

# SE Electronics Z5600

Rather than being of Chinese origin and masquerading as something more 'western', SE's range of mics is proud to be totally Chinese. Naturally there's a massive cost-saving hand on. **JON THORNTON** staggers around.

**THE FIRST THING THAT** will strike you about this microphone is how staggeringly inexpensive it is. While we've all grown accustomed to the rapid rate of change in price/performance ratios for anything with DSP or computing power on board, it still comes as a bit of a shock when you see the asking price for the Z5600.

A large diaphragm capacitor, multipattern, valve microphone complete with an external power supply that features remote pattern selection, a spider shockmount and a perfectly respectable case should surely command more money than the RRP of UK£399 including VAT, shouldn't it? And if not, where's the catch? Yes, it's made in China – and we've seen a lot of 'budget' microphones and capsules emerge from that country of late – with varying degrees of quality. The difference here is that the factory in question now produces the SE product range exclusively, rather than acting as an OEM supplier for a variety of other brand products. On close inspection, the build quality seems very rugged – the microphone is certainly quite weighty.

The general quality of assembly and finish isn't quite as tight as an equivalent Japanese or German manufactured microphone, but it's by no means poor,

and it doesn't suffer from that slightly unfinished look of some budget capacitors on the market. The base of the microphone unscrews to allow removal of the lower cover, and easy access to the socketed 12AT7 valve that forms the heart of the preamplifier. Replacement or upgrading of this valve would be a very easy task.

A 1.07-inch dual diaphragm assembly does duty at the front end, and the microphone is mated via a 7-pin XLR connector to the external power supply. The power supply unit features an XLR output, together with a 9-position polar pattern selector ranging from omni, through cardioid and on to a fig-8 response. The whole package has a vaguely vintage look and feel about it, although it succeeds in looking more purposeful than elegant. Sensitivity is quoted at 12mV/Pa, and equivalent noise at 16dB (A-weighted). After powering up the Z5600 and leaving it to warm up for a while, initial impressions were quite favourable. Set to a cardioid pattern, on male vocals there was a definite presence in the mid-range that sounded quite smooth and natural. Overall, the sound is a little 'larger-than-life' when compared to my reference C414, even to the extent that the 414 sounded a little flat initially in an A/B comparison. But more extended listening showed the Z5600 to struggle slightly with the higher frequencies – becoming a little scratchy on vocals around 12kHz or so, whereas the 414 sounded perfectly smooth. Bass extension is good on the Z5600, and it sounds very compelling in the bottom octaves, even without proximity effect coming into play. Moving to acoustic guitar, and the same general characteristics are evident. Experimenting with different polar patterns seemed to have some effect, with the overall response sounding a little smoother on an omni setting – but there was still a hint of the microphone struggling to be really convincing on delicate picked guitar. That said, the Z5600 does

produce a fantastic and eminently useable 'pop' strummed guitar sound that positively flies out of the studio monitors at you. This is quite a bulky and weighty microphone – and because of this, positioning it in tight situations is something of a challenge, especially when using the supplied suspension mount. Other slight moans include the lack of any switchable high-pass filter or pads on the microphone. But my single biggest reservation is the level of self-noise the microphone exhibits, even accounting for the fact that it is a valve design. While this is never problematic when close miking discrete sound sources, it would be potentially intrusive in low level or ambient recording situations. In summary, the Z5600 is very useable, and if you can work around its few shortcomings it is a lot of microphone for the money. Tonally, it can conjure up some great up-front sounds, and its slightly strained sounding top end is not necessarily problematic in all applications. ■



## PROS

Great value; well presented; larger-than-life tonality; flexible polar pattern.

## CONS

Quite bulky; lack of HPF/pad; not a great choice for low level recordings.

## EXTRAS

While the Z5600 represents the top of the 'Z' Series range, at the bottom is the Z1100. Exactly the same size as its more expensive sibling, and featuring what appears to be almost identical construction, the Z1100 is a fixed pattern cardioid microphone. The same 1.07-inch diaphragm is employed, albeit in single diaphragm guise, and the electronics are discrete Class A rather than valve based. In comparison to the Z5600, the Z1100 sounds quite a bit thinner, being altogether less convincing on an acoustic guitar, for example. There is plenty of low-end extension, but the Z1100 sounds a little 'reedy' in the mid-range when compared to the Z5600 and my C414. Although never unpleasant, it sounds to my ears more like a back-electret with slightly better bass extension. This makes it very hard to compete with similar offerings from other manufacturers in the entry-level large diaphragm market. At least it does until you realise that the Z1100 retails at UK£217 including VAT. With that being little more than the cost of a half-decent dynamic microphone, it starts to look altogether more attractive as an addition to a microphone cupboard.

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