

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

These words, penned so eloquently by Charles Dickens to describe the turbulent times that preceded the French Revolution, best describe my recent experience with the U.S. version of the exalted European Becker Traffic Pro.

The worst of times: Being forced to install a “universal” version of the Traffic Pro rather than the BMW specific unit sold just about everywhere but here in the United States. But as I soon discovered, a name isn’t everything. Beneath the lesser-known Harman/Kardon Traffic Pro name was an excellent navigation system that is about so much more than navigating through traffic. Stay tuned to learn more about the incredible functionality of this unit.

Ironically, my first experience with the Traffic Pro was with a BMW Traffic Pro and not the unit I was “forced” to buy here in the states – the Harman/Kardon Traffic Pro. See: <http://www.mytrafficpro.com> and [http://www.mytrafficpro.com/roundel\\_reprint.pdf](http://www.mytrafficpro.com/roundel_reprint.pdf)

In the U.S., the Traffic Pro is sold as a Harman/Kardon unit for brand recognition while the rest of the world gets the much more recognized Becker name. See: <http://www.becker.de/> In case you didn’t know, Becker makes OEM head units for BMW, Mercedes, Porsche, Ferrari and many other respected companies. The parent company for all of the above is Harman International.

I know, I know, you’re probably wondering why this review is titled: *Harman/Kardon Traffic Pro Review – The Real Review* rather than a review of the BMW Traffic Pro mentioned above. To make a long story short, it seems that Becker of North America did in fact make what turned out to be a futile attempt to private label this unit for the ever so pompous BMW of North America. As a result of BMW NA’s shortsightedness, we’re currently left with no other option but to buy a “universal” version of the Traffic Pro rather than a BMW specific unit. I guess that’s what we (collectively: “the most powerful BMW consumers in the world”) get for our unwavering commitment to BMW NA, namely *nothing*.

While the rest of the world (which includes BMW, Porsche, Mercedes and the like) can in fact buy a manufacturer *specific* Traffic Pro, we have been ostracized to the parallel world of afterthoughts. This translates into units that do not match in color, are incompatible with BMW OEM CD changers, have the same general instructions for BMW owners as well as owners of the highly coveted Yugo Cabriolet, and wire harness adapters that were marked so randomly I actually thought of making an appointment with my physician to be tested for dyslexia. This is obviously the “worst of times” part of my review.

When I finally decided to take the plunge and lay down \$1,500 smack-dab, the Traffic Pro website directed me to <http://www.crutchfield.com> to buy the “install it yourself” kit. This gets you a few additional perks such as a free \$100 gift certificate, the “appropriate” wiring harness, and a dash kit for your vehicle (assuming your car needs

it). My salesperson, Jenny, told me “exactly” what I needed and recommended that I go with the red display to best match my BMW display. In all honesty, she did say that it would not be a perfect match. In retrospect I would now choose the “yellow” display for contrast rather than be annoyed that the red display is not an exact match. For the life of me I can’t figure out why they didn’t give us the dual illumination (yellow/red) version that Becker offers in Europe.

While it may be true that the salespeople are very nice at Crutchfield, the wiring harness/connector supplied with the unit was essentially a cut and splice version. The connector used to mate up with the OEM wire harness was of inferior quality and, as mentioned above, did not match with the corresponding wires for the factory harness. The installation manual does give you the information for each pin of the Traffic Pro. This requires you to manually match up each wire to the corresponding BMW harness wire. They don’t make it easy, especially when the instructions don’t tell you where your car reverse wire/signal is located and frustrate you by giving you a total of a four inch wire used to connect to it.

Overall, the instructions from Crutchfield were less than what I would expect for the money. Both Harman/Kardon and Crutchfield need to put together a better package if they want this to fly. Splicing in wires on my BMW was *not* an option. This kit needs to be easily reversible. Many people lease their cars and may either want to take the unit out for their new car or possibly even sell it to recoup some of their investment. Furthermore, requiring the average installer to call Harman/Kardon support just to figure out where to find the reverse wire and speed signal (assuming it’s not on the radio) is probably not a good idea. One should call support as a last resort and not to find out basic information. And since shade-tree mechanics tend to leave these types of projects for the weekend, their enthusiasm might sour very quickly when they discover they can’t get support on the weekend.

Given the fact that there are only a handful of people that are as anal (or even more anal) than me, I figured I’d call my friend Ron Stygar to make up a custom cable for me along with letting me install it in his pristine heated garage. The \$90 I spent on this cable was the only item I needed for a quick and easy plug-n-play installation. The fact that Ron had the original BMW instructions for the European version of the Traffic Pro also made it a lot less stressful.

It seems that Harman/Kardon recently added another purchase option which allows you to buy the Traffic Pro with free professional installation. Not sure who the professional installer is but all can say is *Caveat Emptor!* After installation, we were now directed to proceed with calibrating the unit. Unless you’re a glutton for frustration, I can’t emphasize enough the importance of reading the installation guide carefully before you attempt to use the Traffic Pro. It certainly would have saved us some time.

Harman/Kardon says that the Traffic Pro “is the most highly refined example of a sophisticated new breed of fully integrated navigation system.” I have to say that once you get over the installation and color display “issues,” the Traffic Pro is extremely well

thought out and relatively easy to use. Don't need a navigation system? That's like saying you always know what road you're on, always have the right map in your glove compartment, and have gas station attendants that are always willing to give you the "right" directions. We don't need automatic transmissions, air conditioning, or even power windows for that matter. So why do we get them? They make driving more pleasurable and less stressful. A navigation system is no different.

To refer to the Traffic Pro as a navigation system would be an injustice. It is a highly refined radio, CD player, CD controller for a CD changer, traffic programmer, and last but not least, an excellent navigation system. So let's get to the best of times part of the review: the functionality of this unit.

The basic layout of this unit is a standard DIN sized receiver with an extra large display in the center. Clockwise, there is a Left Control Knob (info/volume), ON/OFF Key, Tone Key, Traffic Program Key, select CD button, select Radio button, select Navigation button, CD eject button (which controls the detachable faceplate), right control knob ("OK"), ten (10) Multifunction buttons (directly below the display but a bit difficult to see at night).

In terms of general operation, turning the unit on and off is self-explanatory. There is one slight difference between the OEM BMW units. If the unit is still on and you switch the ignition off, it remains on for three (3) additional seconds unless you press the ON key, in which case the unit remains on for one (1) hour and then it turns off automatically.

By pressing the Tone Key you activate some of the basic adjustments associated with all radios such as the Bass, Treble, Fader, Balance, Filter (i.e., Flat Tone), Subwoofer, and Loudness settings. A nice feature not found on our factory head units is that the Bass, Treble, Fader, Balance and Loudness is each saved separately for all the different modes (FM, AM, Traffic Reports, Navigation Messages, Telephone, CD, and CD Changer).

The navigation system is relatively intuitive even if you've never used one before. Two (2) CDs cover the United States. Once you press the Navigation Key and confirm that you've read the warning not to program a destination while driving, you are greeted with four (4) options: i. Destination (used to program a new destination), ii. Destination Memory (previously stored destinations), iii. Points of Interest (P.O.I.), and iv. Last Destinations (up to fifty (50)). You scroll through the menu by turning the Right Control Knob and confirm by pressing "OK." For a new destination, you first program the town and then the street (or centers in a town). If the same town exists in more than one state, you will be prompted to choose a state. When you're entering an address, only the letters, digits, and symbols needed to complete a destination are displayed which can be selected and confirmed with the Right Control Knob or the corresponding Multifunction Key.

Once you enter a complete destination, the Route Menu allows you several options. You can either Start a Fast Route or Short Route calculation (last one used is

displayed); Save Destination; input a specific House Number; an Intersection; or program Route Settings. The Route Setting menu allows you to choose between Fast Route, Short Route, or a Restrictions submenu of with/without Highway, Ferries, or Tolls. This is very nice indeed! The manual recommends “Short Route” for larger cities or metropolitan areas. When you’ve completed your destination and options, you can then confirm with the Right Control Knob at which time the Traffic Pro begins to calculate your route. A blinking “CD” light on the display indicates that the unit is still calculating the route. Once complete, the unit greets you in a male or female voice depending on what you choose in the User Option menu. I chose the sexy-voiced woman from the U.K. (English GB) over the “Americanized” (English US) voice option.

“When operating the navigation system, please always remember that you are on the road.” That’s H/K’s way of telling you that for those of you who routinely apply common sense to driving, it would behoove you to continue to do so. To that end, the route guidance display and voice prompts are among the best I’ve seen in a navigation system. In large letters on the left side of the display the arrow (→) points to the next street at which you should turn. Just below that, in smaller letters, is the street you are currently driving on. The right side of the display shows different variations of arrows along with the number of miles (or yards) until that turn. When you’re close enough, the distance is substituted with a progress bar with the black part decreasing as you approach the intersection. All the above display information is confirmed with voice prompts such as: “Please follow the road,” “Keep right after 2 miles,” “Prepare to take a right,” “Please take a right in 100 yards,” and so on.

Low on gas? Hungry? Want to stop at a friend’s house or need to get to an airport? Just program a Stopover. Once you reach your Stopover, the Traffic Pro automatically guides you to your main destination. Stuck on the highway in a traffic jam? Just program in the length of the section to be avoided and the Traffic Pro calculates a detour route. Can’t tell you how many times that’s happened to me. Good job H/K! The navigation announcement has several different settings. You can have navigation only (current audio source is muted during announcement), a mix which allows adjustment +/- 6 dB, or independent volume levels for the audio and navigation.

Miss a turn or just don’t want to go the way the Traffic Pro is telling you? No worries... the system automatically calculates a new route. Know exactly where you want to start from but getting annoyed that the Traffic Pro insists you go its way? Just press the Left Control Knob and once the announcement begins, press it again and hold it till you see “speech announcement off.” Reactivate the sound by pressing the Left Control Knob again. There are so many other features/options that it would be unduly tedious to go through them all. Suffice it to say that you have other options such as displaying route settings, requesting current time, requesting current position, requesting a road list (allows you to scroll through the current road and road names up to the destination), and Points of Interest that are too numerous to name but I will name one. If food is one of your favorite points of interest and you are in an unfamiliar place looking for the nearest Italian restaurant, the Traffic Pro will list all nearby Italian restaurants and guide you to the smell of that mouthwatering marinara sauce!

There is one nice feature even when route guidance is not active. You can display the street you're on and the number of satellites you're tracking by pressing the Navigation Key and then the Left Control Knob. This is a very useful feature if you know the general area but can't find a street sign or perhaps it's too dark to see one.

The Radio Mode is activated with the Radio button. This displays FM, AM, Program Type (pty), Display (Dis), Regionalization (Reg), and Text (txt). The Traffic Pro is capable of receiving RBDS signals (Radio Broadcast Data System) which displays station broadcast information. Unfortunately this unit is not XM-capable which would have been a real nice feature. Perhaps some day?!?!

The FM band features four different display modes: DAS (Dynamic Autostore) Seek Qual.; DAS Seek Name; Station RDS, and Stations Fix. Abbreviated names for receivable stations are displayed above the multifunction keys and are arranged in descending signal strength or alphabetically for FM "DAS Seek Qual." and "DAS Seek Name" respectively. You can then choose the corresponding multifunction key to choose the station.

The Display button allows you change between program type (Pty on) or Frequency (Pty display off). This gives you the option to choose specific program types in FM DAS mode in which case only the stations with the particular Pty chosen can be selected. You also have the option to choose NO PTY and all stations will then be displayed. Examples of program types include Classical, Rock, News, Country and more.

Stations RDS mode displays and constantly switches to the best receivable frequency for the station. Station Fix is basically the equivalent to manual FM tuning. In both of these modes you can store up to 12 frequencies per waveband by holding down the multifunction key until you hear a confirming beep. The basic features for Scan and Search are all retained.

The Traffic Program (TP) feature is really quite interesting and presumably over time will be more popular with radio stations. If an RBDS station transmits traffic program announcements, you can have your current mode (CD, CD Changer, and AM) interrupted so that transmitted TP announcements can be played. You can also listen to one FM station while receiving TP announcements transmitted by another FM station.

There are two ways to select a TP Transmitter: automatic tracking or direct programming. Automatic always uses the current FM station as the TP transmitter. If the signal is too weak, the unit automatically searches for a new TP Transmitter. Direct programming allows you to choose a TP transmitter which is different from your current FM station. In all modes, you activate automatic tracking by pressing the TP button for more than two (2) seconds.

The Traffic Pro also features a telephone-muting option if a telephone system is installed in your car. The current program is muted and once you accept the call, the sound can be heard through you speaker system.

One final note about the radio: BMW factory units come with a diversity antenna which allows the OEM units to automatically switch between two antennas on the car depending on the signal strength. This feature works quite well but is not found on the Harman/Kardon Traffic Pro. In fact, nearly all aftermarket radios do not have diversity since it is a BMW specific option. So the fact that the Traffic Pro does not have this feature should not surprise anyone. I must say that I didn't notice the signal quality was any different or inferior than my factory head unit. What is odd, however, is that the pre-production BMW Traffic Pro units which were used to solicit BMW NA didn't have it either. This probably means that Harman/Kardon only intended to target the BMW Z3 crowd since that is the only car that I know of that does not have a factory diversity antenna built into the car. Odd to say the least! Even the new Z4 has diversity.

The CD (which is built into the unit) and the optional Becker 7860 6-disc CD Changer, which can be added as a trunk mount unit, have all the basic features found on most units. You can Scan Search, Fast Forward, Rewind, Random Play, Repeat a track, and display the number of tracks and total playing time for the CD being played. The CD Changer has several other options such as custom CD-naming and filtering although I doubt these would be highly sought-after features.

The unfortunate consequence for many BMW owners who decide to take the Traffic Pro plunge is that it is *not* compatible with the OEM BMW units such as Alpine. BMW uses a proprietary connection called I-Bus which, in all its wisdom, BMW NA decided not to license to Harman/Kardon USA. Of course the European BMW Traffic Pro's are fully I-Bus compatible. In fact, they also have the diversity antenna option. Talk about second rate consumers!

There is also another benefit besides all the bells and whistles built into this unit, namely the sound performance. The TP has *noticeably* better sound quality over the BMW factory head unit (both the C33 and C43 models found in most E36's). I don't know how H/K did it but I can hear certain instruments on some CD's that just were not there before. I guess the best way to describe the sound is that it's more open and clear while still remaining transparent.

Still, with all its incompatibility, I have to say that the Harman/Kardon Traffic Pro is an outstanding sound/navigation system with so much more to offer than meets the eye. To put things in perspective, this unit, excluding navigation, is currently OEM on all Ferraris sold today. In the end, it's a great alternative to the currently unattainable BMW-compatible Becker product. Good job, H/K! Here's hoping that the already good fit, color and compatibility on the navigation system will one day be as perfect as the rest of the unit.