

**DAVE FOISTER
finds quality,
character and
valve in the first of
new wave of
microphones from
SE Electronics.**

SE Electronics burst on to the scene as a manufacturer in its own right last year, having previously made microphones for other people. We'll all have encountered them in some form, most likely as the black U87-shaped SE1000 that was customised and re-badged by several more familiar manufacturers. Now the time was right for their own range of eye-catching models with high aspirations and the low prices expected from a Chinese company. After a few changes of direction, SE has settled down in partnership with the UK's Sonic Distribution, who shares in the manufacturing venture and distributes exclusively in Europe. The first fruits of the set-up include two valve models, the Z5600A and the Icis, whose extraordinarily low prices demonstrate the advantages of the collaboration.

Both come impressively packaged in large aluminium flight cases, which contain smart wooden boxes for the microphones, dedicated power supplies, capable-looking suspension mounts, and chunky multicore cables. This is

first choice on every occasion, but for certain jobs it cries out to be stuck on a stand — it's going to save you reaching for the EQ to make that voice or sax stand out from the crowd. That's not to say it's over-bright, certainly not harsh — it just has plenty of presence in that all-important vocal area that often translates into enhancement of other instruments too. And this is not at the expense of its noise floor either, which is commendably low; at the other end of the scale it can handle 130dB for only 0.5 percent THD, which is why it doesn't need a pad.

The Icis is not so clearly pitched at the retro market; despite its finish, it has a more contemporary shape, and its method of attachment to its suspension creates a slicker overall image. The mount consists of a suspended sleeve, which slips over the microphone body after a flange has been unscrewed at the base; the flange is then put back on to hold everything together with a very reassuring firmness. It might be a little easier to poke into awkward corners than its big brother, although it's probably fair to



SE ELECTRONICS ICIS & Z5600A

VALVE MICROPHONES

the standard package — there are no accessories to buy. The microphones themselves clearly set out to evoke associations with the past, with a powder grey finish reminiscent of original C12s, and in the case of the 5600A, a very familiar shape.

The Z5600A is a development of SE's earlier Z5600, with a redesigned body housing and improved PCB layout, giving better performance both acoustically and electrically. It retains the over-sized 1.07-inch capsule of the original, making it even more of a large-diaphragm microphone than you might think. It's the more flexible of the two, as its power supply carries a large rotary switch for selecting the polar pattern. It's an AKG-style nine-position switch, with omni one end, figure-of-eight the other, and cardioid in the middle, with those subtle yet frequently very useful intermediate settings in between. That's it for controls — no pad, no filter, just a red power LED that usefully flashes for a while after switch-on, settling to the accompaniment of a relay click inside that suggests the valve is warmed up and ready to go. The mains input and switch, and the output XLR, are on the back, while the multiway connector for the microphone cable is on the front. Unusually, both ends of the cable are the same, with female connectors, removing the possibility of feeding it across the room the wrong way round (it could do with being a bit longer though). The connector locking ring clamps the suspension mount to the base of the body and the whole thing sits firmly and securely, although it's very big and has no option of mounting it without the suspension.

To Trade or To Exploit?

A microphone of this kind has to do one of two mutually-exclusive things: either it trades on the perceived transparency of valve circuitry, or it exploits the distinctive sonic character it can give. The SE opts enthusiastically for the latter approach and does it well. This may not be your

say that you wouldn't be wanting to hide either of them away but pose with them as much as possible. Electrically the Icis is very similar to the Z5600A, with the same capsule but no polar pattern adjustment — this is a straightforward cardioid pure and simple. The power supply is therefore a plug-and-forget box with no controls on it at all. The Icis's specs are otherwise the same, and it shows in the close similarity of the sound. Again, an ideal vocal microphone, that being one of several applications where a choice of polar patterns is less commonly needed. And both have that undervalued advantage that they look the business, are big and imposing, and will make clients feel important.

Conclusion

Even with the falling prices we've become used to in the microphone market, the price tags on these two still come as something of a shock. Imagine the least you'd expect to pay for a package like this — then halve it. If there's a danger in this, it's that people might make judgements about them without giving them the courtesy of listening to them. If you're in any doubt, Sonic will lend you one on free approval (as they do with all their hardware) so you can check it out for yourself. You won't be disappointed — in fact, you probably won't want to give it back. □

INFORMATION

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