

Neumann TLM49

Adding meaningfully to a range of products that includes a number of classics is a tough task when you don't want to be accused of tokenism, but Neumann has achieved it with a 'budget' model. JON THORNTON can believe his ears.

I T MUST BE DIFFICULT for a microphone manufacturer with a history and pedigree like Neumann to release a new microphone these days. In an age where we've become accustomed to seeing large diaphragm condensers at ridiculously low prices, it's a trend that has put pressure on price points at all levels, and conscious that any corners cut in build quality or performance are likely to reflect badly on the marque as whole, it must be tempting to just stick with the *status quo*.

Tempting, but not necessarily good business, which is why this microphone has such a lot riding on it. Not because it is necessarily revolutionary — it's a fixed-pattern cardioid large diaphragm condenser — but because you get the sense that everything about this microphone — its size, looks, sound, construction and price point — has been a very tricky balancing act.

Starting with size and construction, there's absolutely nothing here to suggest that you're getting anything other than rock-solid Neumann quality. Unashamedly taking its rather retro styling cues from the venerable M49 and M50, the TLM49 is a squat, purposeful looking thing. The extremely large, wide meshed head grille

protects a classic K47 diaphragm, as employed in the company's legendary U47.

Internally, as you would expect from the TLM designation, the output stage is solid state throughout with not a transformer in sight, and externally no switches or controls get in the way of its classic looks. The microphone is supplied with an elastic suspension mount, and the whole ensemble looks as understated as a microphone of this size can be with its satin nickel finish. In fact, the only sign of building to a price here is the fact that it is supplied in a cardboard box, rather than the usual wooden case.

From the outset, Neumann's designers have focussed and tuned the TLM49's capabilities as a vocal/speech microphone with a 'retro' sound to match its looks. The published response figures show a gently falling response from 1kHz, finishing about 5dB down at 30kHz. An equally gentle rise from 1kHz to +3dB at 5kHz is followed by a dip around 7-8kHz, and another +3dB peak at 10kHz, before falling off to -6dB at 20kHz. Not a microphone that's been tuned for linearity then, but I have to say on vocals it really does work straight out of the box.

Spoken voice and male and female sung vocals have that 'mix-ready' quality to them that is the hallmark of a classic microphone. Lows and mids are smooth and well extended, high mids have a great sense of clarity while still sounding very rounded and full, and there's plenty of air to the top end that never once verges on being harsh or gritty — even across a range of different singers. In comparison to a U87 it doesn't have that 'catch' to the mid range that helps a vocal jump out of the studio monitors, but it does make pretty much any vocal sound completely stitched together.

There's a useful degree of tuning available by varying distance and angle on mic, as proximity effect is smooth and progressive, and the TLM49's tendency towards a really pronounced hypercardioid response above 8kHz means that softening up an overly harsh high register is easily accomplished with a gentle twist off-axis. The size and construction of the head-grille also means that popping, while still present with close mic positions, seems to be less of an issue at medium distances to the extent that a popshield isn't sometimes necessary.

So it performs admirably on voice, but how does it fare in other applications? After all, this isn't a bargain-basement microphone, and most potential buyers would want something fairly flexible for their money.

Acoustic guitar at a reasonable distance gave a tone that sounded a lot more immediate than you would expect from the placement — plenty of body and nicely defined resonance with a good degree of high frequency detail. The TLM49 didn't seem to capture quite the same degree of transient detail as the Brauner Phantom used in comparison here — which

wasn't necessarily a bad thing as it had the effect of rounding out and softening the sound a little. And purely because that was the way the session was going, I tried it about 45 degrees off-axis but close up to a bass cabinet, which resulted in one of the nicest tones I've ever had from that particular rig — deep but not boomy, rich but not lacking in definition, and a good hard edge to the mid frequencies that worked wonders in the mix.

All of which makes this microphone a tremendous specialist and a more than competent generalist. There's enough familiarity in its looks, build and sound to reassure, yet enough of a distinctive character in every respect to really make it stand out from the crowd. It's tempting to think of this as a 'budget' Neumann, but that would be doing the TLM49 (UK£899 + VAT) an injustice. We've seen some perfectly fine 'budget' mics from it before — the TLM103 springs to mind, which was never exactly cheap, but very capable. The 149 though, sounds like it's in a completely different league to its (not inconsiderable) price bracket. A fine balancing act of all the parameters mentioned earlier it might be, but one that has been executed to perfection. ■

PROS Terrific sounding vocal microphone; build quality; looks; reasonable price.

CONS No HPF; a proper case or box would have been nice.

EXTRAS Neumann has added to its Solution-D family with new digital models KM 183 D, KM 184 D and KM 185 D — three different directional characteristics are being offered initially; four others will follow in 2007. The modular construction of the new microphones permits the passive omni, cardioid and supercardioid capsules to be combined with the KM D output stage.



In the microphone, the Neumann A-D converter from the D-01 is located immediately next to the capsule and claims a dynamic range exceeding that of the capsule. If required, the DSP functions integrated into the microphone can be configured and controlled

remotely via the DMI-2 digital microphone interface and RCS remote control software. These functions include gain setting, a compressor/limiter with de-esser, and a peak limiter. Updates to the DMI-2 include support for 192kHz, AES 11 synchronisation and improved jitter performance. A key feature continues to be data exchange via the AES 42 standard.

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