



Another Chinese mic, but this one really is a bit different...

## CONDENSER MIC

# Sontronics Helios Mic

Another affordable mic manufacturer? **Jon Musgrave** asks whether Sontronics have what it takes to survive in this market

### DETAILS

#### SONTRONICS HELIOS VALVE CONDENSER

**PRICE** £446.50

#### CONTACT

**Tel:** 01202 777956  
**Web:** [www.sontronics.com](http://www.sontronics.com)  
[www.sonic8.com](http://www.sonic8.com)

#### TECH SPEC

**Frequency Response:** 20Hz - 20kHz  
**Sensitivity:** 20mV/Pa -34dB  
+/-2dB(0dB=1V/Pa at 1kHz)  
**Impedance:** <= 200 Ohms  
**Equivalent Noise:** 18dB  
**Max SPL:** 125dB  
(0.5% THD @ 1kHz)  
**Power supply:** SPS-1  
115/230 V PSU  
**Mic covered by limited 3-year replacement warranty**

**U**NTIL ABOUT 10 years ago the quality microphone market was dominated by a handful of highly respected players, basically selling pretty much the same models they'd been making for decades.

Then, all of a sudden, a Russian manufacturer, Oktava, starting knocking out good sounding mics at a fraction of the price. Admittedly, these could be slightly poorly finished, but the key here was they sounded pretty good. Pro users inevitably were a little suspicious and carried on using what they knew and loved.

But for those on a budget this luckily proved to be just the beginning of a mic revolution. As other manufacturers gradually began to crop up (Rode, GrooveTubes, ADK, SE Electronics, MXL and CAD,

to name but a few), the large diaphragm condenser mic began to look like a necessity, even for those on the tightest budget.

And with pro users beginning to embrace pretty much anything that sounded good, irrespective of price, it looked like the big players may be in trouble. So here we are in 2005 with things having evened out a little in pricing terms, and yet another new entrant to the affordable end of the market to consider.

### New kids

Sontronics is responsible for a new six-microphone range. This includes a pencil condenser with optional capsules (STC-1), a handheld condenser (STC-5), and four large capsule designs (STC-2, Orpheus, Helios and Omega). These four cover both fixed cardioid and multi-

pattern designs in both valve and solid-state format. At £450 the Helios is the most expensive, and also the most fancy, being a multi-pattern valve design.

The Sontronics range has been designed from the ground up, and with a distinctive design for both the Orpheus and Helios they should certainly stand out from more run-of-the-mill mics. However, it's also worth noting that Sontronics' Trevor Coley was previously involved with the SE Electronics range, so he should certainly know a thing or two about manufacturing affordable microphones.

### Feel the zinc

Clearly, the Helios has a pretty unique shape (more about that in a minute), but its other interesting feature is its zinc body. Allegedly less

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## Sontronics range with prices

Given the costs associated with marketing and distributing a new product, it's no surprise that Sontronics have taken the opportunity to put together a full range of mics under the Sontronics brand name. With the Helios at the top of the range (£449), next in line is the cardioid single-pattern Omega. This is also a valve design, but with more traditional 'lollipop' looks (£364).

Then we have the Orpheus, which looks like the Helios, but is a multi-pattern phantom powered solid-state model (£317). The cheapest large-diaphragm model is the STC 2 (£147), a cardioid phantom powered mic with suspension cradle. Then we have the STC 1 cardioid condensers (£88 each or £223 for a matched pair). You can also get omni and hyper-cardioid capsules for these (£39 each). Finally, to round things off, there's the STC 5 handheld cardioid condenser (£94), which is a phantom powered stage mic with low-cut filter switch.



**THE CONSISTENT SILVER FINISH  
USED THROUGHOUT IMPARTS  
A SOLID RETRO FEEL**

resonant than the traditional brass cylinder, the zinc 'box' that houses the mic's gubbins is a design we've not seen before, and certainly not at this sort of price. Blue's Blueberry mic has a rectangular body, but isn't coupled with the lollipop design that you see here. And what of the lollipop design? The reason for its size (over eight centimetres) is that the capsule is isolated and effectively suspended by four rubber ties. The result is a very imposing and distinctive design.

The mic is coupled with an SPS-1 power supply, which incorporates the polar pattern control knob (continuously variable from omni to figure of 8). Next to this you'll also be able to find low cut filter and -10dB pad switches, and a blue 'tube ready' indicator. The Helios valve takes about a minute from cold to hit the 'blue' operating temperature.

### So how does it fare?

It has become par for the course for mid-price mics to turn up in full-on flight cases, and the Helios is no exception. You'll also be impressed to find the mic nestled in a stylish wooden box. In fact the overall finish

quality of all elements (mic, power supply, box and case) is as good as any I've seen at this price, and the consistent silver finish used throughout imparts a solid retro feel. Although the hinges on the box were a little rough and ready, and the mic cable not particularly long (about three metres), that wouldn't detract from my overall opinion.

The mic itself has a built-in clip, which comes attached to both sides of the body. This in itself is quite a neat design (especially given that isolation has already been achieved to some degree at the capsule). The mic cable plugs into the back of the body. My only gripe here is that with the cable plugged in you can only adjust the angle of the mic so far before the cable plug gets stuck. This means that if you were moving your boom stand past about 45 degrees you'd have to unplug and re-plug the mic (which means powering it down). Quite annoying, I'm afraid.

Fortunately, first impressions of the sound are very encouraging. For vocal recording using a mid-point cardioid setting, it combines plenty of proximity warmth with a nice clear

top end. There's plenty of brightness and air to the sound without it sounding unpleasantly harsh, and the large-format design no doubt promotes a good performance. In terms of polar response, the mid-point cardioid setting seems quite tight. Obviously, as you shift the pattern selector round towards figure of 8 the back opens up completely. Shift the other way to omni and the proximity effect decreases to reveal a reasonably consistent omni response. However, with no response charts available at present it's difficult to comment on it any further.

### Conclusion

Overall the Helios is a well-spec'd and good sounding mic. It comfortably sits in the affordable mid-price bracket, and in all honesty if they weren't a new brand would probably retail for at least 50 percent more. It's always good to see another new manufacturer taking this price point seriously. My only niggle was that inflexible mic clip, but luckily the manufacturers have already taken my comments on board and will be sorting it. Now that's progress! **FM**

## ALTERNATIVES

### SE ELECTRONICS Z5600A

£399 9/10 **FM155**

SE's multi-pattern model shares similar specs to the Helios, but trades stylishness for solid functionality.

[www.seelectronics.com](http://www.seelectronics.com)

### ADK TT MULTIPATTERN VALVE

£500

Nine polar patterns and class A 6072a valve design.

[www.adkmic.com](http://www.adkmic.com)

### GROOVE TUBES GT67 CARDIOID VALVE

£399

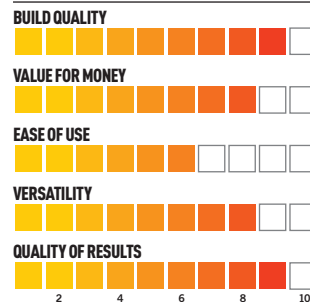
Utilises Groove Tubes resonator disc design to improve top-end response and a super miniature GT valve, hardly surprisingly.

[www.groovetubes.com](http://www.groovetubes.com)



The power supply which houses the valves...

## VERDICT HELIOS MIC



A distinctive and quality sounding mic let down a bit by its inflexible built-in mic clip.