



SIGHT

&

SOUND

SONTRONICS SIGMA

WHAT IS IS?

A very classy microphone that produces a modern take on the vintage vibe of yesteryear's 'ribbon' designs, both visually and sonically.

WHY SHOULD I WANT ONE?

The sparkling clarity of digital recording and studio-quality condenser microphones is affordable to almost all of us, there is an increasing need for some of the vintage warmth that makes classic recordings from the past so special - hence the Sigma

SRP:

SONTRONICS SIGMA: £430
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Certain members of the office are huge fans of swing music. There was something classic about that time, a style that evoked the real joy of performance. The sharp suits, the slicked-back hair, and of course those excellent, chunky, radio-city broadcast mics. When we first took the Sigmas out of their mini cases, then, there was a burst of spontaneous applause.

But you don't have to be into big-band jazz to get into the sonic signature of the Sontronics Sigma mics. Whether you're looking for smoky vocal tones, smooth sax, a more organic traditional blues sound or simply warmer tones to blend with the hi-tech voices in your mix, there's something about the Sigmas for you.

I'm getting ahead of myself though. If you're unaware of Sontronics, a UK-based company with a knack for creating some truly lovely microphones, then you've been missing out on a great deal of

excellent hardware. We've already encountered various condenser mics in past reviews, so we have high hopes for the Sigma.

Out of the box... we have more boxes. But this isn't your standard gaudy cardboard packaging, oh no. A sturdy metal case keeps everything safe, small enough to easily stack away when necessary, and with the added security bonus of a combination lock.

It's the attention to detail that many companies forget, and although it's not necessarily vital to a home setup, should you ever want to move these babies to either a gig or a new home, you'd only end up having to buy protective storage anyway. Some of these mics are likely to end up in the hands of professional record producers, who will surely appreciate the ability to take them from studio to studio without the risk of damage.

Out of their cases, our pair of Sigma mics (that we were sent for

recording in stereo) look nothing short of gorgeous, fitting an aesthetic reminiscent of extremely expensive broadcast mics while adding a sleeker, more specifically musical touch. It's the kind of thing you'd dearly love to gig with, just to impress the onlookers, and the classic/modern blend of styles mean that this will look at home in any studio recording any style of music.

For all our fawning over the look of the thing, what's really exciting is what's inside the well-crafted shell - Sontronics has designed the Sigma microphone to faithfully capture your vocals and instruments, but with a slightly mellower tone than you would expect from most modern mics. The Sontronics blurb urges you to experiment with 'vocals, acoustic instruments, orchestral instruments, drums and percussion'. We did, too (see The Roadtest).

Obviously something with such a varied range of intended uses is ▶

Words: Simon Croft

SONTRONICS SIGMA MICROPHONE

▶ going to need to be able to cope with frequencies across the board, so the Sigma has a measured frequency response of 20Hz-20KHz. That's the same as a CD and somewhat beyond the upper range of most people's hearing. But if you take a look at the frequency chart on Sontronics' website, you'll see the Sigma has anything but a ruler-flat response. Instead it starts to roll off gently from 5kHz onwards, very much like vintage sound equipment.

Many of you may not know exactly what a ribbon mic is. As the name suggests, a thin metal ribbon sits between magnets. This element is then moved and made to vibrate by pressure from the air, creating an electrical signal.

The upside is a microphone that combines the extended frequency response of a condenser with the warmth you're more likely to associate with a dynamic design. The downside? Well, if you blow into the mic to see if it's on, or close mic a bass drum or brass instrument, you're likely to have an ex mic on your hands. Treat the Sigma with respect and all should be fine (and I have to say that the maximum Sound Pressure Level rating of 135db is a lot closer to your modern condenser than the ribbon designs of the last century).

The Sigma is also active, which means that you need a source of 48V phantom power. In the

past, ribbon designs have tended to be passive, but Sontronics has managed a lower noise floor with the Sigma than you'd expect from a vintage design, making it more suitable for digital recording.

A trait of most ribbon mics, including this one, is a figure-of-8 polar pattern. This means that it picks up most sound from the front and rear of the unit, with almost no sound picked up from the side.

While you certainly can use a figure-of-8 reposer on stage, to avoid feedback it should be with a jazz or blues band that is used to creating its own balance without on-stage monitors.

The package includes an effective external shock-mount to protect the mic from foot stomping, stand kicking and related events that would otherwise cause a loud 'boing'!

By this point, you'll probably have formed the impression that a Sigma isn't a toy – especially if you've already clocked the price. If entry-level recording is your aim, this isn't the mic for you. However, if you're ready to start hunting down high quality mics for their own unique qualities, a Sigma will reward your efforts with a silky-smooth tone all of its own. A microphone to bring out the connoisseur in you, we think. Should you buy one? Not if you can afford two. **PM**



ROADTEST

Sontronics sent us two mics of the same model for a specific purpose, not because of a shipping mistake. What the addition of an extra Sigma means is that we can go stereo! Now, there are many ways to combine two mics to get a stereo recording, but one of the truly classic ones involves two matching figure-of-8s.

Believe it or not, in order to get the best results you need to have one mic upright and the other above it and upside-down, so that the capsules are as close together as humanly possible. Now you need to twist the mics, so that the pick-up patterns form an X. (I say this, because the source of the sound you are recording should be at the top of the X, whereas you might think that one mic should be pointing directly at the sound,

which would be more like putting the mics in a + shape.)

For a venue, we of course chose our splendid new Playmusic offices, before all the furniture was moved in. Enter the Playmusic Blues Orchestra, comprising three acoustic guitars, one acoustic bass and assorted vocals, ranged in a loose semi-circle around the mics. Sadly, we didn't really have any percussion to hand (and to be honest our neighbours might have had something to say about a drumkit), but gently tapping out a rhythm on the back of an acoustic guitar helped to add to the generally no-tech approach to music making.

Musical balance was achieved by moving people closer or further away from the mics – a mechanical mixing process, if you like.

As far as the musical sounds captured by the Sigmas was concerned, the results were superb. The sound was detailed but warm, while the stereo image was solid but not as tight or precise as you might get with a pair of modern condensers. Believe me, it was great.

It's not the most forgiving recording technique though – with a pair of headphones on you could certainly hear why this room is destined to be an office rather than a studio, and you could also hear the traffic outside. That, my friends is real life captured in all its natural glory, a glory that's bloody hard to record well in!

With a better room – and perhaps a new orchestra line-up – it could have been as fine a stereo recording as you can make. **PM**

