



SE4 Matched Pair

SE Electronics' SE4 is designed as a replacement for the popular SE3, which itself was top of the range of its low cost but high performing stick condensers. **JON THORNTON** discovers that it's all in the chassis and in the replaceable heads.

When reviewing this original SE range of stick mics — SE1a, SE2a and SE3 — I remember viewing the SE3 as the pick of the crop with its sweet, neutral sound at a very affordable price point. In all it was a very accomplished microphone, so why the replacement of it with the SE4?

Well, SE clearly knew that the SE3 was fine as it was, as they state that the SE4 is engineered to sound and perform exactly the same as the SE3. And according to James Young from Sonic Distribution, users around the world also voted with their feet, resulting in the SE3 vastly outselling the SE1a and SE2a. No problem with that, except for the fact that SE3 users began wondering why it wasn't available with interchangeable capsules like its cheaper sibling, the SE2a.

The problem came down to the chassis design of the SE3, in that although the capsule unscrews neatly, the rear entry ports were formed in the main chassis itself. So developing an elegant way of adding capsules with different polar patterns became slightly problematic. The SE4 has a re-engineered chassis to overcome this and

allows the use of interchangeable capsules, with cardioid, omni and fig-8 versions available. The name change is there to reinforce the fact that the new capsules aren't backwardly compatible with the old SE3.

The SE4 is available singly, or as a matched pair as supplied for the review. The matched pair is supplied in a compact and sturdy aluminium flightcase containing the two microphones, two small suspension mounts and a useful stereo bar. There are also cut-outs in the flightcase to accept up to four additional capsules, so you could carry the whole set around in one neat package. Unfortunately, these are an extra cost option and weren't supplied with the review models, so we'll content ourselves with the standard fit cardioid option.

Side by side, the SE3 and SE4 with the cardioid capsule look almost identical, save for the point at which the capsule unscrews. While they were at it though, SE added a two-position pad with settings of -10 and -20dB (the SE3 had only the -10dB setting). The high pass filter stays the same as before.

Construction is very much what we've come to expect from SE, functional more than elegant,

but it gets the job done and is well put together. In extended use though, some of my own SE3s have shown that the fine mesh protecting the diaphragm can be a little fragile in terms of how securely it's anchored to the frame, and it's not clear whether this has been addressed in the redesign. Accessing the internals is also easy, in common with other SE mics, and reveals an almost identical circuit board to the SE3 (the only change here seems related to the additional pad setting). Discrete components are used throughout and a transformer handles final output duties.

Sensitivity is quoted at around 12mV/Pa and equivalent noise at 14dB (A) — fairly respectable figures for a small diaphragm microphone. The matched pair also comes with individualised frequency response graphs, which show that the mics are fairly consistently matched to within 0.5dB or so, albeit with a response that seems lumpier than you might expect in the bottom octaves.

In use, it's clear that the aim of not changing the characteristics of the mic has been achieved. Side by side comparisons with an SE3 give near identical performances — my SE3s sound a little softer but I'd put that down to diaphragm ageing more than anything else. Overall tonality is slightly bright and forward, just managing to avoid sounding too brittle or harsh on sound sources like acoustic guitar and piano. There's a good sense of weight to the bottom octaves, and a progressive and smooth off-axis response. SPL handling is also good, but the provision of that extra 10dB of pad comes in very useful when used for close miking guitar cabs, an application they are really suited to.

Moving slightly away from the typical pop and rock studio context, I also tried them as a coincident and near-coincident (ORTF) pair using the supplied stereo bar. Venue and source here was the Philharmonic Hall in Liverpool with a string quartet, set back from the performers by about 10ft. Perhaps slightly unfairly the comparison here was a pair of Sennheiser MKH-800s on a cardioid setting, but the SE4s acquitted themselves reasonably well. The sound here was slightly harsher and more 'voiced' than I'd prefer, and they're noticeably noisier than the MKH-800s.

But this needs placing firmly in the context of price. The Sennheiser solution is almost an order of magnitude more expensive than the SE4 pair. And I'm not sure that I'd ever stick an MKH800 in front of a guitar cab. The SE4 remains just as impressive in terms of price and performance as the SE3 was, and has the added flexibility of interchangeable capsules. And with a properly matched pair available that's extremely flexible in studio applications as well as delivering workmanlike location recordings, they make a lot of sense. ■



PROS Added flexibility over SE3 with same overall sound; competitive price; matched pair a nice compact solution.

CONS Struggle a little as distant microphones; may be a little too forward sounding for some applications.

EXTRAS The SE4 allows the use of interchangeable capsules with cardioid, omni and fig-8 versions available.



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