

## M-AUDIO

# Solaris

Straight from M-Audio's Chinese factory is the three-pattern Solaris microphone – the 'grown up' version of the successful Luna. **Huw Price** looks for any family resemblance...

### SOLARIS

Manufacturer **M-Audio**

Price **£199**

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**M**-Audio's new multi-pattern condenser microphone has a rounded capsule housing sitting on top of a slim, gently tapering chassis, almost identical to the cardioid Luna model we looked at in Issue 8. It's a design that is both distinctive and stylish and may even possess some sonic advantages.

As you may recall, the Luna was finished in a two-tone livery with its silver capsule housing and black body. However, the Solaris looks even classier in its all-silver metallic finish, with the company logo, model name and all other legends engraved into the metal and outlined in black. And Solaris should stay looking this good since there's no enamel to scratch and no transfers or screen printing to rub off.

### Switching mics

There are also a couple of extra features that should make the Solaris a more versatile and practical tool than the Luna. The 6dB-per-octave bass rolloff switch is a welcome addition, although some might regard the preset frequency of 125Hz as a little too high. The proximity effect is nature's way of telling you that your microphone is too close to the sound source. It occurs with cardioid and figure-eight microphones and produces a boomy and indistinct low-end frequency response – though it can also be used creatively. In an ideal world you would simply move the microphone further away, but if you need to minimise spillage or room ambience, this isn't always practical – hence the need for a bass rolloff.

There are many musicians and project studio owners who plan to buy only one microphone. Given that the number-one priority has to be vocals, a high-quality condenser would top most shopping lists. This is fine providing you're aware that delicate condensers can get a little overwhelmed by electric guitars, electric basses and drums. They can even be pushed into distortion by loud vocalists. Once again, if you

can't move the microphone further away, you need an attenuation pad. The well spec'ed Solaris obliges with its -10dB switch which, together with the bass rolloff selector, is located beneath the capsule housing at the front of the microphone.

Fixed cardioid microphones are generally cheaper than multi-pattern models because their capsules are easier to make. To create a multi-pattern capsule you need a second diaphragm and a selector switch to vary the polarising voltage supplied to the rear of the capsule. As well as cardioid, the Solaris can be set to omnidirectional and figure-eight, but rather than simply adapt the Luna's capsule, M-Audio has opted for a partial redesign.

Some similarities remain, such as the 1.1-inch diameter capsule, the all-brass construction and the evaporated gold/Mylar diaphragm. The most significant difference, however, is that the thickness of the diaphragm has been reduced to three microns to increase sensitivity and sharpen the response to transient sounds. The three-way pickup pattern selector switch is sensibly located at the back of the microphone. This means that you can adjust the pattern without needing to move the microphone away from the source or squeeze your fingers behind any pop shields.

### Ins and outs

The Solaris is supplied with a black, powder-coated metal shockmount that is easy to attach and enables the capsule to sit well away from any potentially disruptive reflective surfaces. It includes the same metal flightcase as the Luna and even comes with a European standmount adaptor. There is a manual, but its contents can be boiled down to the following: switch phantom power on after you connect the microphone, switch it off before you disconnect it, don't attempt to take your Solaris apart and try not to get it wet.

Under the hood, construction standards are very high. Arranged over two printed circuit boards are



four transistors making up the Class A FET preamp. Output duties are handled by a chunky transformer securely planted at the base of the body. M-Audio claims that Solaris offers 'no more than +/-1dB of deviation across the entire 20Hz–20kHz frequency range.' If accurate, this is an impressive achievement, but there is no individual frequency graph to prove the claim and anyway, the frequency response really tells only half the story. Transient response and distortion figures are important, too.

Testing the pickup patterns revealed a very tight cardioid response. Rear rejection is exceptional with a very wide usable area where the frequency response remained fairly consistent across a one-metre arc in front of the microphone. The omnidirectional pattern was similarly impressive, with very little loss of high-frequency content to the sides and rear of the capsule. In figure-eight mode, the sound almost vanished at the sides while sounding extremely consistent front and back.



### Luna eclipse?

So much for the technical stuff, let's get musical. It is surprising just how different the Solaris sounds from the Luna. In direct comparison, the Solaris makes the Luna sound a little over-bright. In all our experience as reviewers, the Solaris is one of the few microphones equipped with a Chinese-made capsule that doesn't sound too thin and spiky in the high frequencies. The presentation is smooth and musical with all the vintage warmth that the Luna promised but didn't quite deliver.

Despite its un-hyped top end, the Solaris' sound is detailed, with clear articulate consonants and no sibilance on vocals. All the woody resonance comes through on acoustic guitar with a present and balanced tone. Although not quite as adept at dredging up the real depths of a sound like a high-end Neumann, the Solaris does exhibit a proximity effect that can be used to fatten up instruments if necessary. Switching from cardioid to omni sacrifices a little of the intimacy for a more open and balanced sound.

The biggest surprise, however, was the figure-eight setting, which combined the intimacy and presence of the microphone's cardioid response with an extra degree of openness and focus. Anyone with doubts about whether they need a multi-pattern mic would surely be won over after the briefest of listening tests with Solaris. [MTM](#)

### SUMMARY

#### KEY FEATURES

- Ultra-thin three-micron capsule
- FET class 'A' condenser microphone
- Cardioid/omnidirectional/figure-eight pickup patterns
- Transformer output stage
- 10dB attenuation pad switch and bass rolloff switch

#### WHY BUY

- Warm, natural sound quality
- Multiple pickup patterns
- High power handling
- Quality suspension mount
- Metal flightcase

#### WALK ON BY

- May be too 'warm' for some tastes
- Switches feel a little flimsy
- Fixed-frequency bass rolloff

### VERDICT

A vintage-toned, multi-pattern bargain of a microphone that can handle any recording task you throw at it.



#### METHOD SPOT

### Getting a response

The Solaris lets you explore techniques beyond simply cardioid. Figure-eight and omnidirectional settings pick up more room ambience, creating natural and characterful sounds. If you buy a second Solaris you can try spaced omnis, crossed figure-eights and good old mid-and-side stereo. It could change your whole approach to mic positioning!

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