

# Audio-Technica AT2020

If one thing has gone along with the proliferation of workstation working methods then it is the proliferation of affordable microphones.

**JON THORNTON** looks in at an entry-level contender from one of the original democratising microphone brands.

**IT WASN'T TOO LONG AGO** (or am I getting old?) that if you were in the market for a reasonably priced capacitor microphone that still performed in a manner suitable for professional work, your options were pretty limited. AKG's venerable C1000 springs to mind — a small diaphragm back electret design admittedly, but a good all round performer. Still, in those days large diaphragms and externally polarised microphones meant serious kit, and serious kit meant serious money (*Yep. You're getting old. Ed*).



Today, the situation couldn't be more different. The rise of the project studio coupled with the entry of a variety of offerings of chiefly Chinese origin has seen the lower priced end of the microphone market explode. It's not surprising, therefore, that some of the more established brands have started to look at this end of the business seriously.

A case in point is Audio-Technica's AT2020, which from the outset makes no assertions to be anything other than a new milestone in price and performance and aimed squarely at the project/home studio market. With a street price of just under the UK£100 mark it represents a serious assault on this sector of the market. First impressions of the microphone are of a compact, side-addressed design that looks and feels rugged and well screwed together. The no-frills packaging limits itself to a zippered vinyl pouch and a solid microphone clip that screws into the base of the microphone. So far, so very Audio-Technica.

Dig a little deeper though, and the AT2020 throws up some interesting details. You'll notice that so far I have not mentioned diaphragm size and that's because I'm not entirely sure how to classify it. Typically, we view diaphragm diameters of about 1-inch (2.5cm) to be 'large diaphragm' capacitors, but the diaphragm employed in the AT2020 is roughly half that diameter at 16mm. Not only that, but it's a back-electret rather than an externally polarised design — which makes initial comparisons with a C1000 seem much more apt all of a sudden. Or indeed with an AKG C2000, which uses the same approach of taking a small diaphragm capsule and mounting it in a larger side-addressed housing.

Polar pattern is cardioid and fixed, and no pad or switchable filters are provided — it's very much a case of what you see is what you get (or maybe not from the diaphragm size point of view...) But it's what it sounds like that counts and male vocals were the first order of the day. Audio Technica's products have always had a certain sound to me, certainly in their large diaphragm offerings, and is probably best described as 'glassy' but still neutral and flat. The AT2020, though, doesn't seem to share these attributes. Yes, there's some good detail in the mid and high registers with a sense of clarity as opposed to warmth. But overall, particularly on vocals, it sounded quite brittle and thin, which was only

partially resolved by working the mic very close. Part of the reason for this becomes clear when examining the quoted frequency response, which starts falling off around the 200Hz mark with a little resurgent peak around 40Hz. This seems to make the microphone quite quirky in terms of matching its response to source material, with some voices sounding very thin and others slightly more balanced.

On an acoustic guitar this trait manifested itself in a sound that was bright and aggressive, and would certainly cut through a mix well enough, but in a solo instrument context seemed to be lacking a little in substance in the bottom octave. Moving on to electric guitar, and the AT2020 was tried in a very close (SM57 type) position, and at 30-40cm distance. Actually, it worked very well when used very close — like an SM57 with added bite and grunt, but started to sound overly 'roomy' as the distance increased. As only one microphone was available for review, I also tried it as a single overhead on a drum kit, positioned to slightly favour the kick drum side. Again, it did a reasonable job at revealing high and mid detail, but verged on brittle sounding with the cymbals. Low frequency information was a little subdued — maybe not a bad thing in this application though, especially if a kick drum mic is already employed.

If all of this is starting to sound like damning with faint praise, then I guess that it is. But you've got to appreciate this in the correct context. First, it's a microphone that has clearly been built to a price — and a very affordable one at that. And in some ways it's more honest than some of its competitors in that its sound is obvious and apparent right out of the box, instead of having aspects of its response masked by electronic tuning which sometimes means that shortcomings are hidden until it's too late. Secondly, it's very clear that Audio Technica has deliberately produced a microphone geared towards users who may use it for a bit of everything, with little or any choice of alternatives. And it does a reasonable job of everything that you throw at it. ■

## Contact

**AUDIO-TECHNICA, JAPAN:**  
Website: [www.audio-technica.co.uk](http://www.audio-technica.co.uk)

<b>PROS</b>	Tightly packaged, well put together; price; reasonably versatile.
<b>CONS</b>	Can sound a little brittle at times; low frequency extension not great.
<b>EXTRAS</b>	A-T has made similar progress in the affordability stakes, as demonstrated with the AT2020, with its new UHF system. The 2000 Series UHF true diversity wireless mic system offers many of the advanced technologies and features of A-T's high-end wireless systems at a highly competitive price. Easy set up and automatic frequency scanning facilities combine with up to 10-channel frequency-agile operation, for high quality, interference free performance.