

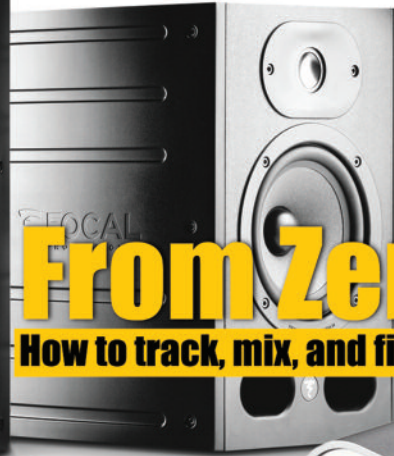
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# REVIEW

REVIEWS BY PAUL VNUK JR.



## Samson

### MTR201 and MTR231 Condenser Microphones

Samson Technologies is a company with a very broad range of products, from USB accessories and signal processors to studio monitors and USB keyboard controllers. Even with that breadth, we might not often think of “Samson” and “studio microphones” in the same sentence, but the company has a long history of providing great mics for the money. Aside from the ultra-affordable CO line of large- and small-diaphragm condenser mics, Samson sells an active ribbon mic, the VR88, which garnered a highly positive review in our July 2008 issue.

The new MTR Series is the next step up from the CO Series and consists of three models: The MTR101, MTR201, and MTR231. Each of the three models is built upon the same internal electronics, body, and internal shock mounting for the capsule. As you step up through the models, each one adds additional features and accoutrements.

The MTR101 is a cardioid electret condenser with a distinctive “Art Deco” rounded head basket. It ships with a threaded ring-style stand mount and sells for a respectable \$79.99. For \$119.99 total, you can add a shock mount and a clip-on pop filter to the package as well.

For this review, I was sent the two step-up models, the MTR201 and MTR231. Each of these models features a 1" gold-sputtered capacitor diaphragm inside a flat-topped head basket and comes as part of a kit that includes the abovementioned shock mount and pop filter, plus a hard-shell carrying case. So what does one get for the extra cash? Let's find out.

#### Meet the MTRs

Each microphone is housed in a 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " long body/grille assembly with a 2" diameter. While visually the dark gray body is pretty standard condenser fare, the brushed silver head basket is reminiscent of the grille from an old sedan in a 1940s gangster film. It's a look that manages to be both modern and slightly retro at the same time. These mics are solidly built and feature a wonderful fit and finish

#### Features, internals, and specs, oh my

The MTR201 and MTR231 both have a -10 dB pad that gives each mic an impressive 142 dB maximum SPL handling. The MTR231 adds a 3-position pattern switch for choosing between cardioid, figure-8, and omni polar patterns.

Considering the quality of each mic's overall construction, these switches are the only things that feel a tad less sturdy, but considering the price point they're quite acceptable. Also note that there is a loud pop and a several-second cutoff of the sound when switching patterns on the MTR231, so it's best to mute your mixer channel before doing so.

As mentioned before, both models make use of the same 1" gold-sputtered diaphragm, with a dual capsule version on the multipattern MTR231. Here are some specs:

The MTR201 has a sensitivity of -33 dB  $\pm$ 3 dB (0dB=1V/Pa @1 kHz), equivalent self noise of 13 dB, a dynamic range of 120 dB, an 81 dB signal-to-noise ratio, and a maximum SPL of 132 dB (142 dB with pad).

The MTR231 has a sensitivity of -39 dB in omni mode, -37 dB in figure-8, and -33 dB in cardioid mode (all  $\pm$ 3 dB, 0dB=1V/Pa

#### Studio mics that blend affordability and flexibility

for this price point (and indeed for prices considerably higher).

Each mic is threaded and made to screw into the included shock mount, which is equally well built with tight banding and firm threading. This is a shock mount of Samson's own design, made for the MTR Series, rather than the usual off-the-shelf one-factory-for-many-brands design we often see with inexpensive overseas mics. Just below the head basket on the MTR models is a small grooved ring where the snap-on metal mesh pop filter attaches via a compression clip.

Lastly these two mics come in a sturdy foam-lined briefcase that is put together well and holds the mic, shock mount, and pop filter snugly in place without bulging. If you've purchased any low-cost import mics over the years, you know the bulge of which I speak!

@1 kHz). Its equivalent self noise is 16 dB with a dynamic range of 118 dB, signal-to-noise ratio of 78 dB, and maximum SPL of 132dB (142dB with pad).

#### Sound

In cardioid mode both microphones have a very flat frequency response across the middle with a slight 2 dB rise in the low end between 20 and 50 Hz, a minor 500 Hz dip, followed by a 2 dB bump around 4 kHz and a 5 dB bump around 12 kHz. In omni mode the MTR231's low end lessens slightly while the top end stays fairly similar to what's heard in cardioid, and in figure-8 mode the most significant peak is centered around 4 kHz.

In the early days of low-cost import mics, designs had a tendency towards harshness and even fizzy top ends.

Recently, however, the trend has been to tailor the microphones back towards more classic flavors, with more even and neutral sonics and more reined-in peaks. This is exactly where the MTR line falls; most of the abovementioned peaks and valleys are fairly subtle, giving both models a smooth, even fullness with a nice forward mid punch.

### In use

I put both microphones through their paces on acoustic guitar, vocals, mono front of drum kit, stereo overheads, electric guitar cabinets (both at a distance and shoved right up into the grille), and for spoken word.

Even though the MTR231 makes use of a dual diaphragm versus the single diaphragm in the MTR 201, I was impressed with how close the two sounded when the MTR231 was in cardioid mode. It is sonically close enough that you could easily get away with using the mismatched set as a pair of drum overheads.

On vocals, both models in cardioid exhibit a nice up-close proximity effect with the pop filter shaving off plosives. If you want a deeper, chestier tone, then figure-8 on the MTR231 does the trick instantly.

I am not normally a person who likes large-diaphragm condensers right up on the grille of a guitar cabinet, but both models excel in this application and it was my favorite use of the mic. On drums both MTRs make decent overheads, but I preferred them on mono front-of-kit duties, especially the MTR231 in figure-8 mode.

On sources like acoustic guitar with vocals, this mic is a touch singer- and instrument-specific. It's best suited for times when punch and power is needed to add centering and weight to a mix. Again, I prefer the MTR231 in figure-8 best on vocal duties.

Interestingly, in figure-8 mode, the rear lobe is a little bit more nasal and pinched than the front. Having different sonic signatures

on the front and rear lobes of a figure-8 microphone is nothing out of the ordinary, but it is something to be aware of and can even be used to advantage depending on the tone you're trying to capture.

I had less luck with omni mode on the MTR231; I'm used to the very even response of more expensive omni mics, and found the rolloff and slightly nasal off-axis response not to my taste. Given how useful this mic is in cardioid and especially figure-8 modes, I don't consider this a deal-breaker at all.

### Conclusions

Which model is the better choice for you? I would guess that for many people, the cardioid-only MTR201 would be just fine and worth the slight savings. However, if you like a low chesty sound in your vocals or want to experiment with things like mono front-of-kit sounds, then the MTR231 with its very useful figure-8 pattern is probably for you.

If this is going to be the only microphone in your arsenal starting out, I found that both models "stack" quite well, meaning they sound very good in multiple overdubs using the same mic on every source in a recording. I would imagine they'd be great at handling any number of duties, from songwriting sessions to podcasting and general recording.

Samson has succeeded in bringing a new and highly affordable mic line to market with microphones that are versatile and sound great. With their solid build and nice accessories, they manage to avoid the me-too syndrome found in low-cost overseas condensers, and will remain useful parts of your mic locker even after you step up to costlier mics down the road. ➔

**Prices:** MTR201, \$149.99; MTR231, \$199.99

**More from:** Samson, [www.samsontech.com](http://www.samsontech.com)