

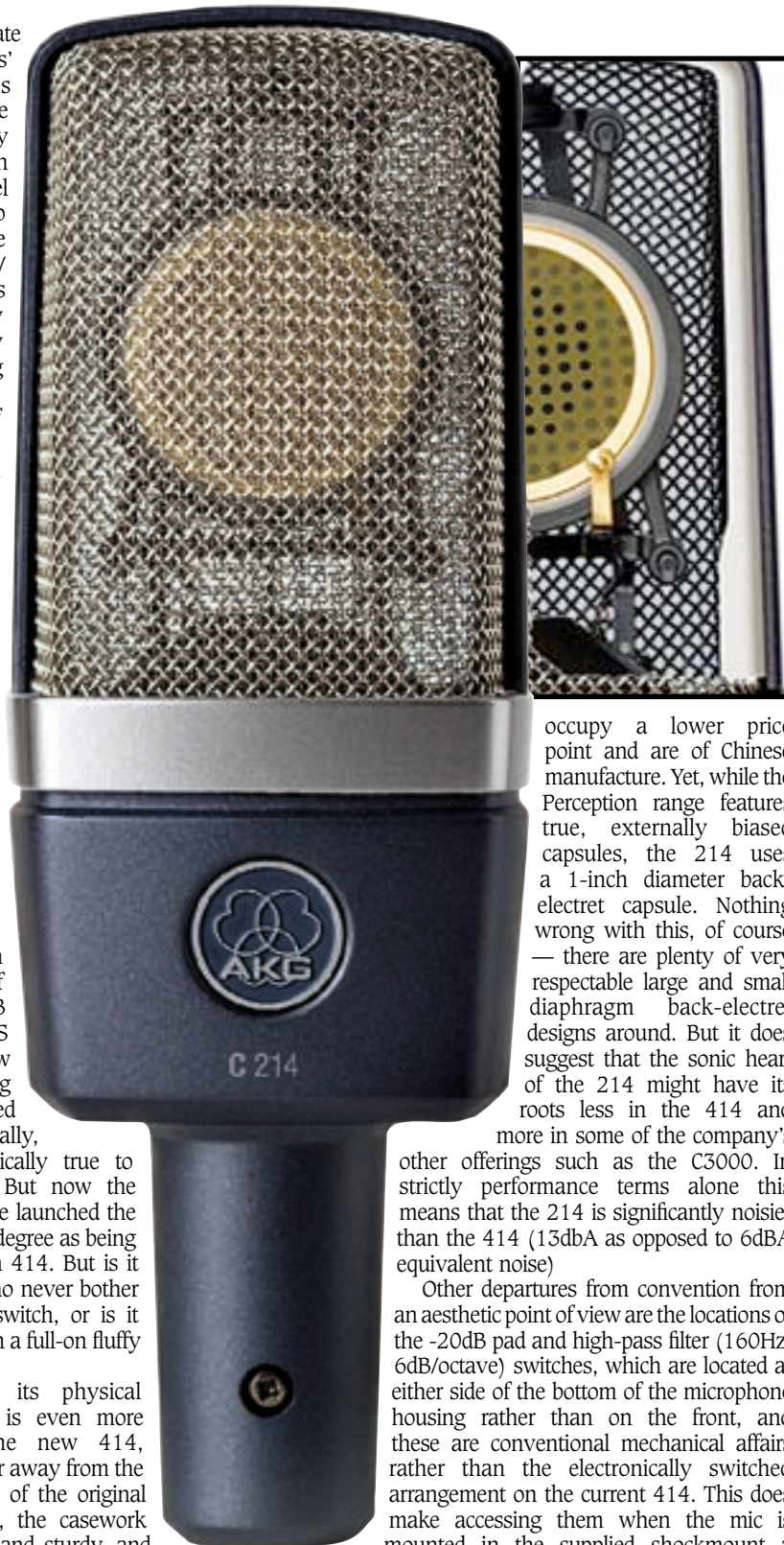
AKG C214

We all need references, be they sonic or operational. **JON THORNTON** encounters a mic that would seem to derive from his own personal microphone 'starting point' and finds himself calling for a towel...

Any fans of the late Douglas Adams' Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy will undoubtedly be aware of the exhortation that you 'keep your towel with you'. For those who haven't come across the book/radio play/TV series/film in question, a towel is supposedly the singularly most useful item to carry around the galaxy, serving a multitude of functions and getting you out of tight corners.

Let's face it — in audio terms we all have our own equivalent, whether it be a favoured piece of outboard, a pair of monitors or a microphone. For me, and I suspect for many others, it has to be AKG's C414. Grab hold of a flightcase with half a dozen of them in and there are very few recording scenarios that you can't deal with. Of course, this cosy familiarity has been rocked on occasion by the introduction of updated models, the most recent of which was the replacement of the venerable C414-B ULS with the newer XLS and XLII variants. A new capsule and housing took some getting used to visually and sonically, but they remained basically true to the same core values. But now the good folks in Vienna have launched the C214, marketed to some degree as being effectively a fixed-pattern 414. But is it really a 414 for those who never bother with the pattern select switch, or is it more of a hand towel than a full-on fluffy bath type?

Initial reactions to its physical appearance are that it is even more 'rounded off' than the new 414, inexorably moving further away from the chiselled trapezoid shape of the original 414s. On the plus side, the casework seems well put together and sturdy, and 'Made in Vienna' is stamped prominently on the underside. This fact alone differentiates it from AKG's recent Perception microphones, which unashamedly



occupy a lower price point and are of Chinese manufacture. Yet, while the Perception range features true, externally biased capsules, the 214 uses a 1-inch diameter back-electret capsule. Nothing wrong with this, of course — there are plenty of very respectable large and small diaphragm back-electret designs around. But it does suggest that the sonic heart of the 214 might have its roots less in the 414 and more in some of the company's other offerings such as the C3000. In strictly performance terms alone this means that the 214 is significantly noisier than the 414 (13dBa as opposed to 6dBa equivalent noise)

Other departures from convention from an aesthetic point of view are the locations of the -20dB pad and high-pass filter (160Hz, 6dB/octave) switches, which are located at either side of the bottom of the microphone housing rather than on the front, and these are conventional mechanical affairs rather than the electronically switched arrangement on the current 414. This does make accessing them when the mic is mounted in the supplied shockmount a little trick, though not impossible. As well as the shockmount the package also includes a 'sock'-type pop shield and a hard carrying case.

So — the moment of truth when patched in, powered up and settled down. Of course, there was only ever going to be one choice for comparison purposes, and that is the 414. In deference to the march of progress, I chose the newer 414 XLS rather than one of the older B-ULS variants and also because internal inspection of the capsule assembly of the C214 shows a far greater similarity in terms of internal suspension and mounting to the most recent 414. A quick walk check around both microphones with speech is all that is required to establish that there are substantial sonic differences between the two when the 414 was set to a cardioid pattern.

First, the 214 is more obviously 'voiced' than the 414. There's a very pronounced HF peak that makes it much brighter sounding than the 414, coupled with a general lift in the low mids and a much more exaggerated proximity bump. The 414 is less 'scooped' sounding and seems to have a much better low frequency extension. Both microphones have similarly even off-axis response, although the 214 has noticeably less rear rejection.

Moving to acoustic guitar showed that both microphones captured transient and harmonic detail well but the tonal characteristics so obvious with speech were even more obvious here. Whereas the 414 delivered a neutral, honest representation of the guitar, the 214 was a little bit more forward sounding and seemed to exaggerate the fundamental tones a little more. But here's the thing, I actually preferred the sound of the 214 in this particular application not just because of the voicing in its response but also, I think, because of the difference in rear rejection mentioned earlier. In some respects, this made the 214 sound more like I'd expect an omni microphone to sound in this particular application, pulling in a little more of the room sound.

As ever, though, it's horses for courses and in some other applications — just in front of a kick drum, and as a kit overhead — the 414 sounded leagues better to me; not as splashy on the kit, and with far more low frequency grunt on the kick. Sung vocals — as ever it's more about matching the microphone to the singer — and on this particular (male) vocalist the 214's more forward sound won the day. Which makes it officially a draw.

So, is the 214 effectively a fixed pattern 414? Absolutely not. Is it a decent microphone in its own right? Unequivocally yes. A fairer point of comparison might be with Audio Technica's 4033 or 4040, with which it shares a lot of similarities. But crucially, if I didn't need the variable patterns, could the 214 step up and become my 'towel'? That's a very personal question (*You wouldn't want to share my towel, for example. Ed*), but I have to say not. Even though I preferred it in some applications to the 414 while reviewing it, I still wouldn't have the trust in it that I have in the original to cope with the unknown. But taken for what it is, it's a well engineered, useful microphone that deserves to succeed at what is a very crowded price point (UK£385 + VAT). There are far worse choices you could make. Like listening to Vagon poetry. ■

PROS Well engineered; good value for money; forward voicing suits some applications.

CONS Not a fixed pattern 414; fiddly pad and HPF switches; noisier than its sibling.

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