

AKG WMS 40 Microtools system

The WMS 40 Wireless Microphone system represents an impressive range of UHF transmitters and receivers, with a selection of compatible accessories and complimentary applications, that together AKG calls Microtools. **NEIL HILLMAN** goes small.

MICRO. FROM THE GREEK 'mikros' meaning small. So far so good. An adjective: extremely small in scope or capability; trivial. But as far as those definitions are concerned: no, no and, well, no. The only thing small or trivial in this range is the attractive semi-professional price tag that accompanies each item.

Designed expressly by AKG to be entry-level, the WMS 40 range has succeeded in lowering the price-point for such-specified kit, while simultaneously providing a quality that will have other manufacturers of serious systems pausing awhile to maybe consider their own offerings. Yes, the casings are plastic, yes, the battery compartments will need the respect that only a freelance owner would afford them; but given the finances faced by the jobbing recordists servicing today's television (the micro-economy, in microcosm), or if you were just embarking on a road-career, it suddenly becomes less of a compromise to consider these products as a low-cost and flexible way to tool-up. However, one of the proviso's is, inevitably, the obligatory licensing arrangement with JFMG in the UK.

The WMS 40 range operates in the 710-865MHz band, which neatly spans the allocated bands for UK Channel 69 'specific locations': indoors (854.250-862.000MHz) or outdoors (854.250-858.750MHz and 859.750-862.000MHz), or 'free-roaming' (854.900-860.400MHz): all of which require an annual license fee to be paid to operate legally; although some of the WMS 40's channels are in the license-free (863-865MHz) smash-and-grab zone of the bingo hall and aerobic instructor. However, the fixed, preset, frequencies of the transmitters and receivers let the system be set-up quickly and easily, and ensure that a recordist need never inadvertently slip across the wrong side of the tracks. Either way, I would assume that any AKG supplier would take the time and trouble to determine which preset frequencies



were best suited to each purchaser.

There are three receivers in the WMS 40 range; one is a portable diversity, the PR 40, for location use and two stationary models: the SR 40 and the SR 40 Diversity. Both of the stationary SR 40 receivers — which may be rack-mounted or free-standing — carry a balanced XLR output along with an unbalanced 1/4-inch jack-socket, provide an adjustable squelch, and

offer an output level control that allows adjustment of the receiver's output between -30dB, 0dB and +6dB.

RF and Power levels are displayed on the front indicator panel. The audio bandwidth for the whole WMS 40 range is stated to be 40Hz-20kHz; THD as 0.8% and a claimed signal-to-noise ratio greater than 108dB. Reasonable then, even if only 4 channels may run together inter-mod free.

The PR 40 diversity portable receiver is specifically designed for location recordists — as a mixer-bag pocket item — or for camera-persons, fixed to the camera of their one-man-band crew. It carries two folding antennae, an on/off switch and indicator, and, in an easily scanned row of three: a battery level LED, an RF level LED and an audio level LED. There are two conjoined outputs: a combined line-level and headphone arrangement on a 2.5mm TRS jack socket; the fixed line-level signal appears on the tip, whilst the adjustable headphone feed is carried by the ring.

The unit is powered by two AAA batteries, giving a useful life of 8 hours; or by an optional Powering Adaptor (PA 40) which fits neatly into the battery compartment of the unit and takes power from a suitable camcorder supply outlet operating between 5-18V; or by rechargeable cells, replenished via an optional drop-in, walkie-talkie type charger (CU 40) that conducts through an array of contacts located on the bottom of the receiver. This highly convenient feature is common to all of the transmitters in the WMS 40 range, too, with a recycle time of around just 1 hour. Comforting.

Users are spoilt for choice with the transmitters on offer. My favourite in a moment; first there is the HT 40 handheld transmitter. Designed as a robust vocal microphone — with a bright edge to its output — the transmission technology is housed within the body of an AKG D880, a dynamic cardioid microphone whose rugged body hides the integral antenna.

The transmitter is operated by a silent on/off switch, and there is a low-battery indicator; although with around 35 hours of operational life from two AA batteries, that could amount to an awesome 700 renditions of My Way; or a spine-tingling combination of 350 each of I Will Survive and Hey, Big Spender before it starts to glow. Staggering.

The PT 40 bodypack transmitter is, surprisingly, quite large, though light, and may be worn in the traditional manner of either a presenter's pocket or belt, and may be coupled to a selection of suitable lavalier microphones. Simplicity itself in ergonomics and controls, it carries a mini-XLR connector, an on/off switch, a Mute slider-switch and a low-battery indicator. A small display window provides an LCD showing Carrier Frequency or sub-channel of a Frequency Group, audio input level, battery level and remaining operating time, error messages and the set-up menus for Frequency, Preset and Gain.

A jog switch on the side of the unit is used to alter variable parameters and activates the screen's backlight for 10 seconds when momentarily pushed. The key to the inherent quality of any transmitter is its compander, or more precisely its ability to process HF transients; and its here, probably for the first time, that a cognoscenti will pause and reconsider the merits of the performance-cost ratio in the WMS 40; in particular the critical coupling of a PT 40 with a PR 40, processing a variety of male and female voices.

But my favourite of the WMS 40's Microtools is, without a doubt, the delightful SO 40 'Snap On' transmitter. It is tactile and elegant, efficient and effective, and the cheapest way I know to instantly transform any cabled dynamic microphone into a hand-held transmitter. The SO 40 is so small and light, it weighs less than the cable and XLR it replaces. Sturdily made in a light, reinforced glass-fibre case that houses an integral antenna, there is a silent on/off switch with a centre mute position, yet retains the power to the device while it continues to transmit the 5mW RF carrier. A recessed rotary pot allows the input gain of the SO 40 to be optimised for the outputs of

various dynamic microphones. Its single AAA battery power should last for up to 8 hours; but even this little device is designed to sit comfortably in the CU 40 'drop-in' charger.

The Microtools range also includes a guitar-jack transmitter (the 'Guitar Bug' GB 40) for musicians, and for lecturers, a lavalier microphone with a detachable head; worn like a ball-point pen in a breast pocket (the 'Micropen' MP 40). This whole AKG WMS 40 system shows a considerable, and pleasing, Ikea-esque style; combined with a satisfying sense of ergonomic flair and economic prudence.

In a world where there's no such thing as a free lunch, the AKG WMS 40 certainly makes for a tempting finger-buffet. ■

PROS

A brilliant bangs-for-bucks price-point coupled with a refreshing sense of style, class and quality.

CONS

While the WMS 40 is disrespectful to its peers by blurring the boundary of where it ought to stand given its price, you do — ultimately — get what you pay for.

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