

MIPRO MI-808 Wireless Personal Monitoring System

By *Bill Evans*

While the increasing use of personal monitoring systems has made life easier for many FOH engineers by cleaning up stage volume, it has actually made things more complicated for those of us who mix monitors regularly. Once upon a time, the only wireless was a mic for the LV and maybe a belt-pack for the guitar player, and monitor guys didn't really worry much about it. Hell, sometimes backing players even shared monitor mixes. Having more than, say, four mixes going was exclusively the territory of the big touring guys.

These days it is not unusual for me to go out on a local festival gig and be asked to take care of half a dozen-plus mixes with everyone on wireless PMs. So I not only get to deal with "issues" about the mix (which are much more intense with PMs, BTW), but also get those looks we all love from the stage if someone experiences the dreaded wireless dropout. To avoid those, the wireless units at the other end of the snake went to true-diversity systems in pro models, but the receivers for PMs remained single-antenna deals. Until now.

For anyone needing a refresher, true diversity means that the receiver unit houses two receivers with an antenna for each, and a kind of electronic traffic cop monitors the signal hitting each receiver, automatically switching between them to keep the strongest signal as the active one. (Another scheme, called antenna diversity, uses one receiver with two antennas, and the strongest signal gets sent to the receiver.) Perhaps because with PMs, the transmitter is stationary and the receiver is in motion, the opposite of wireless mic and instrument systems—it may have been a case of engineers and marketing types figuring there was no reason for diversity. After all, your car radio is basically the same deal, and it does not need two antennas or receivers.

The MI-808 from MIPRO has gone against that conventional wisdom, and it does make a difference.

I will admit that when I was asked to check out one of these units I was not that enthusiastic, looking at them as one more Asian knockoff. I was wrong. The MI 808 is a real contender.

The Gear

Housed in a metal half-rack unit, the transmitter can be switched between 16 pre-programmed frequencies in the UHF range, and you get the typical green-backed LCD readout with four "directional" switches for navigating menus for set-up. Input is balanced stereo on either TRS or XLR connectors. There is a headphone jack on the front, which is handy for doing a quick check of the mix at the transmitter for troubleshooting.

The receiver has a pair of wire antennas hanging from it that are not removable but are very flexible. The volume control is mounted on the face and sticks out partially over the edge of the box, making for easy "grab-and-go" stage adjustments. While the MI-808 lacks the "no-brainer" frequency-synching between transmitter and receiver that is becoming fairly common, setting the frequency of the receiver to match the transmitter is a simple thing, and the controls are out of the way, so the possibility of a performer accidentally screwing 'em up is minimal.

The unit we received came with a couple of different ear-piece sets that, truthfully, never got used. I have a bunch of high-end PMs available from Future Sonic, Shure and Westone and used those instead.



What it is: True diversity transmitter/receiver for personal monitor systems

Who it's for: Soundcos, operators and musicians who hate dropouts

Pros: Easy to use and set up, good sound, no dropouts

Cons: Replacing batteries is a pain

How Much: MI-808T/MI808R
MSRP \$1,390

The Gigs

First shot was in a rehearsal situation where I play and run PMs and a couple of wedges at the same time (the Hearback System makes that a lot easier). As is the norm for me anyway, I found myself unpacking the MI-808 from the box just minutes before downbeat. I usually make everyone go wired in rehearsals, so this was an added complication that ended up being not so complicated after all. I literally took two minutes to set it up. Outs from the Hearback mixer went via TRS to the MI-808, and as it was the only wireless in use that night, I just went with the factory #1 setting and got to work.

No dropouts, easy to set up. I did notice some hum, but it was minor and easily

ignored. The real test came a week later at an actual gig. There were three wireless units being used for PMs on this gig, with the rest of the band on wired PMs or wedges. Maybe I just got lucky, but there was no conflict between any of the wireless units over frequency right out of the box. The first thing I noticed was that the hum I had heard earlier was gone, which means it is in my rehearsal system and not the MI-808. That sucks for me, but speaks well for the MI-808.

The best thing you can say about a wireless PM unit is that it is quiet, and once set up, you don't even realize it is there, which was very much the case here. The other two units were of a more noted pedigree than the MI-808—one priced a little less and one more expensive than the MIPRO. The cheapest unit failed completely, and the backup singer using it had to go wired after just a few songs (always have a wired backup handy...); the pro unit suffered from quite a few dropouts, while the MI-808 worked flawlessly for nearly three hours.

Bottom Line

The combination of the MIPRO brand and the "MI" part of the model number here may lead you to think that this is a cheap, entry-level wireless, but it ain't so. It worked better than the MI unit with the better-known name and as well as the pro unit you see on many a major tour. My only real complaint is that putting batteries into the receiver is a bit of a pain. The spring-loaded blocks that hold the two AA batteries in place may have looked good on paper, but they take some getting used to and could pose a challenge when trying to change out batteries on a dark stage or dim Monitor Beach. But, to be fair, the batteries are not going anywhere once in. Not all AA batteries are exactly the same size and this arrangement guarantees a tight fit.

Yes, there are strong feelings on both sides of the "offshore" manufacturing issue and, yes, there seem to be several new Asian manufacturers appearing at every trade show and most of them are putting out crap. Not so with MIPRO. This is one case where it is well worth getting over any off-shore qualms and checking the performance of the MI-808 out for yourself. I know it is on the short list for me next time I am shopping for wireless PM units.