

Korby Convertible

Let's ignore, for a moment, the fact that the Korby Convertible conjures up images of a chromed and finned gas-guzzling monster that should have emerged from General Motors in the 1950s because it's actually a mic system that emulates classics. **JON THORNTON** ponders the emulation or recreation question.



THE KORBY CONVERTIBLE is also known as the KAT-4 system and offers a microphone system with interchangeable capsules that aim to emulate classic and highly sought-after mic designs. Opening up the substantial briefcase that the unit is supplied in reveals the microphone body complete with one capsule fitted, and space for the other capsules, which are wrapped up in very classy looking pouches made from what looks like thin wooden veneer. Also included is the remote power supply and a shockmount.

The microphone body itself is a simple tubular design, with a light coloured powder-coated finish. Enclosed within the fairly unassuming casing is a hand-wired tube-based preamplifier and associated electronics. All of the components are said to be hand-picked and tested to meet the exact tolerances required.

Each of the supplied capsules has a physically identical appearance with a metal grille surrounded by a bright metal framework, and matches the diameter of the microphone body exactly. So much so, in fact, that if you weren't aware that the capsules were interchangeable, you'd never guess. Given that there was no documentation included in the review kit, I looked long and hard at the spare capsules and their four-pin connectors trying to ascertain the exact mode of removal. In the end, after a deep breath (*A very big breath at these prices. Ed*), a firm tug detached it easily. The capsules are designed to be 'hot-



swappable' — in the sense that they can be changed even when the microphone body is powered up, not forgetting to mute the audio path of course!

Although they look identical externally, squinting through the mesh grilles reveals that there are significant differences in the supplied capsules in terms of design and method of wiring. Clearly, this is more than just different tunings of the same diaphragm design and instead a much more sophisticated approach to emulating classic microphone characteristics.

Which brings us to an interesting point for debate — emulation or recreation? There are an increasing number of modern emulations of vintage microphones out there now, as well as reissues by manufacturers of some of their more 'classic' models. By definition, none of them can be truly original — although some of them can sound impressively close in character to the originals. On the other hand, some of the original vintage microphones still out there are going to be naturally degraded in terms of their sound, or repaired/modified/upgraded to the extent that they are not really 'original' either.

All of which must pose something of a dilemma for the manufacturers of these new microphones. Having said that, there are probably two factors to bear in mind. The first is that most engineers, either through personal experience or word-of-mouth, would probably have a fairly succinct short-list of the most desirable of vintage microphones. And that list would probably contain the Neumann U47, Neumann U67, AKG C12 and ELAM 251. The second factor is that somebody like Tracy Korby, with his extensive experience of using, repairing and modifying these classic designs — not to mention designing his own much praised microphones — is probably better placed than most to determine exactly where on that spectrum between emulation and recreation a new design should fit.

So it comes as no surprise that the first four capsules offered for the Convertible system are labelled 47, 67M, C12 and 251. After all, why confuse the issue? Ah, well — it's actually not that simple anyway. Firstly, the 67M capsule isn't a recreation of the original, but a recreation of a modification of the original design, aimed at giving more high-end presence. And both the 47 and the 251 capsule work as fixed pattern cardioids rather than the switchable patterns of their inspirations.

I'm not going to (because without the original references it would be hard to) get into any debate here as to how close the individual capsules sound to the originals. Rather, let's just evaluate how they sound. The 251 capsule, on both male and female vocals is probably the sweetest sounding of the bunch, and is the one that grabs your attention most easily — a full sound with great mid-range presence and a smooth HF lift that can take a lot of EQ without sounding at all brittle.

The C12, to my ears, sounds the most neutral of the lot, but with plenty of high-end resolution both close in and at a distance — this sounded great on male vocals and at a medium distance on a string quartet. The 47 capsule, as you might expect, had the least HF presence

of the four, but more than made up for this with a richness to the low-end and mids that complimented some voices, and worked well as a single drum overhead. Again, like the 251 capsule, the 47 took EQ well allowing considerable sonic adjustment without ever sounding strained or harsh, particularly when dialling in a little more 'sheen' to the sound.

The surprise of the bunch, though, was the 67M, which delivered an effortlessly 'big' male vocal sound right out of the box, but one that sounded contemporary rather than vintage — lots of definition in the high end together with a terrific warmth to the lower registers. Which goes to prove that sometimes the exact recreation approach is not always the best.

With just a single set of electronics, the Convertible was never going to be a shameless recreation of the classic designs (although Korby apparently has a number of other microphone bodies in the pipeline, potentially offering many more mix and match permutations). What you do get, though, is a very useful and broad palette of sounds, that is incredibly easy to pick from. Finding the right mic for a particular singer is an awful lot quicker when it consists of simply muting the channels and swapping a capsule.

And all of the capsules sound extremely good. The bottom line is this — if you want the originals, go and buy them if you can find them. But if you want the flexibility of four great sounding microphones, which pay more than a little homage to classic designs (and at a fraction of the price), the Convertible is well worth a listen. ■

PROS All of the capsules are eminently useable and sound good; flexibility; terrific attention to detail in design and build; hot-swapping makes capsule choice quick and easy; capsules can be bought singly if budgets are tight.

CONS The whole kit is quite pricey; second-hand values probably not as good as the originals; not sure whether those delightful wooden capsule cases would survive rigorous use.

EXTRAS Korby Convertible Kat 4 UK£4675 (+ VAT)

Korby Convertible Kat 3 UK£4250 (+ VAT)

Korby Convertible Kat 2 UK£3660 (+ VAT)

Korby Convertible Kat 1 UK£3075 (+ VAT)

Korby Convertible Capsule UK£795 (+ VAT)

Korby Convertible mic body and PSU UK£2395 (+ VAT)

Korby Convertible Road Case UK£160 (+ VAT)



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