

Shure KSM137/KSM141

You'll have used its dynamic mics but the Shure name has only just started to cross the mic divide with the appearance of the KSM series studio models. There are now some stick mics to throw in to the equation, and all the trappings of a real studio product range.

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BRANDING IS A FUNNY thing. The name Shure is virtually synonymous with classic microphones designed for use and abuse on stage – if ever a microphone had iconic status in the field of live performance it is the SM58. Yet, while the SM58 and its windshield-less sibling the SM57 often find themselves the dynamic mainstay of many a studio's mic cupboard, it has so far been a fairly unusual sight to see the Shure badge infiltrating the higher ranks of studio capacitor mics.

This is something that the company seems intent on rectifying with its KSM series of microphones. Targeted firmly at studio users, but billed as rugged enough to also survive a life on stage, the range encompasses large and small diaphragm capacitor microphones in a variety of flavours of polar pattern and electronics. The latest additions to the range being reviewed here fall under the 'compact instrument microphone' category, and as they appear to share a great deal in common in terms of provenance, we'll start with the KSM137.

This is a fixed pattern (cardioid) capacitor microphone, which employs a back electret capsule in an end-address configuration. In terms of size, the KSM137 is a couple of millimetres thinner in girth, and about a centimetre longer than the Neumann KM184 with which visual comparisons will inevitably be made. Supplied in a plastic carry case together with clip and foam windshield, it's clear from the first time you pick it up that Shure wants it to be taken seriously. Finished in satin nickel, a colour that Shure calls 'champagne', build quality is immediately recognisable as being of a higher order than some other recent entrants to this sector of the market. To some extent, this is reflected in the price, which while not exorbitant is by no means 'budget' either.

A two-position high-pass filter offers either a gentle 6dB/octave roll-off from around 115Hz, or a more aggressive 18dB/octave cut below 80Hz. Above this, a switchable pad offers a choice of 15 or 25dBs worth of attenuation. Both of these switches are of the 'flick with a ballpoint pen/tweaker/whatever sharp object comes to hand' variety. These don't score highly with me for ease of use. This isn't helped by the rather curious choice of a black line on a black background colour scheme that

indicates the current position of the switches. It makes a quick visual check of the settings from any distance more or less impossible.

The frequency response of the KSM137 is indicated as reasonably flat between 200Hz and 20kHz, with a very slight peak centred around 9kHz. The response falls away by 5dB between 200Hz and 20Hz. This is pretty much borne out in use – on an acoustic guitar it sounds pleasantly neutral, and the bass extension is actually rather better than the figures would suggest, even when not used in a close mic position.

Used as an alternative to the classic SM57, 30cm away from a guitar amplifier, you have no option but to reach for the pad (now where did I put that MagLite and random pointy metal implement?) While it is clear that the capsule can deal admirably with high SPLs, the electronics seem to require help in the form of input attenuation quite early on in the game. Having said that, the KSM137 works really very well in this application – lots of low end punch, good presence (no doubt helped along by that 9k peak), but more significantly, none of the overly bright, almost brittle detail that some small diaphragm capacitors might have exhibited here. In fact, the extremes of frequencies have an almost 'smoothed off' sound that is sometimes reminiscent of... well, of a well-sorted dynamic microphone really. Obviously time for a little more investigation.

The KSM137's slightly more sophisticated big brother is the KSM141. Judging by the identical specs, the KSM141 shares its diaphragm and electronics with the 137, but features a mechanically switched polar pattern, with the choice of an omnidirectional or cardioid response. Selecting a polar pattern involves twisting a knurled metal ring located between the diaphragm and the amplifier section. While the cardioid pattern looks and sounds identical to the KSM137, the omni pattern sees a gentle lift to the bottom octaves rather than a falling response. In all other respects the microphones are identical. Both the KSM137 and KSM141 are available as single microphones and stereo pairs, and the KSM141s supplied for review came as a pair. So in the interests of further proving my dynamic-sounding capacitor theory, they were duly hoisted as a stereo pair of drum overheads.

Now, I'll sometimes try a pair of nice, neutral

dynamics as drum overheads if a retro sounding kit is required, or if everything is getting just a bit too thrashy in the cymbal department. The downside to this approach is in losing some of the transient detail in the overhead sound. With the KSM141s, transient detail was just there for the taking, yet still with that almost smoothed off sound to the top-end. Shure goes to some lengths to point out that these microphones use the latest in ultra-thin diaphragm technology (a 2.5µm gold layered Mylar one, if you're interested), and this is apparent in the transient response.

And yet, there still isn't quite that sense of absolute clarity in the higher frequencies. Don't get me wrong, these are not dull or bad sounding microphones in any sense – in fact they sound extremely solid, natural and flattering on a variety of sources. It would be tempting, although probably entirely without foundation, to lay this at the door of Shure's decision to use a back electret capsule rather than an externally biased design. Equally likely is that we've just become too used to capacitor microphones being tuned with a rising high frequency response slightly higher up than the presence peak of these microphones.

In pricing these mics where it has, Shure is entering a market that has some well-established players with heavyweight 'studio' branding. I suppose that Shure could have engineered these microphones to sound very similar to the competition. The fact that it didn't was a brave decision, and, as much as anything, warrants giving them a listen. ■



PROS	Solidly built; compact size; natural sound; excellent transient response
CONS	Fiddly switches; may not have enough HF bite for some applications/tastes
EXTRAS	The cardioid KSM109 claims an extended frequency response and is equipped with a switchable pad (15dB) and circuitry using the same architecture employed by the higher-priced models in the KSM group. The champagne-finished mic comes with a zippered carrying pouch, microphone clip, and Popper Stopper windscreen.

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