

Oktava ML52

Better known for a certain 'unconventionally handsome' side-fire condenser, this Russian company's extensive history is steeped in ribbon mic technology. Prepare for a fig8 ribbon for the people.

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ABOUT EIGHT YEARS ago, Oktava set the ball rolling with its revolutionary Russian approach to the pricing of condenser microphones with the MK219, following the enterprising involvement of A&F McKay who revived the factory in Tula and continue as world-wide distributors. This model performed astonishingly for the price, and provoked a host of similarly low-priced alternatives from new names and forced the hand of the big European manufacturers who have since tapped into an apparently huge market for budget condensers.

Now that Royer has brought the ribbon mic back to the attention of the masses with models at prices somewhat lower than established ribbons, Oktava has weighed in with another blinder in the shape of the ML52 at an even lower price.

Oktava has been around as a company since 1927, (although microphone production started in 1947) and for many years was the only company in Russia producing ribbon mics. They have a history of ribbon microphones including clones of classic RCA models.

The ML52 is quite a monster at 185mm tall, from top to XLR socket base, and 63mm in diameter. It has quite an imposing presence with its almost sinister-looking textured matt black finish and vertical slotting. Underneath the slots is a wire mesh, and underneath this is a layer of what appears to be very fine nylon. Even with the cover removed, the dual aluminium ribbon strips are well protected behind metal bars, minimising the possibility of damaging these fragile parts. This metal assembly houses what I assume must be a rare-earth alloy magnet.

Despite its appearance, the microphone is surprisingly light at around 600g including clip, especially compared to the STC/Coles 4038, which includes a massive magnet. By comparison, the Oktava is a featherweight, making mounting and placement far easier. Most of the weight of the ML52 comes from the bottom section where the transformer is housed. The review model came in a useful protective plastic case with moulded foam lining, however, the instruction sheet was printed entirely in Russian along with a frequency response trace. The latter is little more decipherable than the former, but there was no vertical scale marked on the chart. However, a big dip around 10kHz is evident, visually and audibly.

I struggled with a few minor Kremlins, I mean gremlins, at first. The clip's screw thread was of a large type requiring an adaptor for most stands. Once I had located one of these, I found it difficult to plug a lead into the XLR connector on the base of the microphone. With a bit of brute force it clicked home.

Although Oktava produced unidirectional ribbon mics in the 1970s and 1980s, this example is the more familiar figure-of-eight type, with excellent signal rejection off-axis. The accurate fig8 response led me to trying the ML52 as part of an MS set-up for an acoustic recording. The centre mic was a tonally different-sounding condenser, but the imaging from the Oktava was superb, requiring just a little removal of some honkyness in the midrange with EQ.

Put up next to an old STC 4038 on a big bright Bosendorfer Imperial Grand, the ML52 sounded not entirely dissimilar, with a rich smoothness and big bottom end. The upper midrange on the Oktava was

PROS Remarkable value at a very low price; rich, detailed, natural sound; very low self-noise; accurate figure-of-eight response.

CONS Good quality mic amp required for best results; low output level; bulky size; mounting niggles; grim appearance.

EXTRAS An early MK219 cardioid condenser, the Oktava mic that came in from the cold and started it all. Initially regarded with suspicion and cynicism, few could actually believe that a mic this ugly could sound quite so good. Initial 'variable' build-quality and an electronically temperamental nature aggravated matters. However, quality control increased dramatically and quickly, yielding a mic that offered exceptional character and performance for very little money. It found a home in every discerning private studio and established the model as a viable cheaper alternative to other established large-diaphragm designs. A good all-rounder, it is capable of convincing results on vocals but has to be used with pop protection.



The Oktava factory, located some 100km south of Moscow, was state-owned under the communist regime and was being wound down after the collapse of the political system. Effectively a 'preferred supplier' to the Soviet machine, its capsules were used in the State's space programme. Distributors A&F McKay spotted the potential of the Russian mic portfolio, offered investment and improvements. The famously jagged initial-run ME219 castings were improved dramatically simply by cleaning out the moulds. Manufacture is still very 'hand built' but now to Western standards.

If you have the Soviet 'XLR' that came with this mic, put it on the mantelpiece or make a medallion out of it. It will fit no XLR receptacle that you have ever seen.

perhaps not quite so silky, and the output level lower by a few dBs, but considering the price difference they were remarkably similar.

Used as a vocal mic, the ML52 delivers a rich sound, perfect for overly-sibilant male and female performers. The proximity effect can be put to exaggerated use for extremely intimate performances, an abundance of rich bottom end becomes apparent at very close spacing. A pop shield is a sensible precaution when a plosive might potentially damage the fragile ribbon strips.

Percussion also proved a suitable candidate for the ML52, with bongos sounding particularly natural when placed within the mix.

Because of the fairly low output level, there is much benefit to be had from using a high-quality mic preamp. This will reward the user with greater resolution. Even with high gain settings, the mic's own noise floor is very low indeed.

In terms of build quality, the body is fairly roughly screwed together, and perhaps lacks the absolute precision of more expensive European microphones, but apart from the mounting niggles I had no problems. Paired with a good quality mic preamp, this ML52 achieved great results on a variety of acoustic instruments, and I was particularly taken with the richness on vocals. A real result. □

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