, only an occasional climax causing her to lose her way. Then again, on my reference Nakamichi CR4 the same peaks are only just cleared without troubling the ear doctor.

One of my most treasured pre-recordeds, Kyung Wha Chung's 1972 performance of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto, suffered from a reduced sound stage behind a less articulate solo violin, but this is a minor criticism of an otherwise worthy replaying.

FOR THE RECORD

Recordings made on chrome and metal tapes (Sony Metal ES, Maxell UDII Chrome) were exemplary on the Aiwa and obviously benefited from the manual bias current and record level sensitivity adjustments. A softening of cymbal harmonics was one indication of whether source or tape was being monitored.

Thanks to the HX Pro, Ferrics too proved quite extended after a little

tuning. The instruction manual even lists over 70 different tape types with guidelines on necessary bias levels. This kind of tweakability shows the AD-F850's potential as an enthusiast's machine - it rewards attention to fine tuning.

Recording from radio is much easier with a three-head deck than a two-head one. Because you don't get the opportunity to replay the same piece of source material while checking levels, the recording process is speeded up if levels can be monitored and adjusted 'on the hoof' like this.

In day to day use the Aiwa proved an easy deck to live with. You could gripe about the lightweight construction, the agricultural 'clonks' of the mechanism jumping to life and the pointless AMTS light (why waste a display light on telling people that inside the door lurks an Anti-Modulation Tape Stabiliser?) At the back of my mind though I could hear the price tag as it swung to the sounds of a very capable cassette deck. Analogue recording lives healthily on in the AD-F850 ●

Aiwa AD-F850 £149.95

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WORLD VERDICT

⊕⊕⊕⊕
No Dolby S, but three heads and two capstans make the AD-F850 a bargain.

Measured Performance
see p111

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