



SE Electronics RN17

The cooperation between SE and RND continues with the second in what is a series of higher end products from the company. **JON THORNTON** discovers sticks with a difference and a bulge.

SE Electronics' collaboration with Rupert Neve Designs bore its first fruit a couple of years ago with the release of the RNR1 Ribbon. Universally acclaimed, this mic married a cutting-edge ribbon motor design to a powered output stage designed by Rupert Neve. The result was one of the best ribbon microphones on the market with the transient response and smoothness beloved of ribbon mics, but with an open and extended high frequency response. It doesn't come as much of a surprise that this same broad approach would, in time, be carried forward to other products, and the RN17 is the first of these (but won't be the last) to emerge.

The 'RN' prefix in the model number is easy to work out, but the '17' refers to the capsule size — these microphones feature 17mm diameter true capacitor capsules with 15mm gold sputtered diaphragms. SE claims that this makes it the smallest externally polarised capsule in current production. The capsule side of the RN17 is actually the result of a project that dates back nearly three and a half years. Originally slated for production as an SE17, it was never released due to the company feeling the time wasn't right. But there was clear potential in reinvigorating the project as part of the RN series by rethinking the electronics side of the equation.

The RN17 is a pencil microphone with a range of interchangeable capsule options, although with a very obvious difference. You can't fail to notice the asymmetrical bulge toward the rear of the microphone that accommodates the substantial output transformer. Admittedly, SE has never really been big on form over function aesthetics, but the rest of the microphone is quite svelte looking, with more than a passing nod to other SDC offerings. But what could have ended up looking pig-ugly, actually doesn't. Instead it looks purposeful and business-like, with the rear appendage ever so slightly reminiscent of the outcropping on Sony's C800-G.

The bulge on the rear performs the vital function of housing a custom wound output transformer, developed out of the same research programme that resulted in the transformers employed in the RNR1 and the RND 5088 console. Further upstream, the electronics are completely Class-A, with a design approach to eliminate as completely as possible high order harmonic distortion.

The kit supplied for review comprised a matched

pair of microphone bases, together with the following capsule options — cardioid, hypercardioid, omni, modified cardioid and (somewhat unusually) fig-8. The whole kit comes packaged in a substantial metal briefcase, together with a pair of 'shot-gun' type suspension mounts. Each capsule is packed in its own screw topped aluminium canister for protection, with engraved legending of the type on both canister and capsule proper. These provide great protection for the capsules, although they are a tight fit, so extracting the capsules can be a little tricky.

The capsules screw on to the microphone body — a much more secure arrangement than a bayonet type approach — although care needs to be taken to avoid cross-threading or over tightening. Fitted in the supplied shock-mounts the whole assembly looks even more purposeful — actually more akin to something a special-ops regiment might have in its bag of tricks, and possibly not as unobtrusive as might be preferable in some (broadcast, classical) applications. The shock-mounts perform very well — but are a touch fiddly to position — in practice I found that a fixed DPA clip held the RN17s just as securely.

Picking a reference for comparison purposes posed something of a dilemma — looking at the price point suggests comparisons with the Neumann KM 180 series, but the design intentions suggest something more Danish... In the end I opted for a DPA4006 and 4011.

4006 versus the RN17 with the omni capsule fitted was the first preview, with acoustic guitar as the source. Close to source the two were very hard to separate — both turned in an impressively detailed sound with plenty of depth. Perhaps the 4006 had just a touch more mid-range transient detail, but it's a close call and an impressive debut performance from the RN17. Moving the microphones further from source, and so bringing more of the room acoustic into the balance led to some more marked differences. Here the RN17 seemed to retain a little more low frequency weight to the sound, while still reaching in

and capturing the detail of the source especially in the high mids. The 4006 by comparison kept the HF and mid frequency detail, but sounded a little less fulsome.

Switching to the cardioid capsule on the RN17 and swapping the 4006 for a 4011 again proved an extremely close contest. This time, however, the differences were more apparent close-up. There's not a great deal in it, but the RN17 seemed just a little brighter in terms of HF detail. I have to qualify that by saying that it does this while still managing to sound extremely natural and soft — even if that sounds like a contradiction in terms.

The fig-8 capsule is somewhat different to the others; it's slightly wider in circumference and a good deal taller and when fitted operates in a side-address configuration. Overall tonality is similar to the omni capsule with perhaps a little less LF body, and it demonstrates some very deep off-axis nulls in its response. Given the fact that I had a pair of RN17s to hand, I tried this in conjunction with a cardioid capsule in MS configuration, and with two of the fig-8 capsules in a Blumlein arrangement. For some reason the Blumlein arrangement gave much better results here — I found myself struggling a little with some niggling phase issues with the MS pair for reasons that I couldn't quite fathom.

But the killer capsule in my view is the modified cardioid. This introduces a gentle cut to the low frequency response of the standard cardioid so when it is used very close-in the sound remains well balanced. The polar response seems identical, but the effect of this close-up magnifies that sense of detail and ability to really reach into an instrument. As a spaced pair of drum overheads this capsule sounds phenomenal — incredible definition to the

cymbals, a transient response that lets the other elements of the kit really jump out and grab you, and all the while an incredibly smooth, natural sound that never sounds quite so 'warts and all' as the DPA4011. I do have to point out that this capsule was supplied in the review kit slightly by accident. It's still in development and won't necessarily be available at launch. Instead, a version of the cardioid capsule with a built in pad (which I haven't tried) will be available.

The mic ships as standard with the cardioid capsule and the other variants can be bought separately as required. All of the capsules certainly have their own distinctive sound, so this is an investment that really adds to the versatility of the RN17. But they all share some common characteristics — a real 'reach' for detail both close-in and at a distance, and an overall tonality, particularly in the low end body of a sound, that just sounds big but never overblown. I've been fortunate to be able to try nearly every microphone SE has ever produced over the years and so I don't say this lightly — this is its best yet. ■

PROS

Wide range of capsule options; tremendous detail and reach; natural and open sound.

CONS

Supplied shock-mounts a little cumbersome; more visually obtrusive than some alternatives.

Contact

SE ELECTRONICS, CHINA:
Website: www.seelectronics.com