

SE Electronics Ic1s

Proving that you can improve the breed with attention to form and feel, SE has a valve cardioid that looks the part. **JON THORNTON** puts it through its paces.

HAVING SPENT THE LAST FEW years garnering something of a reputation for producing inexpensive capacitor microphones, which while delivering good sonic performance were always — how can I say it — not exactly the last word in innovative styling, some of SE Electronics' latest offerings are showing that this Chinese manufacturer is paying as much attention to form as to function.

Ic1s is a case in point — a large diaphragm, fixed pattern valve microphone. Although it features the same 1.07-inch diaphragm as the variable pattern Z5600 — albeit in single sided form — and indeed the same tube (ECC83A), SE has elected to give it a very different look to its stablemate.

And very fetching it is too with a slender body finished in light grey and a curved head grille assembly. The look extends to the supplied shockmount, which features a metal tube into which the microphone drops, held in place by a locking ring screwed to the microphone base. A thick metal ring surrounds the elastic suspension, lending a very modern look to the whole assembly. Modern, but heavy — all of that shockmount assembly with the microphone in place makes for a weight that will tax some mic stand clutches, although the swivel joint and locking nut assembly on the mount itself seems to deal with it well enough.

Like all SE mics, the Ic1s (UK£297 + VAT) can be taken apart easily, and a glance at the internals reveals a tidy looking circuit board, a socketed valve and the output transformer. Connection to the remote power supply is via a supplied cable with locking 8-pin connectors, and the power supply itself has nothing but an XLR output and a power switch with associated LED.

Its fixed cardioid response would seem to position the Ic1s as a microphone intended primarily for vocal work, and so this was its first task in the studio. Given

that it shares the diaphragm of the Z5600a, I was expecting it to turn in a very similar performance, but that wasn't the case. And this isn't necessarily a bad thing as I had found the Z5600 to be a little too sharp sounding and unforgiving of sibilance on occasions — particularly on female vocals. The Ic1s still has a distinct presence on female vocals, and one that has a little more edge than, for example, a U87, but at the same time delivers the 'body' of the vocals in a very smooth and warm fashion particularly when used close up. It's difficult to know whether this is down to deliberately different tuning, or simply the presence of a single diaphragm, but it certainly isn't just a single pattern Z5600a.

On male vocals, the story was similar, with the microphone turning in a nicely textured sound with good clarity and definition overlaid on a nicely warm fundamental. Bass extension is good — almost too good in some applications, and the lack of any high-pass filter on the microphone meant that I had to turn to the console's filters quite regularly. The slight edge to the vocal sound disappears quite quickly with even small movements off-axis to the mic, leading to a sound that is very warm, verging on a little woolly to my ears, so this might not be a great choice for very sibilant singers unless you're prepared to wheel in the de-essers.

Turning to acoustic guitar, those same characteristics give a particular sound 'out of the box' as it were, with some nice high-end detail, good transient response and a fullness that flatters even slightly dull sounding instruments. Using it in this application isn't without its problems — chiefly of positioning, as the weight of the assembly and the rather intrusive ring of the shockmount make this something of a challenge. This wouldn't ordinarily be that much of an issue, except for one thing. You see, Ic1s seems to really be most comfortable when worked relatively close to a source, whether that be vocal or guitar. To confirm this, I tried it as a room microphone with a drum kit. Although it turned in a reasonable performance, and to be honest its cardioid pattern probably did it no favours here, compared with an Audix SCX25 in the same position it seemed to lose its sense of warmth, and that nice edge to the sound started to sound more brittle than defined.

Noise isn't a problem — the specs quote 16dB equivalent noise (A-weighted) — and neither is sensitivity as a very healthy output appears from the supply unit. So given its liking for close sources, this makes the absence of any pad a little hard to understand — this wasn't actually a problem in my testing, but then again I didn't really use any really loud sources.

Nevertheless, viewed as a vocal microphone with some other applications, these shortcomings aren't really that problematic, and its looks are certainly bound to appeal to a certain sort of client. As a general-purpose microphone there are probably



more flexible alternatives, but if you are in the market for something to add to your vocal mic palette, Ic1s is certainly worth a listen. ■

PROS

Nice balanced vocal sound; elegant and distinctive looks; works well close up.

CONS

No pad or filter; shockmount might be too intrusive in some applications; not as versatile as it might be.

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