Shure KSM313 & KSM353

Two of the most respected modern ribbon mics are now part of one of the biggest microphone portfolios. JON THORNTON checks out the new versions to see if all is still good.

The latest manufacturer to join the renaissance of ribbon microphones is also the one that can claim to manufacture the single most popular and iconic microphone of all time. It's interesting, then, that Shure has elected not to design its own ribbon offerings from scratch. Instead, Shure recently acquired Crowley and Tripp microphones from parent group Soundwave Research. This acquisition saw the transfer of designs, intellectual property, microphone process equipment and other assets to Shure, Inc. As part of the deal, Shure now continues to offer support to existing Crowley and Tripp customers, but now manufactures what were the Naked Eye and El Diablo designs in their Wheeler, Illinois facility — albeit with the slightly more conservative monikers of the KSM313 and KSM353.

One of the key factors here is that the acquisition also includes the rights to the patented 'Roswellite' material developed by Soundwave Research. This material uses carbon nano-tubes deposited on a thin film to produce ribbons that exhibit the required electrical properties to function in a ribbon motor, but with vastly improved characteristics in terms of tensile strength and general ruggedness. The results are microphones that exhibit most of the sonic characteristics for which ribbon designs are favoured, but that aren't going to throw their hands in at the first sign of wind, excessive SPL or physical shock *(A drummer. Ed)*. If you want that in empirical terms, Shure quotes the SPL handling of the microphones at a very healthy 146dB — meaning that erstwhile off-limits applications for ribbon microphones (inside a kick drum, for example) are suddenly very much on the agenda.

First impressions of both the KSM313 and the KSM353 indicate that this SPL handling might come at a cost, as the sensitivity of both microphones is quoted as 1.88mV/Pa, which means that you are going to have to get used to exploring the upper reaches of a mic pre's gain range in some applications. While this isn't especially low compared to some 'classic' ribbon designs, such as the Coles 4038 or Beyer's M130, it's somewhat lower than a Royer 121 and a lot lower than some of the newer 'active' ribbon designs out there. Time, though, for a more detailed look at each microphone.

The smaller (and cheaper) of the pair is the KSM313. Packaged as a side-addressed microphone, the KSM313 is extremely compact and almost jewel-like in appearance. This impression is reinforced by the use of a black body coupled with a grille assembly finished in red, which could very easily look tacky but doesn't. Despite its compactness, it feels very solid and overall build quality seems excellent. It ships in a protective wooden case, and comes with the curiously entitled (and curious looking) 'monocle' fixed clip. Despite its odd looks, this clip allows a good deal of accuracy and flexibility in placing the microphone in a number of orientations. Also available as an option is a more conventional suspension mount.

The KSM313 has been engineered in both its former and current incarnations to exhibit quite different responses on either side of its fig-8 pattern, with the rear pick-up exhibiting quite a marked HF bump and extension compared with the front pick-up. First impressions on male vocals suggest that this is an immediately useable feature — a quick swivel of the clip allows the microphone to be closely matched with the character of the voice. The forward pick-up delivers a very smooth and full sounding mid-range, with a smooth and progressive HF roll-off that works wonders on thickening up thin sounding vocals. The rear pick-up adds just enough air and clarity to add a sparkle to a dull sounding voice without making it sound 'capacitor bright'.

Overall tonality seems slightly harder than the Royer 121 I compared it to, something that was most evident when set up on acoustic and electric guitars — it seems to provide a little more 'cut' to the sound in the bottom octaves. This isn't unpleasant, in fact it's quite a useful characteristic with some sources, but it isn't the response you would first associate with a ribbon microphone. Of course, I had to try it in a kick drum taking a sort of perverse pleasure in placing it inside the shell. This same 'hardness' to the sound comes up trumps here as it captures every bit of that low resonance coupled with a decent attack from the beater. There's also plenty of scope to tune the sound by deciding which pick-up is facing forward and which rearward.

If the KSM313 is jewel-like is appearance, its big brother, the KSM353 is positively God-like. Not that it's a particularly large microphone but it seems like its been hewn from a solid block of metal, which imbues it with a very definite purposefulness. And the lack of any cosmetic finishing touches like the red grille suggests that it doesn't really have to prove anything. Again, it ships in a nice wooden case that's designed to keep it stored upright when not in use, and is supplied with a suspension mount rather than a fixed clip.

Summed up immediately, the KSM353 is smooth — really smooth. Overall tonality is much softer than the KSM313 lacking that slightly hard edge to the sound, and there's a more even response front and rear. In every application — vocals, guitar, kick drum and as a room microphone on a drum kit — the KSM353 absolutely shone, with a sound that managed to be detailed and understated at the same time. In essence

it's exactly what a ribbon mic should sound like. On vocals, even at some distance, you'll need to keep a pop shield handy as the KSM353 doesn't seem as troubled by plosives as some other ribbons but your loudspeaker cones will thank you for it.

Both of these microphones deliver excellent results, and the ability to handle a few knocks and high SPLs is a real bonus; if nothing else you feel more at ease experimenting with them than you would with more fragile ribbon designs. They do need a decent preamp to get the best out of them though. With quieter sources at a distance they need a whole heap of gain, and some lesser preamps will introduce too much noise to the equation here. It's good to see that the Crowley and Tripp designs have a long-term future and that the move to manufacturing by Shure hasn't affected the build or sonic quality in the slightest. It will be interesting to see whether Shure chooses to use this newly acquired intellectual property to develop the range further. ■

PROS Build quality; flexibility of tonality with KSM313; KSM353 is a tremendously smooth performer; superb resilience and SPL handling.

CONS Not cheap — especially the KSM353; need a very good preamp to extract the best out of quiet sources.

EXTRAS Shure has taken the iconic 55SH body, which has been in production almost continuously since 1951, dropped in a new motor with a supercardioid cartridge and added some vibrant blue colouring. The resulting hot rod is called the Super 55 Deluxe.

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