

Aston Stealth

JON THORNTON finds a mic which speaks in voices aims to supplant a classic dynamic

Since its launch in 2015, Aston Microphones' journey has been reasonably conventional in terms of product mix, if rather less conventional in the execution of those products. The Origin and Spirit gave us fixed pattern and variable pattern large diaphragm condensers, swiftly followed by the laser-packing Starlight small diaphragm model. A valve or ribbon design as a follow up would have been the obvious next choice — but Aston has once again flown in the face of convention with Stealth, a moving coil dynamic microphone.

Perhaps not as immediately covetable as condenser designs, I'm nevertheless a huge fan of a decent dynamic microphone. There's a whole different tonality and transient response on offer for those brave enough to move beyond close miking drums or jamming one up against a guitar cab — particularly when mated to a decent pre-amplifier. And the Stealth has this covered from the outset, as it features its own built in, Class A, phantom powered pre-amp.

Out of the box, it looks for all the world like one of my favourite dynamic mics — the Beyers M201 — just one that's been on steroids (either that or I've shrunk!). Measuring 58mm in diameter by 196mm in height it's a fairly chunky thing. But it's obvious that it's not the M201 that it has in its sights, but rather Shure's much lauded SM7B. There are a couple of design features that the two microphones share — internal RF screening around the transducer assembly, and a very effective internal shock-mount system — but in terms of features the Stealth goes quite a bit further than the SM7B.

Built in pre-amp

Firstly, there's that built in pre-amp. Leave the phantom power off, and the microphone will quite happily work passively — although like many dynamics it needs a hefty amount of gain. Apply phantom power, and the Stealth detects it automatically and activates the internal pre-amp. Adding what by my calculations is 40dB plus of gain before the output, it can take you a little by surprise — with some loud sources you start looking around for a



Four switch-selectable voices

pad on the input stage of the console. But it's nice and clean, and certainly removes the need for any sort of additional gain lifting device. You can tell that phantom power is applied by a couple of purple LEDs glowing in a 'shadow gap' at the base of the microphone. If a low visual impact is needed, these can be switched off via a small push-button at the base of the microphone.

The last trick up its sleeve is the inclusion of four different voicings for the microphone.

Aston are at pains to point out that this is achieved through switching through four completely discrete signal paths, rather than just selecting different component values in a single circuit. The four voicings on offer are V1 and V2, optimised for vocal recording, G(uitar) and D(ark). The 'Dark' setting is intended to offer a voicing similar to a classic ribbon design. As with their other microphones, Aston called on a variety of industry professionals to help determine the best voicings for the mic — with no less than 92 panel members participating in extensive blind listening and comparison tests.

Switching between the different voices is achieved via a flush, circular ring towards the base of the microphone. A combination of the material chosen for this ring, coupled with a robust mechanical action, means that it is nigh on impossible to turn using the instinctive 'two-finger pinch'. Instead, you need to wrap your thumb and forefinger around it, which gives sufficient grip to move it easily. Whether this is a bug or a feature is hard to tell — but either way it's not a huge deal once you get used to it.

Choice of voice

The Stealth is a fixed pattern cardioid, and a brief walk around the microphone shows some very strong off-axis rejection at the sides — not terribly smooth sounding, but a very high degree of rejection. Close miked voiceovers in less than ideal acoustics should prove no problem at all. Clocking through the four different voicings on offer (in active mode) with speech shows that they sound very different — these aren't subtle shades by any stretch. On male speech, V1 (the panel's

clear choice for male vocal) certainly sounds the most balanced, with a slight 'radio' flattery when worked closer. The V2 setting (the panel's female vocal winner) has more presence and breath — but sounds a little hard on male speech, whilst the 'G' setting sounds quite closed in. And, on speech at least, 'D' sounds pleasantly vintage, if a little boxy. Which sounds a little like damning with faint praise. But that summary is just based on speech — and what's quite intriguing about the Stealth is the way in which those different voicings sound completely different on different sources.

Switching to sung female vocals, and my money is with the panel — the V2 setting sounds balanced rather than hard, with a sense of space that wouldn't disgrace a decent LDC. But it does sound like a different microphone when compared to the same setting on speech. The 'G' setting is a real eye opener. If you're after a tight, punchy, almost slightly compressed guitar sound from a miked cab, this is pretty much plug and play. I was least taken with the 'D' setting — which although reminiscent of something like a Coles doesn't quite have the clarity or reach, particularly at a distance. But still, working as a close kit overhead on a stripped down 'Ringo' style kit — a perfectly useful, slightly retro-sounding result.

It certainly isn't the first time that a manufacturer has claimed that its offering is four microphones in one — but Stealth is probably the closest I've heard to fulfilling such a claim. As a £299 alternative to the SM7B, it would be more than up to the task with just a single voicing. The other three are bonuses. **T**

resolution/VERDICT

PROS Well built; varied and very useable voicings; pre-amp works well; solid, balanced sound on a variety of different sources.

CONS Selecting different voicings tricky until you get used to it; a pad on the internal pre-amp would be useful on occasion.

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