

Golden Age Premier ELA M251E

Valve Microphone

Golden Age deem their take on Telefunken's classic mic so accurate, they even gave it the same name.

SAM INGLIS

According to gear marketplace Reverb.com, the Telefunken ELA M250/251 is the most expensive vintage mic you can buy. Or can't buy, more likely. With exceptional examples fetching \$30,000 or more, it leaves even the Neumann U47 and AKG C12 behind in the 'Who would possibly pay that much for a bloody microphone?' stakes. So what make it so special?

The original Telefunken company didn't manufacture studio mics, but they did make valves, including the unique VF14 valve used in the U47. They also had exclusive rights to rebadge and sell Neumann mics into the North American market. In 1958, however, they stopped making the VF14, forcing Neumann to discontinue the U47. Neumann then set up alternative US distribution arrangements, leaving Telefunken without any mics to sell. To fill the gap,

Golden Age Premier ELA M251E

£5199

PROS

- Rich, balanced sound.
- Apes the look and feel of the original in considerable detail.

CONS

- Expensive.

SUMMARY

With a warm low midrange and a relatively unhyped top end, Golden Age Premier's flagship 251 recreation has a vintage sound to match its vintage looks.



they turned to Neumann's historic Austrian rivals.

From 12 To 251

AKG duly delivered a line of valve microphones which were badged Telefunken and sold mainly in North America. Yet, whereas the Telefunken U47 had been essentially the same as the Neumann U47, these AKG-built mics were fresh designs; and although they used the same capsule and transformer as the existing C12, they differed from it in several significant ways.

The C12's remote pattern switching was dispensed with, and the ELA mics pioneered a new and somewhat modular construction approach intended to make field repairs easier. Their wider bodies and dual-layer headbaskets had different acoustic properties compared with the C12. The ELA M250 and M251 were also available with two circuit designs. The 'E' variants used the same 6072 valve as the C12, albeit with a different biasing scheme, while the versions not badged 'E' sported a Telefunken AC701 subminiature valve.

All of these design changes resulted in a mic that is said to combine the best aspects of the C12 and the U47. A good original ELA M251 reportedly has the open, extended top end of a C12, with the midrange authority and weight of the Neumann classic. Which certainly sounds like a good thing, as long as you have \$30k to spend on a microphone.

Clone Wars

If you don't have that sort of money, however, there's a dizzying variety of new valve mics out there with the digits 2, 5 and 1 on them. These range in price from three figures to alarmingly close to the real thing, and the authenticity of the recreation varies too, particularly when it comes to AKG's revered CK12 capsule. Some manufacturers even make more than one 251-inspired microphone. For example, the Telefunken branding and trade marks are now the property of Telefunken Elektroakustik, who make an expensive and highly accurate ELA M251E recreation in their Diamond series whilst also offering the more affordable TF51 as part of their Alchemy range.

Golden Age Premier already offer the GA-251 MkII, which sits somewhere in the middle of the field price-wise. It's substantially more expensive than, say, Warm Audio's WA-251, but at the

■ The capsule was apparently modelled on a specific CK12 from the first year of the original mic's construction.

same time, it's much cheaper than boutique designs that use European-made capsules and other parts. It also differs from the original in some ways, for example by having the pattern switching on the PSU.

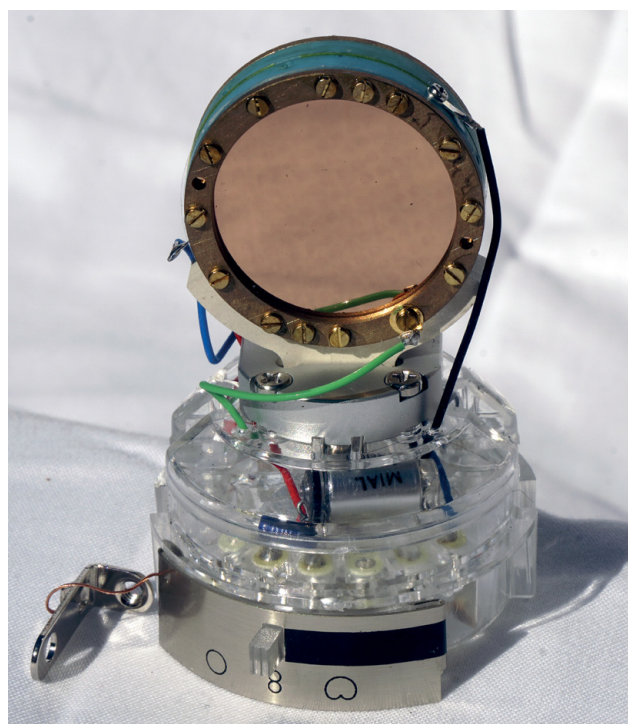
But if it's authenticity you crave, and you have a more generous budget, Golden Age Premier have now introduced a mic they're actually calling the ELA M251E.

It's said to be so accurate a clone that parts such as the power supply and cable can be used interchangeably with the originals, and Golden Age have gone to great trouble to recreate fiddly mechanical items such as the three-way pattern switch — which, this time, is housed in the correct place just below the front grille. The new mic employs a capsule said to have been modelled after a specific CK12 from the first year of ELA M251 production. And although it's a pricey mic, it's nevertheless still more affordable than the Telefunken Diamond-series version.

Striking Gold

The Golden Age ELA M251E ships in a very large hard case, finished in a bold shade of pistachio with brown leather trim, and equipped with mildly pointless combination locks. The mic itself is housed in a high-quality wooden box, and the other components nestle so snugly into their fitted foam cutouts that it can be hard to remove them. These include the power supply, which is the same size and shape as the original, an optional shockmount, and the cable with its integrated standmount.

At this sort of price you'd expect top-notch build quality, and although I didn't open up the mic or PSU to expose the innards, it's obvious that Golden Age have put a lot of work into the look and feel. If you've ever used an AKG-built

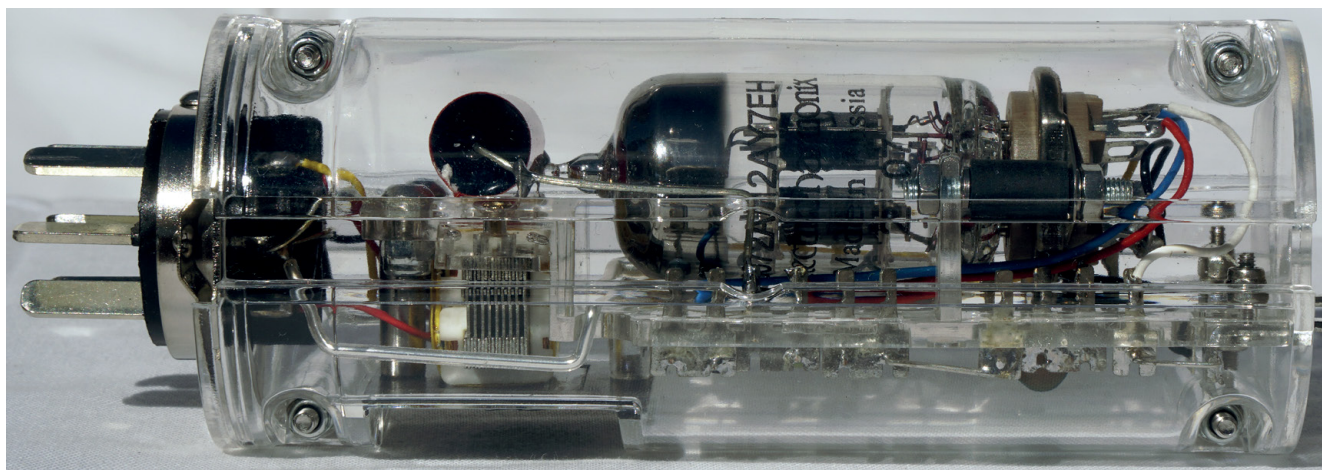


valve mic from the glory days you'll know that the standmount is a thing of beauty in itself, so full marks to Golden Age for recreating this part rather than using a cheaper solution. Other details such as the finish on the body, the dual-mesh grille, the distinctive positioning of the capsule right at the top of the headbasket, and the action of the three-way switch are all implemented very nicely. The only obvious giveaways that this is not actually a vintage mic are the overly shiny metalwork and the weight (or lack thereof) of the power supply.

What's The 251?

The specifications published by Golden Age are a little vague. It's not clear, for example, which polar pattern the noise and sensitivity measurements relate to, though a 19mV/Pa figure for the latter suggest a hotter mic than the original, which clocked in at 12mV/Pa in cardioid. There's no frequency response chart at the time of writing, and in fact one of the curious things about ELA M251 clones is that they tend to be all over the map in this respect.

The brochure for the original shows a broad rise from 3kHz to 15kHz, with double peaks at 5 and 12 kHz. This is the same in figure-8 and cardioid; in omni, the peaks shift downward in frequency and the upper one gets more pronounced. This double peak is present >>



» and, if anything, slightly boosted in the frequency chart for the new Telefunken 251, while Peluso's 22 251 displays an even broader and stronger rise in the same area. However, Warm Audio's WA-251 is more or less flat up to 6kHz, with only a gentle peak around 9kHz, and ADK's Z251 is somewhere in between.

Frequency response graphs need to be taken with a large pinch of salt, but this variability suggests that the '251 sound' is quite open to interpretation — and if my ears aren't broken, Golden Age's interpretation is definitely on the less bright side. Though I don't have an original 251 to compare it with, I was able to test it alongside various other mics including an AKG C24. The stereo counterpart of the C12, this uses the same capsule, valve, biasing arrangement and transformer as the 251, so it should have a similar character, and indeed AKG's original literature shows a similar frequency response.

On sources such as vocals and acoustic guitar, the C24 behaved exactly as that frequency response would suggest. It was airy and lively, to the point of sometimes being a little bit too prominent in the 10kHz region. In other words, it sounded just like you'd expect an ELA M251 to sound — on paper. The Golden Age ELA M251, however, was a surprise.

Old Gold

Although the GAP ELA M251 is not a dark microphone, as such, it's noticeably less bright than other CK12-equipped mics I've tried. The tizziness and excitement in the C24's treble is reduced to a hint of airy refinement. The 251 also presents an overtly 'vintage' character in the lower midrange that is different to what I'm

used to from such mics. The bass rolls off fairly quickly below 100Hz, which is in keeping with the original, but above this, it exhibits a thickness and richness that's not present on the C24 or any C414 I've used. In fact, I'd say that this is the Golden Age 251's most prominent sonic characteristic.

That's not to say it doesn't capture sound in the air band, of course, and on many sources, a broad 3dB boost somewhere above 5-6kHz really brought the mic to life. By applying a similar cut at around 10kHz on the C24, I was able to match the two mics quite closely in the treble. I wasn't expecting them to be so far apart in this region, but once I'd applied the relevant EQ, both sounded fantastic, with the ELA M251 actually having the edge in terms of smoothness. The low-mid thickness of the ELA M251 is the sort of thing that's harder to recreate after the fact, and also harder to eliminate if you don't like it. In general I found it pleasing, though it could get 'cardboardy' on the wrong source. And both models share the tucked-in upper midrange that is characteristic of AKG-style mics.

Incidentally, a welcome consequence of the ELA M251's relatively restrained high-frequency response is that, to my ears, it makes the other polar patterns more usable. The treble emphasis on CK12-based mics is typically exaggerated in figure-8 and omni, and whereas this can take the C24 into 'ouch' territory, it sounds great on the 251.

True Vintage?

Some manufacturers like to establish themselves as high-end brands before moving into the mass market, but Golden Age have taken the opposite

■ As on the original mic, the innards are housed in a rigid plastic tube for easy field replacement.

approach. They made their name selling affordable 1073-inspired preamps and Chinese ribbon mics, but since establishing the Premier sub-brand, they've created a series of increasingly ambitious, no-expense-spared mics and studio hardware. The ELA M251E is perhaps their most ambitious product yet, and its sound suggests an impressive confidence on the part of the designers. Instead of hyping up the top end as some 251 cloners seem wont to do, they've shot for a warmer, smoother tone where low-mid richness balances out 10kHz excitement. As a result it's perhaps less immediate than some, but almost certainly more versatile.

Of course, there's plenty of competition at this price level, and the ELA M251E faces off against other well-regarded clones from Telefunken, Flea, Bock and so on. It also comes in at around the same price as a Neumann U67 reissue, and the cachet of the Neumann name will be a factor in terms of resale value. But I think anyone who tries the Golden Age Premier ELA M251E will realise exactly why it bears the price tag that it does. A huge amount of work has gone into this product, both sonically and in terms of the vintage-accurate cosmetics, and it shows that despite their humble origins, Golden Age absolutely can play in this market. ■■■

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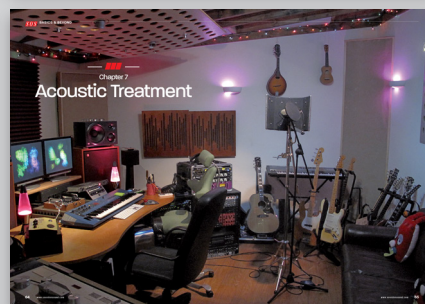
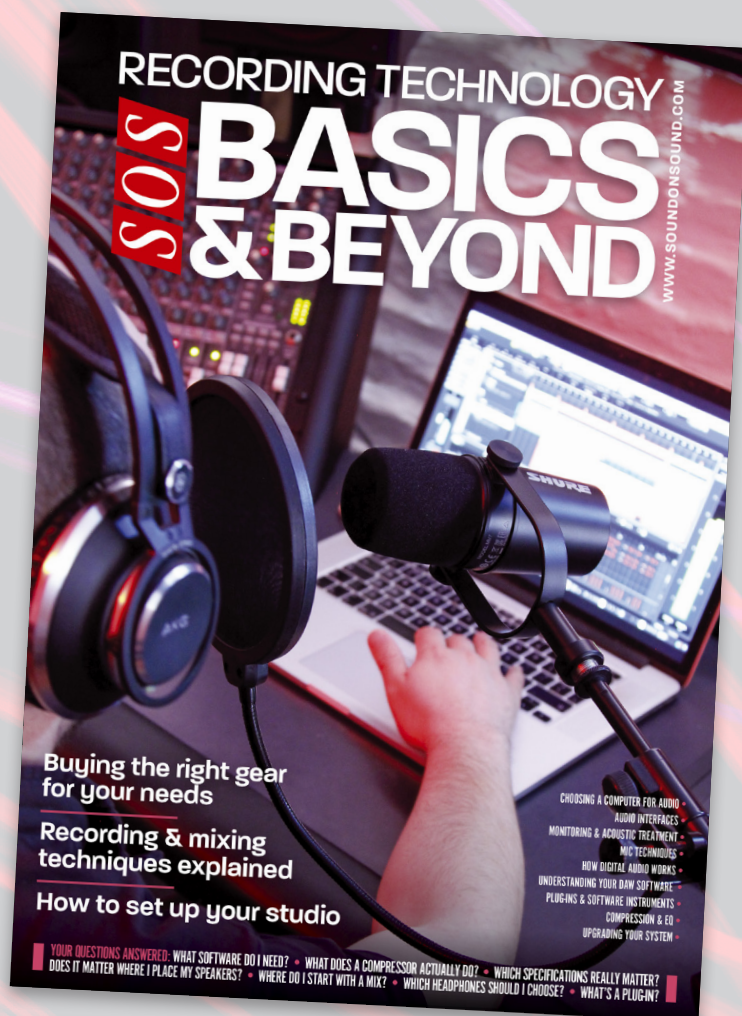
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