

Does a doubling of valves double the quality?



MICROPHONE

SE Gemini valve condenser microphone

The SE Gemini is a valve mic with a difference, but do its twin valves make it a true star? **Trevor Curwen** reads the signs...

DETAILS

SE GEMINI MICROPHONE

PRICE £799

CONTACT

Distributor: Sonic Distribution
Tel: 01525 84 0400
Web: www.sonic-distribution.com

TECH SPECS

Frequency Response: 20Hz-20KHz
Sensitivity: 12.6mV/Pa - 38± 1dB(OdB=1V/Pa 1000Hz)

IT MAY BE as much about marketing as sound quality, but just about every microphone manufacturer includes a valve (tube) mic in their inventory these days. SE Electronics are no exception with The Gemini, on test here, being one of three valve mics in their array of eight models.

The Gemini, however, is no bog-standard valve mic (if such a thing as a bog standard valve mic exists). While valve mics usually utilise a single valve in their circuitry, the Gemini, as the name implies, has a twin valve topography with a pair of glowing bottles at the business end.

This is a world first according to the SE blurb. So, does doubling the valve count double the performance?

Overview

The Gemini certainly comes well-packaged. All the necessary bits are held secure in a large foam-lined aluminium attache case. Power supply, lead and suspension mount all have their own slots, while the mic itself has its own wooden box inside the case for further protection. The mic itself is bloody big, cylindrical, bulbous and as thick as a donkey's dongler. With a very weighty (1.3kg) construction, the bulk of the mic's

body is heavy brass with a textured matt grey finish. This is topped off by a silver coloured top section with a double layer of basketweave mesh protecting the gold diaphragm.

The valves can be seen through a grid of 35 ventilation holes in the body, but the microphone screws apart for maintenance purposes, so it's possible to get inside and take a closer look. Inside, the two valves are plugged into seatings rather than being soldered in place, so replacing them would be an easy task should it be called for. The rest of the transformerless circuitry looks solid, neat and tidy so no problems there. ▶

ALTERNATIVES

RODE NT K2 £570

The K2 is Rode's latest valve mic, an ultra low noise model with variable polar pattern. www.rodemicphones.com

AKG SOLIDTUBE £749

The Soliddtube is AKG's nearest equivalent mic. It's a cardioid only valve design with bass rolloff and 20dB pad. www.akg.com

AUDIO TECHNICA AT3060 £425 FM140 8/8/9/7/7

A cardioid only valve mic that works from a phantom power source rather than its own power supply. www.audio-technica.co.uk

Connections to the power supply take place via a 4.5 metre cable, which is long enough for the power supply to be kept out of harm's way in most miking situations. The cable fixes into place at both ends by locating the 8 pins and screwing up an external collar for a solid bond.

Besides the cable fixing and IEC mains socket, the power supply box has just an XLR audio output plus a simple on/off switch and light. The Gemini, in fact, isn't blessed with any of the switchable options that one might expect of a mic in this price range. The pickup pattern is cardioid only, and there is no hi-pass (bass cut) filter or attenuation pad. On the latter point, however, the Gemini

can handle SPLs of up to 130dB, so won't exactly be a shrinking violet when faced with some of the louder sounds studio life can offer.

In Use

The first job has to be to get the Gemini on a mic stand, but don't try it with any cheapo lightweight stands. The weight of this thing requires something more substantial. A threaded mount on the mic body allows solid connection into the supplied cradle mount.

Turning the mic on at the PSU, the green LED flashes on and off for a few seconds and the mic comes on with what would probably be a loud pop through the monitors

plenty of depth. This is borne out by the frequency response chart which shows a pretty flat response, but with a gentle rise in the upper end, peaking at about 10kHz.

Moving in closer to the mic there is a definite proximity effect bass lift manifesting itself as warmth in the lower mids that the experienced vocalist can exploit, but there's nothing too heavy here, even taking into account the lack of a physical low cut filter switch. Overall, on vocal duties, the mic is capable of capturing a full-on sound that will have plenty of presence in the mix.

On acoustic guitars the Gemini reproduces all the necessary detail with no apparent problems. This is a sensitive mic that has no problems with the nuances delivered by vibrating strings at different volume levels, and captures transient detail really well. This was particularly apparent on the 12 string where the extra high end harmonic detail of the octave and unison strings confers a distinctive sheen.

Overall, the Gemini delivers a nicely balanced sound with a more airy and less subdued high end that might be typical of a valve mic.

Verdict

So are two valves better than one? Well, that's not really the issue because no matter what a microphone's circuitry and construction happens to be, the question really has to be how well does it perform? In the Gemini's case the answer has to be very well indeed. You get a full bodied sound that might be expected from a valve mic coupled with a clear and detailed sparkly top end. It's a great first choice for vocals, but is capable of being used on tasks that require a large diaphragm condenser.

SE are known for their reasonable pricing, but £799 isn't exactly budget territory. Don't be put off, though, as it's not an awful lot to pay for a microphone that is this good. **FM**

THIS IS A MIC THAT CAPTURES A BIG EXPANSIVE SOUND FROM A CLOSELY PLACED SOURCE



It really is worth the cash

should the output be routed to a live channel. After allowing a short but reasonable warm up period the mic is ready for use and it does get very warm – those 35 holes drilled in the body aren't just there to look pretty.

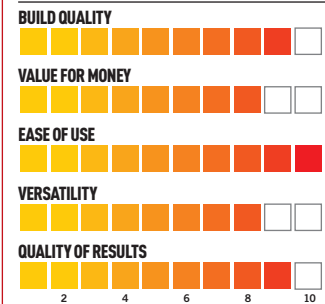
The primary task for this mic will be to record vocals, and the resulting sound is very pleasant. This is a mic that captures a big expansive sound from a closely placed source. Recorded vocals have an enhanced airy breathiness about them, although not at the expense of other frequencies, which seem to be present in the correct proportions for a naturally balanced sound with

Other SE Mics

The Gemini is just one of three Chinese built valve mics in the SE range, the others being the ICIS (£349) and the Z5600A (£399), both of which were reviewed in *FM155*. While the ICIS is another cardioid only device, the Z5600 has access to nine different polar patterns, namely Cardioid, Omni, Figure of 8, and six intermediate stages.

The other mics in the SE range are solid state condensers. Three of these are small diaphragm types running from the no frills cardioid SE1A (£69) and the cardioid SE3 (£121) with low cut filter and 10dB pad to the more expensive SE2A (£149) which is equipped with cardioid, omni and hyper-cardioid patterns. The final two models are large diaphragm condensers – in terms of polar patterns, the solid state counterparts of the ICIS and Z5600A. The SE2200A (£149) has a fixed cardioid pattern while the Z3300A (£298) has cardioid, omni and figure of 8 options.

VERDICT SE GEMINI MIC



A valve microphone with a sound of its own that is ideal for recording upfront vocals.