ADK A51, A51s & A51TL

The ADK A51 series of large diaphragm FET condenser mics are designed for use in studios but are affordable enough for home use as well. Konrad Skirlis checks out the A51, A51s and A51TL models.

ADK mics are American designed and Chinese manufactured by 797 Audio – a company responsible for producing many other microphones on the market. The A51 and A51s models are similar in looks and design. Both are an improvement on the original release a few years ago, as indicated by these models' type III suffix. I'm told the improvements include a 3dB to 6dB lower self-noise figure than the original models. ADK also produce the A51TL multi-patterned mic and have a tube series of microphones available as well (not reviewed).

The ADK A51 and A51s models are both fixed cardioids with the A51s offering a -10dB pad and HPF (the bass roll-off is an easy 6dB at100Hz). The mics' electronics use a transformer-coupled FET designed output. The capsule is one-inch in diameter and is gold sputtered (six microns). The A51 series demonstrate a wide frequency range of 20Hz to 20kHz and sensitivity is a notable 15mV/pA. Self-noise, however, is up at 17dB and therefore does not rate as well as other similarly designed microphones. If you're looking at using the A51 or A51s on loud acoustic signals, their capabilities are a healthy 130dB SPL and 140dB SPL respectively. The housing is machined brass, which looks rather durable and offers a scratch resistant finish. All models reviewed require 48V phantom powering. As mentioned the TL version is multipattern – figure-of-eight, hypercardioid, cardioid and omni-directional being the choices.

Spider Shock Mount

The A51 and A51s may be ordered with just a ring mount, but for a little extra, an elastic 'spider' shockmount and flight case may be included. The shiny A51TL comes with a matching silver spider mount and does look quite resplendent. If you're thinking about purchasing both A51 's' and 'TL' models, their respective ring mounts are not interchangeable and neither are their cradles. The A51TL has a stubbier body and the matte-black finish of the A51/A51s easily falls out of an inverted silver A51TL cradle. To continue on this point, even in their respective spider mounts, the mics can slip out with just a few shakes of the cradle. If you're moving a stand, for example, and the mic is in place within an upside down cradle, the mic will probably go straight down where gravity takes it! Although, in an upright position the mics sit snuggly and safely into their spider mounts. Alternatively, the ring mount is rather basic – it doesn't seem to screw on firmly, with some 'shake' experienced even in a tightened position.

51 Uses For A Mic

A51 & A51s – These two mics aren't in the business of offering a flat frequency response, that's not what they're about – the 2k to 12k range of frequencies are emphasised. It would appear that ADK is attempting (like many large diaphragm condensers made in China) to approximate the sound of a Neumann U87. In general, the high frequencies are well defined, and some fantastic results may be obtained from both models. The upper frequencies are succinct, the lower bass frequencies are reasonably well defined. The modest roll-off of -6dB at 100Hz allows a greater proximity emphasis on the A51s and this is something users should be aware of. Of course, you can also use this to creative effect for extra bass reproduction. I particularly liked the low frequency boost when both A51 and A51s models were used for kick drum and bass cabinet miking. In each case, both models handled the high SPLs with the A51s faring better when used with the 10dB attenuation pad.

On acoustic guitar, the A51s performed quite capably. Its response is suited to this task and is reminiscent of a Neumann U87 in colouration. In terms of clarity, both the A51 and A51s acquitted themselves nicely on a number of recording jobs in the studio. I also gave the A51 and A51s a shot at an electric guitar amp (both in cardioid position) and found they reproduced the full range of the amp nicely. I plugged the A51s into a TL Audio Classic valve preamp and was easily able to pull an appealing guitar sound that had body and crispness. Placed in front of a raging guitar amp, both condensers held their own, faithfully getting that huge sound to tape. The distorted amp settings came across with harmonic clarity and power.

Overall, the ADK A51/A51s display fullness with the sort of colouration that seems to favour voice and acoustic instruments, in particular. For a low-cost condenser the A51 and A51s compare quite favourably to the U87. I know these mics are a fraction of that mic's

cost but given their aim (as I see it) is to affordably emulate a U87, I think it's a reasonable enough parallel to make. Given the choice between these two mics and the Neumann, I'd go for the U87 any day. But, of course, if you don't have access to (or can't afford) a Neumann U87, an ADK certainly won't embarrass you. In terms of warmth and presence boost, they do have similarities.

With that in mind, while the ADK A51 and A51s represent great value for the home studio, they can equally be slotted into a professional studio's mic armoury – there are times when the known brand mics are fully commissioned and you need to call on a good reliable alternative.

A51TL – On vocals, the A51TL displayed a rich, full sound, handling sibilance with greater care than its A51 siblings. I tried the TL on many vocals and speech recordings and discovered it to be quite adaptable to both the male and female voice. While it may not be the world's best mic for the job, it does ably deal with a good number of vocal tasks.

As a drum room mic, the A51TL produced a big and fat sound in an omni-directional position. The colouration was 'darker' than expected, which I didn't mind at all – all too often I come across large diaphragm condensers that sound too bright, but the 'TL' model does not fall into this trap.

I also put the A51TL in front of an acoustic guitar, placing the mic about 10 inches away and slightly off axis to the sound hole. I was able to achieve a full sound with lots of high frequency detail. The lower frequencies on the acoustic translated effortlessly and, in general, both high and low frequency bands were balanced with the mids. In fact, all three ADK mics provided a true guitar sound with a defined high end, and an accurate bass response.

If you want a good quality multi-pattern mic, the A51TL can handle a variety of studio jobs. Considering its price, and compared to expensive known brands, the A51TL comes up rather nicely.

Sounds Expensive?

While the ADK series of mics aren't going trigger a mass dumping of expensive German condensers into nearby mini skips, they do offer a high quality sound at a highly affordable price. All three ADK mics on review are aesthetically very pleasing (the silver A51TL probably the flashiest) and I can't really fault their build quality (the A51TL seems the most robust). The mics in the ADK range present themselves professionally with a sound comparable to higher priced competition. It's hard to get noticed in what's currently an overcrowded condenser mic market, but these ADK mics deserve attention.

Manufacturer Info

- *ADK Microphones*

Web: www.adkmic.com

See our Contact Directory for local contact details

Price Guide

- *A51: US$xxx; A51s: US$xxx; A51TL: US$xxx*