

The 5600a: a tad more flexible than the ICIS...

DETAILS

SE Z5600A

PRICE £399

TECH SPEC

Contact: Sonic Distribution
Tel: 01525 840400

Web: www.sonic-distribution.co.uk

Frequency response: 20Hz to 20kHz

Sensitivity: 20mV/Pa
-34 +/-1dB

(0dB = 1V/Pa 1000Hz)

Polar pattern:

Z5600a: Nine settings from omni to figure-of-8

Impedance: <=200 Ohm

Equivalent noise: 16dB

(A-weighted)

Max SPL for 0.5%

THD@1000Hz: 130dB

MICROPHONES

SE Z5600a and ICIS Valve Mics

China's SE Electronics return with some surprisingly Germanic-looking mics. **Jon Musgrave** takes a closer look...

IN RECENT TIMES, the combination of economic necessity and better manufacturing standards in the Far East has led European and US music technology companies to shift some, if not all, manufacturing to China. Sometimes this has been done in a covert way (maybe with 'designed in the UK' stickered, and no country of manufacture mentioned) and at other times more openly. Clearly the time has come to assess equipment purely on performance, as unless you're Gordon Brown, where it's made should make no difference.

Gimmie the SE

So, on to the mics. Although based in the US, mic manufacturer SE Electronics, headed up by Chinese ex-pat Siwei Zou, has quickly built a reputation for quality, affordable, Chinese-built mics. But like other manufacturers who produce abroad, much of this process is performed by hand. So in the case of their two newest additions (the Z5600a and ICIS), you're looking at a pair of predominantly hand-constructed and surprisingly 'Germanic'-looking valve mics. The combination of the matt-grey casing and sheer

scale of these mics makes you feel like you've happened upon a lost consignment of post-war East German technology. What's more, with both the Z5600a and ICIS sporting ECC83 valve designs, you could easily be forgiven for wondering where the last few decades have gone.

Detail

The significant difference between the Z5600a and ICIS, aside from their shape, is their pick-up patterns. The Z5600a uses a back-to-back capsule design combined with a selector on the power supply to offer nine polar patterns, going from omni to figure of eight. The ICIS on the other hand uses a single capsule to achieve a fixed cardioid design.

Both mics utilise the same 1.07 inch gold edge mount diaphragm design.

Being valve designs, these mics come with external power supplies (again grey). The power supplies are pretty simple affairs (on/off switch with red LED, multi-pin mic input, XLR output), with the Z5600a also sporting the nine-way pattern selector. The only things missing from both are pads and low frequency roll-offs. Both suspension cradles are sturdy and easy to fit, with the Z5600a probably the more stylish as it slips over the lower half of the mic casing. Finally, both come in padded wooden cases boxed up in a quality aluminium flight case.

Taking a look at specifications for large capsule condenser mics can be surprisingly misleading. Although neither the ICIS nor Z5600a seem to come with mic-specific frequency response graphs, a quick look at the website reveals a couple of charts. The ICIS has a reasonably flat response from 120Hz to 6kHz, with a gradual lift up to about 12kHz. The Z5600a seems to have a slight lift up to about 5kHz and then again at about 12kHz for cardioid, with a low lift at around 80Hz. As far as noise is concerned, both mics quote an A-weighted figure of 16dB. This is reasonable for a valve mic, as is the sensitivity of 20mV/Pa. Finally, both have a maximum SPL of 130dB.

In use

The first thing you'll notice with both these mics, is the on/off LED flashes for 20 seconds after power up. There was nothing in the literature about this and it appears to be a

DETAILS

SE ICIS

PRICE £349

TECH SPEC

Frequency response: 20Hz to 20kHz
Sensitivity: 20mV/Pa
 -34 +/- 1dB
 (0dB = 1V/Pa 1000Hz)
Polar pattern:
ICIS: Cardioid
Impedance: <=200 Ohm
Equivalent noise:
 16dB (A-weighted)
Max SPL for 0.5%
THD@1000Hz: 130dB

The ICIS: a tad less flexible than the 5600a...

The SE Range

Although we're looking at a couple of their valve mics here, aside from the Gemini (the twin valve flagship model), the majority of their range is actually solid-state condenser mics.

The ultra-affordable SE1a (£69), SE2 (£149) and SE3 (£121) are all small capsule condensers, with a matched stereo pair of SE1s also available. The SE2200a (£149) and SE3300 (£298) are both class A discrete large capsule condensers, with the latter a 3-option multi-pattern mic and the former a fixed-pattern cardioid. The SE3, SE3300 and SE2200a all include 100Hz roll-off and -10dB pad selectors. But hardly surprisingly, the flagship Gemini valve mic (£799) is the one that's getting the most attention. Again, it's a fixed pattern cardioid mic, but rather strangely uses a twin-valve stage (12AU7 and 12AX7) combined with a pretty large 35mm diaphragm. The result is a pretty flat-response mic with a gentle lift at 10kHz.

WITH THEIR TANK-LIKE CONSTRUCTION THEY SHOULD LAST FOR YEARS...

simple power-on thing, rather than some indication of a problem. Given the weight of these mics, the sturdy cradles seem appropriate, but other nice touches include the screw-locking multicore connectors.

With both mics sharing a capsule design, you'd assume they'd sound very similar and in many respects they do. The top end is quite bright and with the Z5600a set to cardioid, the off-axis response is very similar. The 180-degree rejection isn't too severe and the pattern feels broad: no bad thing if you're not trying to isolate too much. However, in testing, the ICIS did seem to exhibit less in the way of proximity effect than the Z5600a set to cardioid, but in contrast felt slightly clearer in the top end, which corresponds with the graphs. The omni response is less accurate than you'd get from a small capsule condenser. The figure of eight response, however, is pretty good, and with six other midway polar patterns to choose from this makes for a seriously flexible mic.

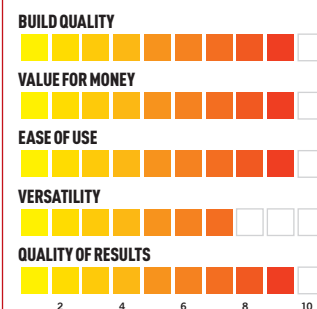
My overall impression of the sound of both is very favourable, and certainly way beyond their cost. Combined with their tank-like construction and sturdy accessories they should last for years. The commonplace ECC83 valve inside is also easy to get to and change. The only disappointment is lack of pad option.

Conclusion

The Z5600a and ICIS prove that reasonable price doesn't necessarily mean compromised quality. I suppose you get a slightly better quality finish on the super-expensive mics, but aside from that, there's little to differentiate them. For the image-conscious amongst us they actually look really cool too (in a post-war sort of way).

The market for affordable mics is fiercely competitive, and these are certainly contenders for best of the bunch. The whole package has a feeling of quality about it that you just don't get from some of the other manufacturers. **FM**

VERDICT ICIS



Amazingly sturdy mic and sounds great for the money. A tad less flexible than the 5600.

ALTERNATIVES

GROOVE TUBES GT67 CAROID VALVE MIC (£399)

Utilises Groove Tubes resonator disc design to improve top end response and a super miniature GT valve, hardly surprisingly. www.groovetubes.com

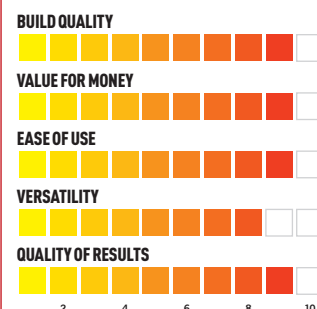
RODE K2 MULTI-PATTERN VALVE (£400)

Replacement for the NTK is a surprisingly low noise model. www.rodem.com.au

ADK TT MULTI-PATTERN VALVE (£500)

Nine polar patterns and class A 6072a valve design. www.adkmic.com

VERDICT Z5600A



Again, great value and built like a tank. You really shouldn't care where these are built.