

SE ELECTRONICS Z5600A

Affordable multi-pattern valve condenser microphones are a rare sight. So, when SE Electronics recently updated its Z5600, we grabbed the new A model as fast as we could. **Huw Price** warms to the theme.

For many enthusiasts, the looks and the vibe valve mics create are almost as important as the sound. So, is it all image without substance? Apparently not. The Z5600A is an update on the previous Z5600 and the body shape is completely different. The original was a more rounded, silver affair reminiscent of the original Neumann U47 in style – if not in sound.

Powder-grey seems to be emerging as something of a corporate identity for SE mics, but in this case, the powder coating is designed to dampen resonance in the body shell. All that extra space inside has enabled SE to redesign the printed circuit board and install better-quality components. The power supply has a nine-position pattern selector that switches noiselessly, but the original 1.07-inch capsule remains the same.

The high-quality multi-core cable that connects the Z5600A to its power supply is almost five metres long and the screw-on connectors at either end provide a secure and safe connection. They are also notched to ensure that all the pins and holes line up correctly, representing a safer solution than the flimsy multi-pin Cannon-style connectors commonly found on cheaper valve microphones.

The Z5600A package contains some extra goodies, including an excellent, if bulky, suspension mount, a smart aluminium flight case with moulded recesses to hold everything securely in place and a padded, wooden carry case for the microphone itself.

Inside the mic, the layout is tidy, but the soldering is a bit shoddy, with some stray blobs scattered about. At the base is a chunky shielded output transformer and an SE-branded ECC83 (12AX7) valve sitting near the capsule. Although rarely found in microphones during the 1950s and

1960s, ECC83s seem to be a fairly popular choice. They provide oodles of gain and sound harmonically rich, plus they are in plentiful supply thanks to the continued enthusiasm of guitarists for orange glowing things in their amplifiers.

Although the Z5600A can handle high SPLs, some recordists like to match valve mics with retro preamps – many without input attenuation pads. In addition, separation concerns often force us into close-mic'ing, with the accompanying proximity-induced bass boost. Sadly, the Z5600A is not fitted with either a pad switch or bass rolloff.

Multiple personalities

After switching it on, a red LED flickers until the microphone is ready for use. Starting off in cardioid, the pattern is tight, with impressive rear rejection, although the off-axis response loses high end. Omni mode is quite impressive for a large-capsule microphone, with just a small degree of treble loss side-on. Both the front and back of the figure-of-8 pattern sound balanced, and side rejection is very effective. Vocals sound deep, rich and present and, like all classic large-capsule condensers, the proximity effect can be exploited to beef things up. In cardioid mode, the slightly spiky high frequencies of the original 5600 have been tamed and, overall, the sound is more obviously 'valvey' than both the old Z5600 and SE Gemini.

The Z5600A sounds richer and fatter, although there is definite colouration in the midrange that will enhance some sources more than others. Some of the low-end grunt disappears in omni, but the highs do acquire a silvery sheen, suggesting the Z5600 is well-suited to ambient recording duties where high-frequency losses can be problematic. The figure-of-8 response sounds more focussed than cardioid, with tight lows and a

strong midrange. Those in-between settings are useful, too, and we particularly enjoyed a halfway setting between omni and cardioid for acoustic guitar.

Conclusion

Although some of the older valve microphones were built for accuracy, those that have become collectable classics tend to be characterful and coloured. The Z5600A falls into the latter camp, so you will need to audition it – but Sonic Distribution does allow a seven-day trial period. It comes a lot closer to most people's idea of a classic valve mic sound than many modern condensers and the multiple pickup patterns enable you to fine-tune the response to adapt to various room acoustics or alter to tonality of the sound depending on the source. **MTM**

SUMMARY

KEY FEATURES

- Large-capsule valve condenser
- Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz
- Sensitivity: 20mV/Pa - 34±1dB
- Polar patterns: cardioid, omni, figure-of-8, plus six intermediates
- Impedance: <=200Ω
- Max SPL: 130dB

WHY BUY

- Rich valve sound
- Nine pickup patterns
- Great build quality
- Superb shockmount
- Classy flight case and mic box
- Noiseless pickup pattern switching
- Great value for money

WALK ON BY

- No attenuation pad
- No bass rolloff
- Slightly shoddy soldering inside
- Might be too coloured for some

VERDICT

A sweet-sounding, multi-pattern valve microphone for an amazingly low price. Bass rolloff and attenuation switches would have made it hard to fault.



Z5600A

Manufacturer **SE Electronics**

Price **£399**

Contact **Sonic Distribution**
01525 840400

www.sonic-distribution.com

METHOD SPOT Swap shop

Although the SE ECC83 valve sounds fine, you could upgrade to a classic Mullard or GE, or even substitute the ECC83 for a 12AY7 or an AKG-style 6072 for a clearer sound – without needing to alter the circuit.