

AKG WMS4000

AKG is having a tilt at the top-end UHF wireless market. Luke Kungl sees how it stacks up against the other heavyweights.

When it comes to fully-fledged professional wireless microphone systems Shure and Sennheiser have ruled the roost for some time. AKG sees no reason why this should be the case – its wireless credentials are strong and its mic capsule pedigree is obviously first-class. So now we have the WMS4000 – a fully-fledged RF system with all the bells and whistles one might expect, and quite a few others besides.

The first thing anyone will notice about this system is that it doesn't adhere to the usual wireless system aesthetic. In short, the 4000 looks really, really smart. There is no shortage of LEDs and colourful displays – always a plus – but what sets the AKG system apart is the use of *different* colours. And thanks to the use of LEDs rather than an LCD you can see it easily while crouching behind a pile of racks – or wherever else you might be hiding... I was instantly impressed. The sleek design is like the front of an Audi or some other European thing that I can't afford. The WMS4000, however, *is* quite affordable – appreciably more affordable than the Shure or Sennheiser top-of-the-line systems.



Navigation

Finding your way around the menu features, data input and display toggling is done by one bold and mighty knob on the front – pushing and turning, pushing and turning. The big knob is skirted by LEDs which change from green to red when appropriate, alerting the user to various (user-refined) conditions, such as low battery warning, low RF, poor diversity etc.

As mentioned, the use of LEDs to convey information makes for easy reading, but the trade-off is that it's only capable of displaying about as much info as a **blinking** license plate. Hence, it takes a little while to

get accustomed to the menu structure. One trap for beginners in this regard relates to the 'Lock' mode. If you hold down the knob for a couple of seconds you will soon find that you can call up status information but you can't change it. It's a great fail-safe measure but a bit mystifying for those unfamiliar with the device and trying to fly by the seat of their pants... Okay, I admit it, I sat in front of the 4000 for half an hour wondering what the hell was going on. [Mental note: read the manual!]

Setting up a receiver can be done a number of ways: you can simply dial up a preset, or work frequency by frequency. The WMS4000 also has an Auto Setup mode that works effectively. In fact, it's so simple yet elegant that I found myself smiling with satisfaction. All you need to do is enter the number of channels you need – say, 10. The unit then performs an RF scan to find the ideal group with at least that many free sub-channels. Then you perform an *auto channel* search on the other receivers set to this same group, to find the next cleanest spot. Done. Okay, other manufacturers offer similar utilities – some good, some bad – but few are implemented so practically. AKG makes use of this feature elsewhere in the menu, as an 'environment scan' (same procedure, different name, different objective). Run the environment scan and the device will remember up to eight of the nastiest RF trouble-spots for your perusal, and avoidance!

So from there, it's really just a matter of naming your receivers – LEADVX, GUITAR, SAX1, and so forth – save your settings and away you go.

Rehearsal

Once you've prepared the system, AKG's Rehearsal Function comes into its own. It's like a diagnostic tool that prepares you for any RF gremlins that may be lurking. During soundcheck you can set the Rehearsal Function on its way and it will monitor the system for around 15 minutes. At the end of this time you can view stats about the system performance – such as the number of dropouts (and when), average strength at each antenna, a percentage split of when each diversity was active, and audio input level at each of these times, along with any clips that occurred. Nice! By the way, whenever something is wrong, the output is muted, and the LEDs turn an alarming red – leaving you in no

doubt that your attention is required!

If after you run the Rehearsal Function you discover some problems with RF in the room you can adjust the threshold each device uses for its frequency and environment scans to improve results, without resorting to squelch.

Capsule

For the purposes of this review I only used the basic dynamic capsule on both the handheld (HT4000) and bodypack (PT4000). With this in mind I'm not going to heap too much praise or damnation on these mics' tonal aspects. Suffice it to say, not having spent much time with AKG RF capsules, this entry-level capsule is perfectly adequate and suited my gigs fine. On stage next to an SM58, sure there were differences, but nothing that made me uneasy. That said, I would love to hear some of AKG's condenser capsules with this system – heaven knows that AKG are more than capable of making high quality condensers.

Functionally, both the handheld and beltpack are similar in concept to the receiver – most adjustments revolve around the use of a toggle wheel. Again, it's worth familiarising yourself with the menu structure before you leap into a gig. I'd contend that the handheld sports a few too many moving bits that look a little on the delicate side (for example, aside from the battery cover, there is a spring-loaded capture to hold them in place... perhaps not entirely necessary). Along similar lines, I found any adjustments to the handheld a tad fiddly – for example, the bodypack can be tricky to open. But overall I don't doubt the roadworthiness of either transmitter. As with all these things, the real test will be how they look after six months of use. (As a notable aside: I do like the remote mute feature.)

Between Sets

For those committed to using rechargeable packs, the charging station will be a real selling point. It takes either transmitter as is – just slap it in and charge it up. (Alternatively, it will take just the rechargeable pack.) The charging station comes at a price but you get the benefits of 'automatic quick charge' with a recovery feature, and it ships with two rechargeable packs – it's a must-have if you're running multiple units with quick turnarounds. Again, the receiver gives an indication of remaining battery life (thanks to the ever-useful red LED ring o' fire) when it's getting into its last hour.

RF under the conditions I experienced (two different venues at two ends of Sydney) was stable and trouble free. I should have bent the rules a little to test its limits, but I was doing a gig with standard antennas and without boosters.

I get the strong impression that this system has been developed with the real world in mind – very logical design, lots of really useful features and a macro approach. Saying that, if you're putting together a com-

prehensive 4000 wireless inventory, you really have to factor in the optional extras. The PS4000 antenna splitter provides power for up to four receivers and two active antennas via coaxial cable. The more deluxe PSU4000 central power supply unit is available for larger installations where the total power requirements are greater than that supplied by the PS4000 antenna splitter. A network concentrator is available for the data output of the receiver – I didn't have the opportunity to test the unit's software but I gather it handles all the info one would want. There is also an optional 'phoenix connector' output, giving another level of remote battery monitoring (although only in a good/bad capacity) and a remote muting pin.

Euro Engineering

So would I buy an 'Audi'? The WMS4000 certainly had an immediate answer to every question I put to it. It works well as a package, and each element works well in its own right. Whether or not a die-hard 'insert other brand here' user should go out and get a bunch is a matter of choice. Personal preference will always play a part with microphone selection – or selection of any audio equipment for that matter – and rightly so.

In essence, AKG has packed a whole lot of wireless functionality into a compact Euro-styled 'coupé'. Even after taking into account the smattering of optional accessories, it is still a competitively priced channel of radio mic.

Before I give the WMS4000 an unreserved thumbs up I'd like a chance to audition the condenser capsules. But knowing AKG, I've no reason to suspect that these won't be first class. What I can say, quite unreservedly, is that if I'm presented with a 4000 at my next gig I'd know that it would be reliable, functional, and get me the results I'd need and demand from a top-shelf RF system.

If you're about to top up your RF inventory, then AKG may not be the first name that comes to mind but the 4000 certainly deserves to be on your shortlist. Give one a test drive.



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