

Gadgets: Sony MiniDisc Recorder MZ-M100

Have you ever wished you had recorded what a client said, either on the telephone or at an interview? Perhaps you have recorded clients, but with an out-of-date microcassette recorder. Microcassettes are hard to transcribe, categorize and store. Sony released the MZ-M100, a portable digital recorder that puts all the others to shame (including those in its own line).

Ease of Use

Although the 118-page manual is daunting, you don't need to read it all the way through to use the MZ-M100. It takes only about an hour to understand the unit's various components — both hardware and software — and to get it working. At 3-square inches by 3-quarter inches thick, the unit fits neatly in a briefcase, purse or pocket. Unlike most digital recorders that use memory cards, the MZ-M100 uses Sony's proprietary M100 discs. These M100 discs contain up to 1GB of data, which translates up to 34 hours of recording time at the Hi-Lower Speed setting. Unlike memory cards, the M100 discs are cheap: They cost about \$7 each, so it's inexpensive to dedicate one to each legal case if you don't want to fill up your hard drive with transcriptions.

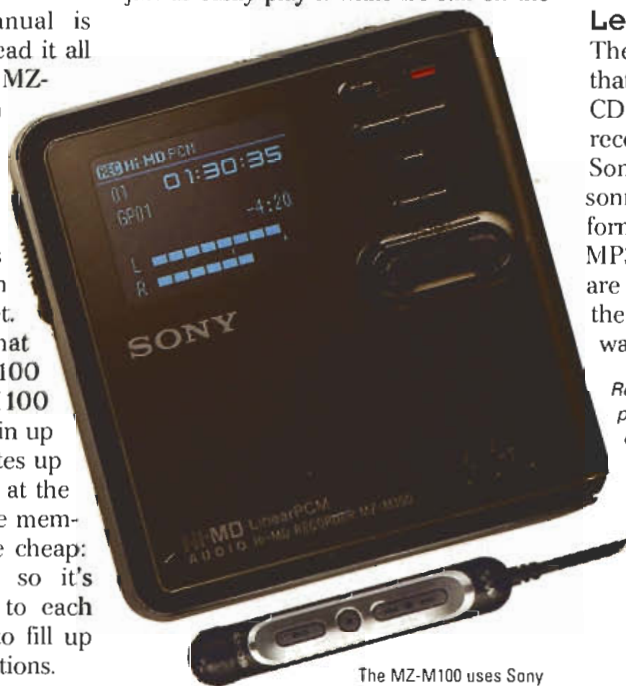
The player comes with a stereo microphone, which connects to the unit by a detachable wire. If you unplug the microphone from the wire, you can attach it directly to the unit for quick recordings. However, since there are potentially noisy moving parts in this recorder (the spinning MiniDisc), Sony advises you to attach the microphone using its wire rather than plugging it directly in to the unit. The MZ-M100 doesn't have the more convenient built-in condenser microphone, and I assume this is due to that sensitivity.

Software

Although the MZ-M100 is strictly a recording device and not originally meant for transcription use, I used Sony's SonicStage software to transfer a sound file to my computer for storage or transcription. After you connect the recorder

with the supplied universal serial bus cable and install the software, you can run the program. It immediately recognizes the unit. Then, you can copy sound files to the hard drive.

By default, Sony saves the files in one of its proprietary compressed file formats; however, you can specify to also save it as an industry-standard Waveform Audio Format file. If you don't want to transfer the WAV file to your hard drive, you can just as easily play it while it's still on the



The MZ-M100 uses Sony MiniDiscs and includes a microphone.

unit. The MZ-M100 gets power from the USB connection. By merely connecting the unit to the USB port, you are recharging its nickel metal hydride battery.

Unlike the software that comes with Olympus digital recorders, Sony's SonicStage isn't designed to be transcription software. You can't slow or speed up the player, and you can't use a foot switch with it. These omissions can be annoying if, for example, you want to slow down the speaker's voice to keep up with your typing. To get around this problem, program the software to save all incoming files to the WAV format automatically. Then, use a third-party transcriber such as the Start Stop Universal Transcription System by HTH Engineering Inc.

Recording Quality

The quality of the recorded material is astounding. If you set the sensitivity to high, you can pick up every sound in a small room. If you frequently record group meetings, you might want to purchase a microphone stand for optimal pickup. This unit also has been engineered to record music, although I am not sure why (perhaps to produce demo CDs).

Let There be Music

The quality of the sound is so good that you can transfer music from a CD onto the MiniDisc and use the recorder as a personal stereo player. Sony's Atrac3 compressed format is sonically superior to the popular MP3 format, although you also can transfer MP3 files to the unit. So, next time you are walking to the courthouse, fire up the Sony MZ-M100 and make that walk entertaining. **LOC**

Reviewed by Peter Bates, founder and president of Bates Communications, a desktop publishing and Web design company in Boston.

Closing Argument

Pros: Records and plays back sound with extraordinary fidelity. Can play music. Provides many features and uses Sony MiniDiscs.

Cons: Record and play buttons are small. The traveling case isn't a true protective case. No condenser microphone.

Verdict: If you do a lot of client interview recording, this is a good choice. It's the best portable recorder I have seen. However, you must purchase good transcription software elsewhere.

MiniDisc Recorder MZ-M100

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Price: \$439.95.

Windows 98/ME/XP/2000.