

DAVE FOISTER finds a curiosity in Latvia's finest pays off, as far from sucking audio into nothingness, JZ's Black Hole delivers the finest sound despite merciless testing.



The little club of people making microphones is truly cosmopolitan, with companies from China, Australia, Russia, and elsewhere rubbing shoulders with the older traditional grandees; so it should be no surprise to encounter a manufacturer from Latvia breaking out into the mainstream market. JZ Microphones is new to me, but if the strange device I'm looking at here is anything to go by, they will be familiar enough before long.

The Black Hole is available in three variants; the BH-1 here is the original and the most flexible, and consequently the most expensive. Its startling body is black and has a big hole in it (hence the name, duh) and succeeds in its obvious aim of being eye-catching. It's a side-fire large-diaphragm condenser, and has a dual-diaphragm capsule to allow multiple polar patterns. The other two versions have a single diaphragm and are therefore restricted to cardioid – the difference between those two is that one has a pad and the other doesn't. The finish and quality of materials is excellent; the big capsule is clearly visible through the surrounding rectangular basket, showing its lack of centre terminal and the well-finished diaphragms. Obviously it's not apparent to the naked eye, but the diaphragms feature a patented variable sputtering using a special alloy – the details appear to be a trade secret.

## JZ BLACK HOLE

### Multi-Pattern Studio Microphone

#### Not Just For Effect

The big rectangular hole may be primarily for visual effect, but it is put to good use by being the means by which the Black Hole's stand mount is attached. Protruding pins top and bottom of the cut-out engage with arms mounted resiliently on a bar which is in turn attached to a stand-mounting swivel, giving the appearance of a vertical abacus; this provides a degree of shock resistance and also allows the microphone to be swivelled sideways without moving the stand or unscrewing anything. The down side is that it's not securely locked off as a result, but it's a reasonably firm mount. The one I got needed attention with a screwdriver to tighten up the main stand-mount swivel.

For more elaborate mounting, JZ now does a dedicated combined shockmount and wind shield assembly, which complements the unusual styling of the microphone very well, although I didn't get to try it. The standard kit comprises the microphone, the internally-fitting mount, and a strange key or screwdriver whose function, in the absence of a manual, remained a mystery until I found a photo on the JZ website showing it as part of the stand-mount swivel, so no doubt with that in place the whole thing should become a bit more rigidly locked. It all comes in a beautiful wooden box, but you nearly didn't get this review as it took two of us to work out how to open it. There's no clasp or lock; instead it's held shut with an immensely powerful magnet, and wrenching it open nearly took my fingernails off. Clearly you'd need to exercise the same caution when putting this down near tapes and hard drives as you would with a ribbon microphone.

The only switch on the Black Hole is for selecting its polar pattern, and is hidden away on the inside surface of the big cut-out. The usual three – cardioid, omni, and figure-of-eight – are on offer, and the frequency response curves printed on the cardboard outer packaging suggest that there's very little difference between them in that respect. Otherwise they show a very promising level response with a little lift around 10kHz and a smooth

roll-off towards 20kHz, where it's 10dB down as it is at 20Hz. This looks like a classic large-diaphragm response, combining warmth and presence, and this is borne out by its sound, as we shall see. There's no pad switch, but as the spec quotes a maximum SPL of almost 135dB there should be no need for one. There's also no high-pass filter on any of the models. The preamplifier circuitry is discrete Class A, and its output is on a recessed gold-plated XLR.

#### Classical Shoot-Out

Everything about the Black Hole cries out to have it put in front of a singer. I used it on a quartet of classical voices, putting it in a shoot-out with a 414; on the first voice, the soprano, we were immediately happy with the Black Hole. It can't be said to be completely neutral, as there's a subtle but undeniable presence boost, but it's not enough to get strident, and provides a useful amount of flattery. The top end is nicely under control and the lower parts of the spectrum are smooth and full. This should make it work well on violin, and indeed it does – I used it for some unaccompanied Bach, which exposes the microphone mercilessly, and it performed extremely well, giving a detailed but never harsh sound. Later I had a folk duo in the studio featuring a melodeon,

and put the Black Hole on the right-hand melodic end of the instrument. Any kind of squeeze box can get a little bit insistent if you're not careful, but the Black Hole made it bright and punchy without being annoying. It was also notable how quiet and uncoloured the off-axis pickup of the adjacent violin was.

Finally, I had some percussion overdubs to do, with two guys beating the crap out of a conga and some strange ethnic drum (life's never dull in my studio). I put the Black Hole near the top of the conga, nervous of the SPL, but it passed the test with flying colours, delivering all the important transients, plenty of body, and no hint of distortion. Once again the spill from the other drum was well-controlled and clean.

This microphone looks like it's going to be fun right out of the box, and it is. There's lots more I'd want to try it on, because the variety of things it's done well for me so far suggest it can handle pretty much anything and deliver the goods. Further models are eagerly awaited, and if the prototypes shown on the website are anything to go by, they'll make the Black Hole look positively ordinary. Meanwhile, check out Latvia's finest as soon as you can. **FAW**

#### INFORMATION

Ⓛ BH-1 - EUR 1690.00, BH-2 - EUR 1299.00, BH-3 - EUR 1395.00, Shock & pop kit for BH - EUR 245.00

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#### THE REVIEWER

Since doing the Surrey (UK) Tonmeister course, DAVE FOISTER has produced, engineered, and played on innumerable recordings in the classical, commercial, folk, jazz, and TV music areas, as well as live sound operation. He currently manages the Guildhall School of Music and Drama recording department, and spends spare time watching racing cars and wishing he was driving them.