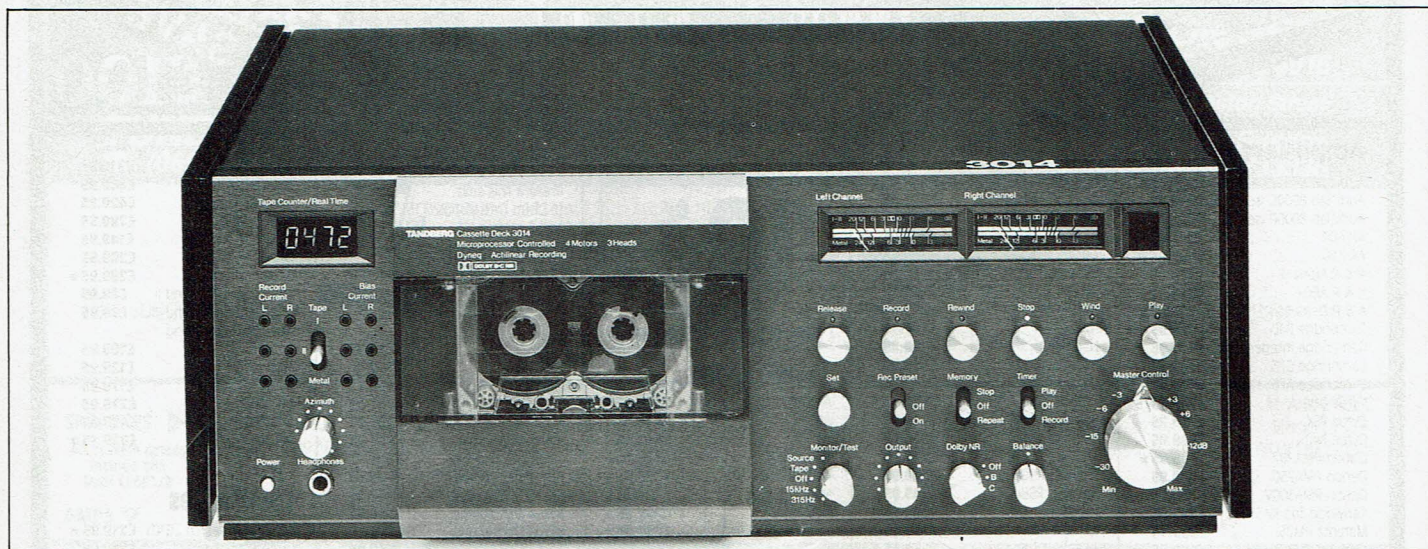


ANALOGUE ANSWERS



High-end cassette decks may be under threat from digital media, but Tandberg's 3014A puts up a pretty strong fight. Review by Ken Kessler

THE SCENE: It's late 1987 and DAT machines are flooding the market. The combined might of the various record companies couldn't stop them, and consumers wanted them. You're shopping for a record/playback system and money isn't too much of a problem. The DAT machines all cost a shade under a grand. Which one do you choose?

Then you see this whacking great black box which looks so mean that you know it'll do it all and probably last forever. You want it simply because it says, 'I'm ba-a-ad'. You see the price tag: £1650.

Then you realise that it's an analogue cassette deck. . .

Tandberg's TCD 3014A just might be the very last Great Analogue Cassette Deck. If DAT does happen – and I'm certain it will – the combination of superb sound quality, compact size, and clever facilities impossible to install in analogue tape systems will probably help it to annihilate analogue cassette deck sales above the budget sector. (I doubt that DAT machines will ever go much below £250, if VCR pricing is anything by which to judge.) Because of this, it's unlikely that even the most committed cassette deck manufacturers – Tandberg, Revox, Nakamichi, Aiwa, and TEAC – will bother developing more advanced analogue units when true digital is available for a lot less than their high-end efforts. Analogue cassette will stay with us until the end of the century – there are a lot of personal hi-fi's, car players, and prerecorded tapes out there – but few consumers will be prepared to spend the cost of a DAT machine on a conventional cassette deck. With these clues, I can't see £300-plus cassette decks having much more than three or four years of viability in the marketplace. It is a replay of the open-reel vs. cassette situation, which means that the battle could take decades.

On the other hand, first-time buyers do not usually plump for £1000-plus cassette or DAT decks, so it's probably safe to assume that customers for big bucks decks have been serious about tape use for some time. It means that they have either a large collection of self-recorded tapes or a fair number of prerecordeds, and – judging by the cost of DAT blanks – they probably won't be inclined to transfer the lot (complete with low-level tape hiss) to the new format.

Let's use some very basic costings to show why – until at least the end of the decade – this £1650 cassette deck is still a sensible purchase for a high-end user. With DAT machines costing about half that of the TCD 3014A's price for at least another year, there's an £800 differential which screams 'GO DAT!!!' But then you look at blank tape prices and figure out that it will cost something like £750 to transfer 100 C-90s to DAT – and 100 cassettes is a pretty small library for somebody ready for an £800 deck (I don't even use cassettes all that often, yet I have over 400 tapes of off-air broadcasts.) And that doesn't even take into account the time and effort required to do the transferring, a task most people find odious. On top of that, the analogue cassette deck purchaser can choose from all manner of prerecorded cassettes to keep feeding into the machine. Add to that the time span before prerecorded DATs are available in sufficient numbers (if

ever), and you can see why a strong case remains for a £1650 cassette deck, even on grounds of economy.

I wanted to present this non-sonic case for the Tandberg before delving into its performance because I'm convinced that sheer practicality is a strong enough argument in its favour. While DAT may prove to sound better, it could also prove to be a marginal improvement, and the music I heard while playing the Tandberg was good enough to preclude asking for more. With stunning performance, low-running costs, and lots of prerecorded tapes to back it up, the Tandberg could be the ultimate purchase for the serious cassette user – especially one already in possession of a decent library. It's a means for exploiting all of the existing software, while making new recordings on affordable tape until blank DATs become cheap and plentiful. A sledgehammer to crack a nut, perhaps, but at least you know the damned nut is pulverised.

When you first examine the Tandberg's tidy faceplate, you wonder where all the features have gone. Aside from tiny screw holes for manually fine-tuning the tape settings, and controls involving other tape matching and monitoring procedures, the deck seems sparse. Any £399 Japanese wonder will have twice the facilities and three times the controls, or so it seems. Then you do the sensible thing and read the owner's manual, which tells you that Tandberg endowed this with every necessary facility and then some, the 'invisible' functions accessible by combinations of controls rather than having dedicated buttons for each step. Aside from auto-reverse and playback azimuth adjust (more about that in a bit), this deck leaves nothing out bar the most trivial of gimmicks; it just doesn't advertise the full complement on the fascia.

The left-hand section houses the tape counter (revolutions and real-time), the aforementioned screw adjusters for record and bias currents, the record azimuth adjust, on/off, and the headphone socket. The next section is the opening for the cassette, which has a removable dust cover. The remainder of the fascia contains large needle-type meters with separate scales for Type I/II and Type IV tapes, the window to receive commands from the optional remote, the basic transport controls plus a button called 'Release', a button labelled 'Set', record selector, memory selector, timer control, tape monitor switch (coupled with the test tone selector for making adjustments) for off-tape monitoring, output control, Dolby B/C selector, and a master record level control coupled with a balance control.

The back panel houses fixed (700mV) and variable outputs, record inputs with variable sensitivity, MPX filter switch, and a playback EQ selector choosing between 'Automatic' and '70µs', the latter needed for Type III tapes or other aberrations. Styling, as the photo shows, is no-nonsense Euro-Tech; I think it's gorgeous, even without the optional wooden end-cheeks.

Aside from the 'Release' button, which disengages the transport for tape removal (and is selected automatically in most modes when the tape ends), and the 'Set' button which is used for memory functions, basic

Isn't the audiophile market, such an omission is hard to accept. That aside, the TCD 3014A proved a joy to use, both in terms of feel and ergonomics as well as sonic delivery. Never one to go ga-ga over cassette decks, I was shocked to find myself musing about this item as a prime source. Okay, so I'm lucky enough to have a steady stream of absolutely terrific real-time copies of new releases courtesy of the record companies, which do indeed 'blow away' the commercial copies, but even the over-the-counter tapes sounded better than I expected. Good enough for a staple diet? You bet.

The most telling thing about this machine was not the detail, or the solid bass, or even the wonderfully clear, untainted top end. Rather, what staggered me was the absolute control it imparted over the music, conveying solidity and correct tempo and spot-on pitch. With the nastiest cassette test in the world - solo piano - I couldn't detect even the slightest trace of flutter. Comparing the Tandberg copy onto Maxell XLIIS of the Chopin Waltz (Track 11, *HN/RR* Test Disc) with the CD was a revelation, a far cry from what I had imagined possible. With this deck, there was no need to make allowances for the alleged inferiority of the format - it was that close.

This unauthorised use of A/B testing exposed only one trait which would help the listener to identify the copy, and that was tape noise so buried in the background that I could only be certain of my findings while listening via headphones. (Which reminds me: the TCD 3014A's headphone amp is superb, and even drives the Whatfedale Isodynamics to healthy levels.) The solo test for a cassette deck's recording capabilities is whether or not the copy can be readily distinguished from the original. If DAT does prove 95%. As for playback of tapes made on other machines - prerecorded or home-made - the Tandberg is peerless for 80% of the time. I'm sorry, but there's just no way that you won't find the occasional listeners, I didn't come up with any which were unlistenable, only those which I know could have sounded slightly better.

Even so, this unit performed like a fine analogue turntable for resolving detail, dimensionality, texture, and - above all else - music. There was no nagging sensation that I was listening to an allegedly mundane storage medium, no constant reminders of being a generation away from material which I copied. Given a spare £1650, I'd be writing a cheque out this very minute. Even though I still lack a player in my car. ●

TEST RESULTS

Wav & Flutter*	Record/playback, peak DIN weighted	Record/playback, unweighted	Wav & drift	Signal/Noise and Distortion, CCIR/ARM Wid with recommended tapes at negligible
0.09%	0.12%	0.09%	0.12%	negligible
TANDBERG 3014A				
Type I (Maxell XLIIS)	49.5	59.5	68.5	1.35% THD
Type II (Maxell XLIIS)	51.5	61.0	69.0	1.9% THD
Type IV (Maxell MX)	55.0	64.5	73.0	3.5% THD

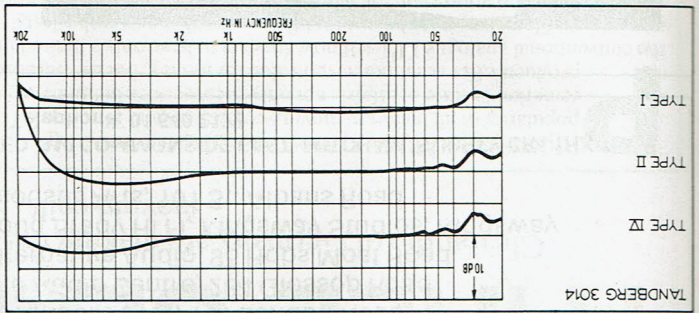
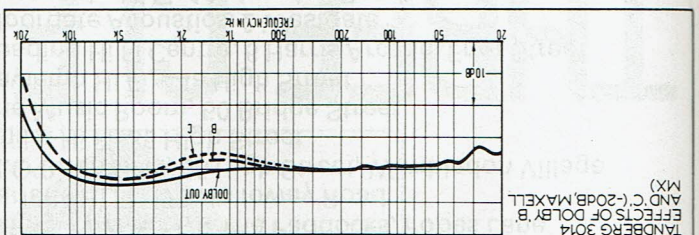
*dependent on tape position; figure given is near middle of a C90. Results are better at beginning, worse at end.

Tan Audio, PO Box 31, Chichester, West Sussex. Tel (0243) 56342.

operation is straightforward enough to allow you to just pop in a tape and make music. Record, too, is simple, the only unique step being the selecting of 'Record On' with the toggle marked 'Rec Preset', a safety feature harking back to open-reel machines. The logic of the machine is such that you can go direct from play to record or vice versa without stopping the tape.

Where it gets complicated is in the sub-functions, and here the manual is a must. By pressing or holding the 'Wind' and 'Rewind' buttons, or using them in conjunction with 'Play', you can alter the speed, engage cueing, and even 'rock' the tape if you're dexterous. The counter shows more than time or position, by indicating calibration mode when you change tape lengths and set the machine for real-time mode.

Selecting a tape is straightforward if you use the factory set-up of Maxellis XLIIS, XLIIS, or MX. To fine-tune for other brands, there are the potentiometers used in tandem with 315 and 15kHz tones. All tapes should be optimised for record azimuth; this takes mere seconds with the azimuth knob, 15kHz signal, and an eye to the meters. It's here, though, that I find



my sole complaint about the TCD 3014A. Lack of auto-reverse aside (something I consider nice but not essential), the failure to include playback azimuth adjustment puzzled me. Tandberg argues that 80% or more of all prerecorded tapes will fall well within the setting of the deck, something pretty much confirmed by sampling a mix of 30 commercial and homemade tapes. I genuinely could not fault the playback of the majority of these non-TCD 3014A recordings. On the other hand, there were enough tapes in my collection - and this is obviously not Tandberg's fault - which would have benefited from azimuth fine-tuning to beg the need for this facility in a deck of this price and calibre. As prerecorded tapes grab more and more of the market (even if it

BOOKS

Stendhal; he is equally right, in the light of small evidence, merely to suggest the gloomy and depressive tendencies of the man; and he avoids trying to trace the wit and sentiment of his familiar style to any one source in his life. All the same, the first section of a faithful inevitably finds him involved in a faithful catalogue of first performances - as indeed does Julian Budden's life of Verdi. Both writers find means to vary the procedure - Budden clear and concise on illustrating background detail (copyright laws, conductor's status, the rise of the *scapigliatura milanese*), Osborne aptly taking advantage of Rossini's early retirement from operatic composition to sketch-in the host of the Paris *soirées*. And both, of course, have a knowledge and love of the operas second to none; in each, the discussion of the works shines with articulate and unusual selection of representative detail. Barry Millington's ability to distil a wealth of information on that most private figures as Rossini and Verdi. Richard Osborne is probably right to dismiss the image of Rossini as *vieux roccoco* and *bon viveur* - those who want the questionable anecdote can turn to

and a separate treatment of early music ensembles and performers. Entries in this massive tome are free, but are checked carefully before publication. James Jolly writes about the 'Record Year' with other contributions on music topics by leading writers. This great Yearbook has already proved its value to me in finding information. *Donald Aldous*

ROSSINI by Richard Osborne. 350pp. Hard covers. Price £14.95.

VERDI by Julian Budden. 404pp. Soft covers. Price £4.95.

WAGNER by Barry Millington. 342pp. Soft covers. Price £4.95. *ibid.*

Published by Dent (Master Musicians). Aldine House, 33 Welbeck Street, London W1M 8LX.

Given the Jamesian precept that 'the artist's life is his work', the *Master Musicians* tradition of sunderring the two can cause problems - especially when you have two such obstinately private figures as Rossini and Verdi. Richard Osborne is probably right to dismiss the image of Rossini as *vieux roccoco* and *bon viveur*. Two new sections tackle jazz, folk and light music.

BRITISH MUSIC YEARBOOK, 707pp plus an index. Price £9.95. Published by Rhinogold Publishing Ltd, 241 Shaftsbury Avenue, London WC2H 8EH.

This is the 1987 edition of this indispensable directory of British musical life, plus overseas competitions and festivals. My congratulations to Marianne Barton, Editor, and her assistant Jacqueline Fowler, for tackling the mammoth task of keeping this 13th edition up-to-date. The sections cover a survey of the 1985/86 musical scene, offices and societies (with information on associations, organisations for the disabled, music clubs, new to this edition), professional services (including recording studios, press offices etc), performers, festivals and competitions, trade (record companies, critics and journalists), education (libraries and museums) and music in places of worship. Two new sections tackle jazz, folk and light music.