

This large diaphragm tube mic kit arrived very neatly packaged in a shiny aluminium carrying case. There is the necessary power supply unit, mains lead, the special cable to connect to the mic, a very effective shock mount, with the mic in a wooded box.

The SPS-2 PSU accepts 230V and 115V, with an additional 'continental' mains lead supplied for the latter. There is an illuminated mains switch on the rear of the unit. The eight pin connecting lead is some five to six metres long and is female at both ends, handy as it doesn't matter which end you pick up to approach the mic with!

On the front panel there is the three-pin XLR(M), labelled 'line out' Below this socket is a blue, 'tube ready', light which lets you know that the valve is warmed up. Also on the front panel are two switches, one for a 10dB output level attenuation and another giving an LF roll off, allowing some alleviation of any unwanted proximity effect.



SONTRONICS OMEGA TUBE MICROPHONE

Initial Evaluation

To get an overview I always set up some voice comparison tests with other mics I regularly use. You can judge output levels, noise floor, polar patterns, overall timbre differences, handling noise, and so on.

This Sontronics review mic has an output 4dB higher than a Sennheiser MKH40. Both above average, but not 'line level' as might be implied by the PSU's output socket's labelling. The 10dB pad could be brought into play if one's mic amp can't cope.

The noise floor is very low, the MKH used for comparison being well known for this attribute! The fixed cardioid polar pattern proves to have an effective rear rejection and no noticeable narrowing of the pattern at HF, as sometimes noticed.

The timbre of the review mic, against a number of others in my collection, indicate an uncoloured and natural-sounding output. Any subtle differences weren't in the mid range and in practice any preference choice in use could depend on different proximity and off axis characteristics.

There is a LF 'body' resonance, the supplied shock mount being essential in the mics use to overcome this inherent 'honk' problem. Any vibrations brought to the mic via the cable are also best 'decoupled' by having a loop in the cable securely taped to the stand. With the shock mount, make sure all its 16 hooks to its elastic rings are in place as they can easily be dislodged!

Studio Use

In Buckingham's West Street Studios, there was an opportunity to let their engineer, Jamie Masters, use this tube microphone at a track laying session for an on-going project with singer, songwriter Stephen Docherty. Over to Jamie...

"I used the microphone to record a single cello over a song that I had previously recorded. Already laid down were piano, bass, drums and guitars, along with violins, clarinet and flute. The cello parts were written to sit closely with the violins and, as these already sounded slightly bright and thin, I was looking for a nice deep cello sound to round out the string parts.

"I used the Sontronics through a TLA 5051 pre-amp going straight into Pro Tools at 96k/24-bit The microphone was positioned about three or four feet away from the face of the cello, just to one side, looking at the sound hole / bridge area. The sound that immediately appeared was

clear and focused, with a very natural tone. The monitoring was on Quedest VS2108 speakers.

A small amount of EQ was used to boost the low end at around 100Hz, which brought out the warmth of the instrument nicely. A cut was made at 2kHz, to reduce some of the bow noise which I felt might get excessive when added to the violin parts. These adjustments were minimal, and were made to fit in with the song as it was, I doubt I would have had to make any adjustments had the song not demanded it!

This set-up remained untouched for the rest of the afternoon. I was surprised that I didn't feel compelled to try moving the position of the microphone at all, as once I ran the track to hear how the cello fitted in, I was very happy with the sound and soon began thinking of the part being played instead!

I should also mention that when preparing for the session I did have a 'named' microphone standing by just in case, but from the moment I hooked up the Sontronics

I didn't even consider taking this more expensive microphone out of its box!"


Location Use

There was an opportunity to use the microphone at a concert recording of 24 Rachmaninov Preludes, played by Julian Saphir on the resident Steinway piano at Hampstead's well known Rosslyn Hill Chapel. To get a stereo result, the review Sontronics was used as the Mid mic, combined with a Sennheiser MKH30, figure-of-eight, as the Side mic. At some two metres back from the piano and high enough to avoid lid reflexions, the combination was easily trimmed to get stereo width and a reasonable balance against the Chapel's ambience.

The thing about valve mics on location is the need of a mains socket, near the mic stand. Luckily there was one within the reach of the special mic-to-PSU cable. There is no mechanical noise from the PSU, unlike some historic units I have heard about! Similarly, there were no 'ground loop' earth connection problems, the desk and recorders being on another mains socket behind the audience.

Pianos are not easy to record. Room acoustics have varying effects, as does the nature of the floor they are standing on. The results achieved certainly do justice to Julian's fine playing

Final Take

Others have reported that there can often nowadays be less and less difference between microphones, despite likely price differences. This is obviously carrying on, in the case of this large diaphragm Sontronics Omega Tube microphone. 

INFORMATION

Ⓢ Sontronics Omega £
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THE REVIEWER

Mike Skeet is a notable location recordist working in the live music/ensemble field and has been forging ahead with surround sound work since the format was conceived.