

Sontronics Apollo 2

Apollo 2 has landed — **JON THORNTON** tests the updated version of this phantom-powered stereo ribbon microphone

This year sees the launch of the 'Mark 2' versions of three Sontronics ribbon microphones. Top of the tree is the Apollo — a classic Blumlein stereo microphone featuring two ribbon motors stacked vertically. The original (2008) Apollo has found many fans, counting Abbey Road amongst its users, but the Apollo 2 looks markedly different from its predecessor, and this difference runs more than skin deep.

Externally, the double tetrahedron shape of the original head grille has been retired in favour of a more conventional mesh cylinder. According to Sontronics MD Trevor Coley, the original design was complex to make, and almost impossible to repair if subject to an unfortunate series of events. The new design is inherently stronger and gives an uninterrupted 'view' to the pair of ribbons it encloses. That's not to say that the new design is necessarily easier to make — the mesh is entirely cylindrical with no supporting structures on the sides — you can just about make out a tiny seam where the mesh is laser welded together.

The ribbon motors themselves have remained unchanged from the previous model, featuring two micron ribbons. Improvements have been made to the electronics side of things though — this is an active ribbon design. Changes to component choices, and having the printed circuit board made in the UK, all add up to incremental improvements in performance here. The all important output transformer is also home-grown, custom made and sourced locally from a small company located just down the road from Sontronics HQ.

An added feature is the incorporation of RFI filtering in the electronics. This isn't, perhaps, something that studio users would necessarily see on their wish list, but those airwaves are getting increasingly crowded, and the inclusion of this feature across the whole range of ribbons is a response to the increasing number of users taking the

microphones on the road into more hostile RF environments.

The microphone is supplied in a rugged ABS 'Peli' style case, and comes complete with a nicely engineered shock-mount. The microphone screws into the base of this, which features a wide arc that leaves the front of the microphone completely unobstructed and gives very good levels of suppression. Also supplied is a short breakout cable, which delivers the 6-pin output of the microphone to two XLR's neatly labelled as 'Upper' and 'Lower'. The whole arrangement is fairly weighty at a shade over 1.2 kilos including the shock-mount, but not so weighty that positioning becomes an exercise in civil engineering.

Natural sounding, with a healthy output level

Setting the Apollo 2 up for a quick speech walk round shows a reasonably healthy output level (quoted at 18mV/Pa), so this won't unduly tax your preamps. For the purposes of the review I chose a Millennia HV3C so as not to add any additional colour to the microphone.

First impressions are of a nice solid, natural response which doesn't sound the slightest bit voiced. This reflects what the published frequency response suggests, reasonably flat between 50Hz and 5kHz followed by a smooth, natural drop of around

5-6dB octave thereafter. The combination of the active electronics, transformer and ribbon motors seem to work seamlessly here — this isn't a microphone that's trying to overcome shortcomings through electronic voodoo, just using all of those components in complete harmony.

Moving to that slightly problematic instrument, the upright piano, with the microphone hoisted over the player and addressing the (exposed) hammers at about four feet away confirms these first impressions. There's a nice sense of spaciousness here — although the rear pick-up blurs things a little, it's not unpleasant and easily tamed in a

controlled space.

The main thing you notice is that the Apollo is far more at home when it's given a bit of space and distance. That's not to say that it can't work close-up. In mono, using a single output, male vocals are rich and warm, but it's only here that you find yourself reaching for some EQ to remove a little of the low-mids to clean things up a little. Give it a little room (or a big room) though, and it really is one of those 'great out of the box' microphones.

Rock choir recording

Imagine if you will a glassed in, five-story atrium. That's the space that joins our studio complex to the main building. What isn't glass is stone or brick, and with choral work it lends a tremendous support to voices, although it can be challenging to record in and do both source and ambience justice. Setting the Apollo 2 up here, rigged about 7ft high and angled towards a mixed 25-strong rock choir during an impromptu rehearsal really showed its true colours. With the absolute minimum of experimentation with position, the Apollo delivers a very well focussed image, together with an ambience that is detailed, but also one that supports rather than intrudes, and sounds absolutely 'connected' to the source.

With a suggested retail price of £1,999, the Apollo 2 isn't without competition, although it's hard to see an absolute direct competitor. Royer's SF12 is similarly priced, but is a passive design, whereas the active SF-24 is nearly double the price. Similarly an AEA R88 gives a passive option, or a stereo pair of Nuvo 8s are active ...but with a fairly tortuous mounting arrangement. The Apollo 2 strikes a neat balance here in terms of price, performance and packaging. And in my humble opinion, sounds exactly like a stereo ribbon should. **i**



/ The ribbon-specific Sontronics shock mount

resolution/VERDICT

PROS Natural, balanced, detailed and solid sound; solidly built; works supremely well at mid and far distance; compact size; RFI filters a useful inclusion in some applications.

CONS Needs a little EQ sometimes when used close up; not as obviously 'retro' looking as its predecessor if that's important to you.x.

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