

# SE Electronics SE1a, SE2a and SE3

While the emphasis on large diaphragm mics remains fairly constant, it's a peculiar fact that the interest in the altogether more versatile 'stick' mic enjoys regular cyclical invigoration as manufacturers release new models in clumps. **JON THORNTON** test-drives three spectacular offerings from China's premium brand.

**AS THE LANDSCAPE** of microphone manufacture has shifted in recent years with newer, low cost manufacturers entering the picture, most attention has been paid to the increasing number of low cost large diaphragm studio capacitors entering the market. Sure, the large diaphragm tool has always had a certain prestige associated with it, but let's not forget the need for small diaphragm designs. One company that hasn't forgotten is SE Electronics — indeed it has been producing small diaphragm capacitor microphones for some time. But alongside recent changes in manufacturing and worldwide distribution, it has also taken the opportunity to update and expand its range.

Logically, if rather unimaginatively titled the SE1a, SE2a and SE3, all three of these microphones are small diaphragm, pencil type devices. Least expensive in the pecking order is the SE1a, a development of the company's original SE1. Even at a recommended retail price point of UK£69 (inc. VAT), the SE1a has a capsule that is a true, externally polarised capacitor design rather than a back-electret.

While the capsule is the same fixed pattern cardioid design found in the original SE1, the electronics have been overhauled to reduce self-noise and improve sensitivity slightly. This has all been packaged in a new enclosure that is a great improvement on the original, and whose overall dimensions are slightly thicker and longer than, say an AKG SE300. In fact, it looks like it's probably more like a longer version of a Neumann KM184 than anything else. Looks are one thing, though — sounds are quite another — and so in deference to its pricing as much as anything else, I put it up against an AKG SE300 with a CK91 cardioid capsule, and a Beyer Opus 83.

In purely operational terms, the SE1a lacks some of the features of the comparison microphones as it possesses no high pass filter or pad. In sonic terms though, it turns in a fairly creditable performance. To my ears it has the edge over the (back-electret) Opus 83, as it seemed to resolve low level detail that little bit better. Overall sound of the SE1a is bright but not forward — although on some sound sources, particularly vocals, it can start to sound a little brittle at times. Extension at the top and bottom end is fairly good, and overall response seems smooth with just a little lift around 10kHz. In the final analysis, the AKG SE300 manages to sound more convincing and generally more natural and open.

For those wanting more flexibility in the polar-pattern department, the next microphone in the range is the SE2a. Featuring the same electronics and body as the SE1a, for UK£149 (inc. VAT) you get three interchangeable capsules in cardioid, hypercardioid and omni flavours. Also for the price, the microphone comes in a wooden box together with a fairly crude

looking, but perfectly functional shockmount. This is in comparison to the cardboard packaging and plastic clip that accompany the SE1a.

Actually, if you delve under the hood a little bit deeper, you find that economies of scale do come into play here. Although the SE1a is sold as a fixed pattern capacitor, the capsule will actually unscrew, and will happily accept the capsules that ship with the SE2a — which could prove a very cost-effective way to mix and match capsules and bodies. Sonically, the cardioid and hypercardioid capsule sound very similar to the stock capsule on the SE1a — although predictably the hypercardioid's off axis response is a lot lumpier and coloured. The pick of the capsules is probably the omni, which manages to sound less 'closed-in' than the other two sometimes can — and did a nice job on acoustic guitar.

At the top of the food chain is the SE3, which is a much weightier proposition in more ways than one. Physically longer and thicker than the SE1a or SE2a, the SE3 uses an entirely different capsule design to that employed in its smaller siblings. Higher specification components in the electronics and an improved PCB design further up the ante, as does the provision of a -10dB pad and a high pass filter. All of this puts on a bit of weight, and it's only when you pick it up that you really appreciate just how big it actually is, and realise that those circular side entry ports give the microphone a curiously retro, almost 1970s look.

All this, another one of those utilitarian shockmounts and a nice wooden box, can be yours for UK£129 (inc. VAT) — almost double the price of the SE1a. And, I have to say, sonically it also represents a big jump. Initial auditioning of the SE3 gave the impression that somehow all of the little quibbles you can point to in the sound of the SE1 and SE2 have just been ironed out. And while each one marks an incremental step — the lows seem to just have that touch more authority, the sense of brittleness to the high mids has been softened slightly, the HF extension seems better and more open — collectively they add up to a very impressive sounding mic. It still sounds that little bit brighter and more forward than the AKG SE300 does, but now it seems to have the bottle to back up that slight brashness. Admittedly, the SE3 might not be the first choice on vocals, but on electric and acoustic guitar, percussion, snare, overheads and even viola it delivered

consistently good results.

While manufacturers like DPA are not exactly going to be quaking in their boots as a result of SE Electronics' small diaphragm offerings, there's no doubt that the SE1a and SE2a are useful tools that represent terrific value for money. In my opinion, the pick of the bunch is definitely the SE3. For the price, it's more than capable of delivering a natural, but slightly larger than life sound — and it does so in a very fuss free manner. And while it would be overstating things to say that it is nipping at the heels of the likes of Neumann's KM184 — it's closer than it's pricing might have led you to believe. The folks at Sonic Distribution also tell me that an SE4 is in the offing, which will effectively be an SE3 with interchangeable capsules. I'm looking forward to it. ■



<b>PROS</b>	Cheap as chips — particularly SE1a; true condensers for back-electret money; SE3 a versatile and classy performer.
<b>CONS</b>	SE1a and SE2a can sound a touch brittle at times; SE3 not as compact as some of its competitors; supplied shockmounts look a little 'industrial'.
<b>EXTRAS</b>	As mentioned in the review, SE has an interchangeable capsule version of the SE3 on the cards, which will emerge as the SE4. SE3s will also be available as matched stereo pairs for UK£349 (inc. VAT).
Incredibly, you can win an SE1a, 2a and 3 as a complete package by entering our competition on page 57.	

**Contact**

**SE MICROPHONES, CHINA:**  
**Website:** www.sonic-distribution.com  
**Worldwide:** +44 1525 840400  
**US:** +1 617 623 5581