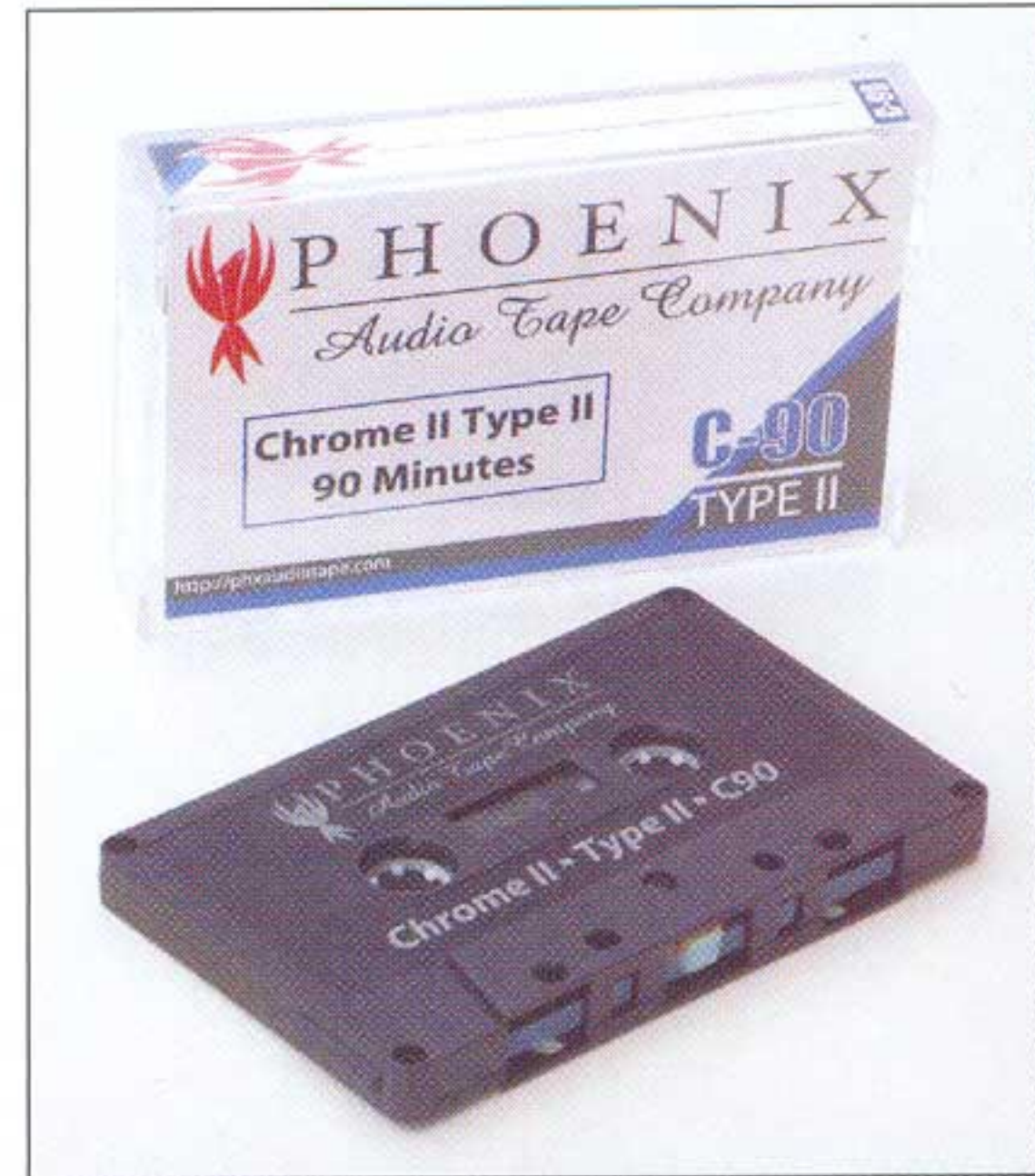


### PHOENIX CHROME II BLUE LABEL (II) £6 (C90)

Of all the tapes here, Phoenix Blue Label is the closest in measured performance to our TDK SA reference, with nearly identical sensitivity and noise figures. This makes it, according to the basics of cassette buying, a 'good' tape and one that should be capable of fine results in any deck that is in a reasonable state of adjustment. Although the tape itself is broadly on-par with SA, the same cannot be said for the cassette shell. It is made in the USA and despite being dimensionally accurate and properly screw assembled it doesn't seem to run as smoothly as the Japanese TDK offering. This didn't seem to impose itself on the recordings, but it did make the deck itself mechanically noisier, something that could be heard between pieces of music. In the Walkman Pro, Blue Label sounded similar to the SA reference with good sensitivity matching and clean treble performance, even at high recording levels. Clearly the story the measurements tell is true, the two tapes are electrically very similar.

One problem I did encounter however was a minor left/right channel imbalance on playback that none of the other tapes here displayed, I suspect this could be a sample fault. The Aiwa machine mirrored these results; additionally the forensic eye of the three head system identified a small amount of bass lift, giving recording a warm sound when compared directly to the original.

Phoenix Blue Label is an accurate and compatible tape that works well. However, for the same sort of money you can also buy TDK's SA which offers similar electrical performance but with more refined mechanicals. It is perhaps worth trying both to see which gives the best performance with your own equipment.



### DARKLAB CHROME (II) £4.50 (C90)

This contains Emtec (BASF) tape, well known in cassette's golden years for being less noisy than the Japanese pseudo-chromes but unfortunately less sensitive too, so it could give dull results when used in Japanese decks set up for TDK SA. The sensitivity of the Darklab tape was indeed lower than the TDK reference but not by

much, at only -0.7 dB it shouldn't be low enough to cause problems. The cassette is supplied in a plain case with no labels yet its tinted shell, black hubs and gold screws still give it an attractive appearance. The mechanics were much smoother running than the Phoenix cassettes in this test; in fact they were nearly as quiet as the TDK SA reference. Smooth running cassettes offer a number



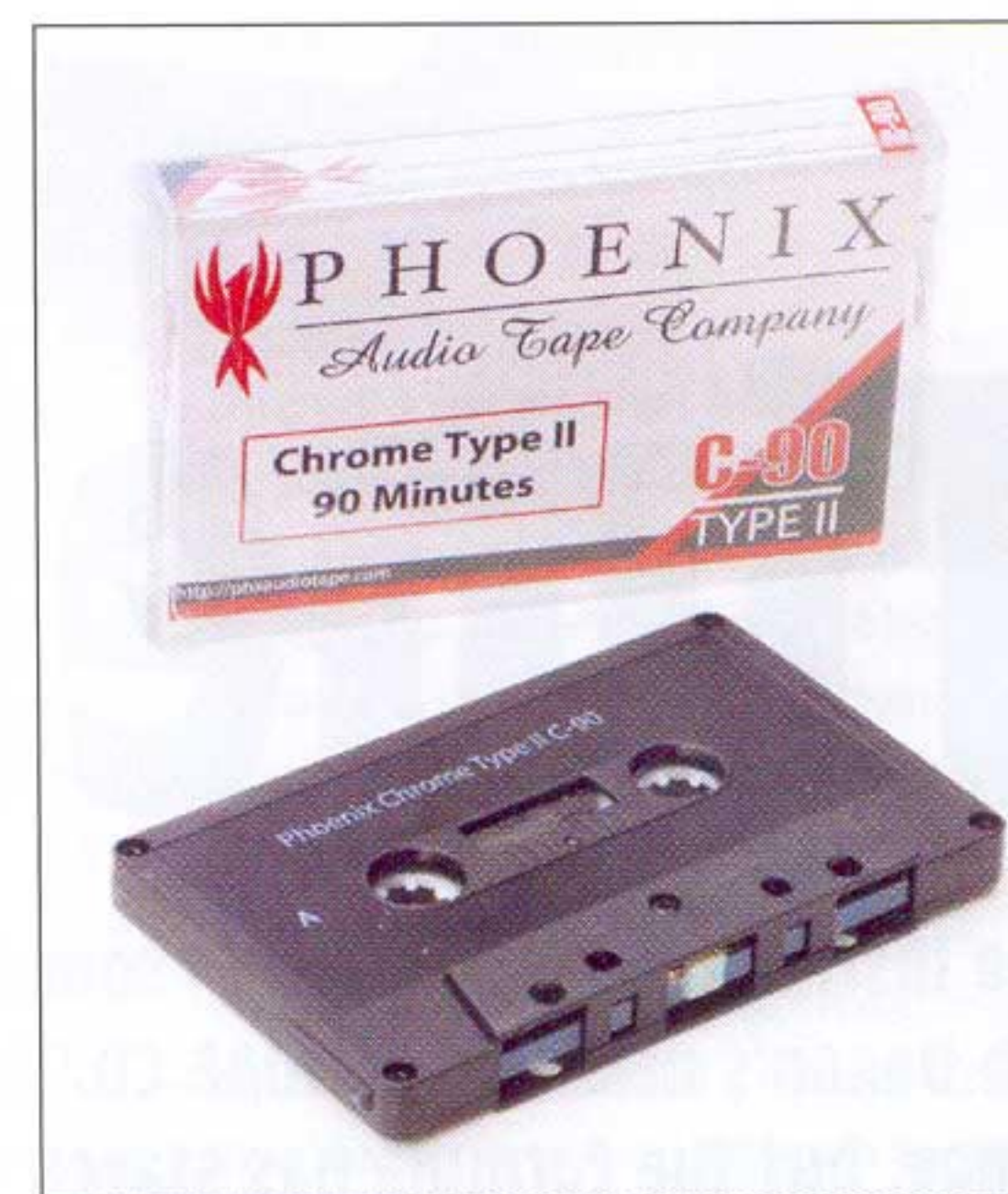
of benefits, the most important being that the more freely the tape runs the better the wow and flutter performance the recorder will be able to achieve. Mechanically quiet cassettes are also an advantage if the mechanism of your cassette deck is audible in your listening room, not all tape noise comes out of the loudspeakers!

In the Sony Walkman the Darklab tape was observed to give a very slight LF boost when compared to the TDK SA reference and recordings were notably quieter on playback than they were with the other tapes. This didn't seem to introduce a Dolby tracking error however and the main body of the sound was subjectively neutral. The Darklab Chrome's main strength was treble insight; in this area it was the best tape here. I suspect that the smooth tape transport plays at least some part in this impressive result. The Aiwa AD-F770 gave similar results, the automatic tuning system being unable to compensate for the bass lift but eliminating the sensitivity difference completely. Strangely, noise was slightly higher than the SA reference but only by a small amount, you could never call the Darklab a hissy tape.

At its modest price Darklab Chrome offers excellent value for money. It seemed to work best with the Aiwa machine and therefore I would recommend it most strongly to owners of self-calibrating or manually adjustable cassette decks where in my experience it can really shine. All you need then is paper to make some labels and inlay cards...

### PHOENIX CHROME II RED LABEL (II) £3.50 (C90)

Phoenix Red Label is their cheaper Type II tape but despite this it seems to use the same American-made shell as the more expensive Blue Label version. In fact if you buy both you'd have to be careful not to mix them up, the printing on the cassette shell is different but not in such a way that



you could easily work out which is which! The Red Label tape has the lowest sensitivity of any Type II tape in this test at -0.8 dB and it is also marginally the noisiest. As with the Blue Label the mechanics are fair but

nowhere near as smooth running as the TDK SA reference, the tape sounding mechanically noisy in both of the test recorders.

The Red Label may be the cheapest tape here but when recording high energy pop music its sound was impressively neutral in the Sony; overall the recording conveyed an identical tonal balance to that of the source, quite an achievement for a budget cassette! Treble was vivid, although it seemed to lack the refinement that the Darklab Chrome could achieve. A word of caution is needed at this point however, the TDK SA reference did sound slightly rolled off at the extreme high frequency end when recorded in the Walkman, so it may be in some recorders than the Phoenix Red Label tape sounds a little bright. Recording in the self-calibrating Aiwa again gave a sound that was subjectively neutral and again the cassette was well liked.

Even though it is the cheapest tape here the Phoenix Red Label works very well and can be recommended for fixed calibration recorders as well as adjustable ones. Experience shows that budget tapes and budget recorders work well together so if you have a combination unit or a basic cassette deck then Red Label is well worth trying. Don't dismiss it for high end machines either though!