

SE Electronics Gemini

The tide of preposterously affordable Chinese mics seems finally to be on the ebb. Fierce competition has made OEM prospects less appealing while SE Electronics has branched out as a strong brand in its own right. JON THORNTON reports on something a little different.

THE GEMINI IS THE RANGE-TOPPING valve design of SE Electronics' new line of capacitor microphones. Hailing from China, the SE marque has been notable in the past for its provision of extremely competitively priced capacitor microphones. The latest range is no exception to this, but the Gemini weighs in at a not insignificant UK£799 including VAT — well in the ball-park of established European marques, so it needs to offer something that little bit different.

The most obvious difference when you unpack the thing is its sheer size — it's a bit of a porker measuring 8cm in diameter and 22cm in overall height. The build is broadly similar to past SE Electronics microphones — well finished and with no obviously rough edges, but pretty utilitarian. The corporate colour scheme has also changed and is now a more understated grey with a titanium finish on the metal grille. It's an improvement in my opinion.

The reason for the Gemini's girth (and indeed its name) becomes apparent when you poke around under the hood a little more. Yes, it's a valve design, but lurking inside the body of the microphone are not just one, but two valves. The valves in question on the review model are badged as SE Electronics, and are an ECC82 and an ECC83A. Technical documentation is a little thin on the ground, but disassembling the microphone body (a very easy task, in common with previous SE designs) and looking at the circuit boards would seem to indicate that the ECC83A is handling capsule preamplification, and the ECC82 is handling transformerless output duties and the associated impedance conversion. Both valves are socketed rather than soldered in place, which should make replacement a very easy task.

The Gemini has a fixed cardioid pattern, employing a 28mm single-sided gold plated diaphragm. The associated power supply, therefore, has a simple power switch and that's about all. Connection to the microphone is via an

8-pin screw connector, with microphone level output on the usual XLR socket.

The Gemini ships with a fairly rudimentary suspension mount that screws onto the base of the microphone. Fitting the microphone to the suspension mount is easy, fitting the mount to a microphone stand is slightly more challenging. Long boom extensions are going to need seriously counter-weighted boom arms with this baby.

Once powered up and warmed up, the first impressions of the microphone are good.

As you'd expect, there is a fair amount of colouration to the sound, but this is generally pleasant — and there is a distinct feeling of breathiness and HF lift on both male and female vocals. Low frequency extension seems good, if a little lumpy off-axis, and there is a pronounced, but very usable proximity bump that kicks in about 3 to 4 inches from the microphone's capsule.

The physical appearance and choice of design makes it clear that SE is going for the 'vintage' sound, whatever that may be, and once you start loading the microphone up with higher SPLs, the low mids, which had sounded ever so slightly gritty, start to smooth off a lot. The high end never quite manages to take on the 'glassy' characteristic of some of the recent vintage re-issues, but stays sounding quite breathy and ever so slightly sibilant on vocals. That said, the Gemini certainly delivers its own take on that 'big' up-front vocal sound, but possibly with a slightly more contemporary edge.

Moving on, the Gemini was tasked with some 12-string acoustic guitar — always a challenge in terms of revealing detail and complex harmonics. The result was a pleasant, reasonably detailed sound that sounded quite open in those important high mid frequency harmonics, and not at all

cluttered. In comparison with an AKG C414, the Gemini sounded a little fuller on the lower strings, but perhaps not quite as detailed on some of the higher notes when played in isolation. Strummed chords, though, clearly favoured the Gemini over the AKG

resulting in a very solid but still detailed sound, making the 414 sound more than a little fussy in comparison.

The Gemini's noise figures are very respectable, certainly for a valve design. SE quotes equivalent noise as 16dB (A-weighted), and real world performance would seem to verify this. As a room microphone, though, the Gemini is less impressive and this has nothing to do with noise or sensitivity, but more to do with what seems to be a very bumpy off-axis response. Things aren't helped by it being a fixed cardioid pattern clearly, but this probably wouldn't be the first choice of application for any potential user. What is clear to me is that the Gemini is far happier when used close in — whether it be on vocals, guitars or other instruments. It does have a particular sound, but it is a characterful and for the most part a very musical one.

So what's missing? Well, although the majority of users would probably never stray far from the cardioid pattern, a variable polar response might have made the Gemini useful in more situations. And the lack of any pad or high pass filter could be an issue, particularly as I found the Gemini quite susceptible to air-conditioning rumble during the test session.

It's an impressive looking beast to put on the end of a microphone stand, but despite its size and overall look, this isn't a vintage copy. SE's engineers have been brave and resourceful, eschewing easy design solutions and using two valves where they could easily have used one in search of that elusive 'classic' sound. In doing so they've come up with a very respectable microphone that has a sound all of its own. I'd describe it as vintage, but with a distinctly contemporary edge, and sufficiently different and impressive in sound as well as appearance to justify its price point. ■



PROS Size (if that matters); distinctive sound; quiet and detailed.

CONS Size (try getting it on a snare drum!); off-axis response seems a little lumpy; lack of HPF or pad.

EXTRAS SE Electronics has opened a new manufacturing facility in Shanghai.



The facility is manufacturing a new range of mics, including major updates of the current SE1, SE2200 and Z5600.

UK distributor Sonic and SE have signed new contracts to extend the scope of their current European distribution network, and to cut all remaining ties with OEM business. SE Electronics is now the only Chinese manufacturer to exclusively produce its own 'branded' mics.

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