

# KEL Audio HM-1 Condenser Microphone

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I have a problem. I'm a sucker for cheap gear. I can't resist the low-price carrot. This makes me do silly things -- buying the Alesis 3630 comes to mind, or picking up mics sight-unseen, sound-unheard. Usually, this does little more than clutter my tiny studio, but now and then I luck out.

The KEL HM-1 was just such a carrot. Sold direct by [KEL](#) in Canada at an introductory price of \$69 (they're now \$129, and include a shock-mount and carrying case I didn't receive). I sprung for two on a whim. KEL's money back guarantee helped fuel the decision. A lucky pick, or more clutter? Let's find out.

My motivation (price aside) for trying the HM-1, was to find a less expensive, smaller alternative to the AudioTechnica 4050s I love on toms. In cardioid, 4050s are great tom mics; unfortunately, they represent more money than I want to put in front of a spastic drummer, and being large, they make good targets. At 2" x 5", the side-address KELs are less likely to be smacked into next week, and with a response of 30hz-20khz, -18dBA self noise, and 134dB max SPL handling (per KEL's specs), they seemed like they might be up to the task.

Dealing with KEL was simple. The microphones shipped from the US, and the company was great about keeping me informed as to the status of my order. Packaging was spartan: a small, foam-lined cardboard box housed the microphone, clip, and a foam windscreen, yet each mic came with an individual frequency plot. Nice touch for a budget mic.

## The Sound

How does it sound? Very good, thank you. It is, as KEL advertise, a dark sounding microphone, much like a high-frequency-damped version of the Audio Technica 4050, and with a similar output level. They're half-inch diaphragm mics, with a hot output level, and take standard 48v phantom power. The capsule is internally shock mounted (encased in and supported on a rubber housing), and the chassis is thick metal, delivering a mic with reasonable levels of handling noise and body resonance, even without an external spider mount.

The HM-1 does tom duty very well -- plenty of low end "dooooom", and enough stick attack to give good definition to the drum. The small profile and low weight (around 6 ozs) make the HM-1 easy to place in cramped spaces, and the cardioid pattern is tight enough to reject surrounding drums sufficiently to allow for gating during mixdown. I would have liked the pattern a touch tighter, but for instruments other than drums it's not a problem. At this point, I was already a happy camper.

On overheads, the lack of sizzle is nice for creating a muted vibe -- very complimentary to jazzy styles. On a recent session, I used an AKG d12e on kick, sm57 on snare top, and two HM-1s behind the drummer pointing between the rack tom/ crash/ hats on the left and ride/ floor tom on the right, around 5' in the air. This gave a great sense of balance to the kit, full tom and snare sounds, nicely seated cymbals -- perfect for laid-back drums in the mix. If you want a bright, up front cymbal sound, the HM-1 won't give this up without a good deal of HF EQ boost.

This dark tonality makes the HM-1 one of my go-to mics for electric guitars. Ignoring the fizziness of heavily overdriven amps nicely, it presents a rich, up-front tone that can be thickened or thinned by milking the proximity effect of the mic. A long standing client's favorite guitar tone is his tele straight into a blackface champ with the HM-1 straight on the grille, up close. Very Stonesy.

On acoustic guitars, it's hit or miss. I've tried the HM-1 on various instruments from an inexpensive plywood parlor guitar to a jumbo, all solid wood '70s 12-string Guild. The rule of thumb is the thinner sounding the guitar, the better the HM-1 will sound. The Guild, for instance, sounded muddy and tubby, just too much bass. The parlor guitar, on the other hand, sounded full and rich, though in person it's a quiet, boxy instrument. The HM-1 on an antique potato-bug mandolin sounded great.

I use the HM-1 a lot on an old Farfisa PianOrgani—it's a reed organ, essentially an accordion with a motor rather than bellows. The KEL takes the edge off the reedy tone nicely, so I suspect it would flatter harsh sound sources like violins and brass, though I've not had the opportunity to try this.

Voice is my least favorite source for the HM-1, though the podcast world seems to have embraced it. The HM-1 is sensitive to bottoming out on 'plosives, so a pop filter or an extremely controlled performer is an absolute must. I've actually used the KEL to help teach mic technique due to this unforgiving nature. Tonally, the muted highs push vocals further back into a mix than I like, and if you use the included windscreen to tame 'plosives, this darkens the tone further. On a shrill vocalist though, it's a good starting point.

A few weeks ago, I had the chance to use the HM-1s on a live gig mic'ing a Steinway grand for the Swell Season (<http://www.myspace.com/theswellseason>). This was a mixed bag. The piano sounded great -- the HM-1's toned down a bright upper midrange nicely, and the rest of the piano's register sounded rich and full. Feedback, however, was a different story. Grand pianos are inherently difficult to mic for live use, and the venue's super-reflective acoustic environment coupled with the HM-1's somewhat loose cardioid pattern and healthy sensitivity forced me to keep the gain lower than I wanted. Lesson learned: the HM-1 is a studio mic.

A note about the clip. Crappy mic clips are one of my pet peeves. The butterfly style shock mounts included with Studio Projects / Apex / Nady come to mind. Terrible. So I love that the HM-1 came with a mutha of a clip. It's the same style design Neumann uses on the TLM 103: a hoop screws to the mic bottom with about a half inch of threads, and the XLR connector mounts through the center of the hoop. Very tight and secure, and easy to rotate for placement. Angle adjusting is made via an oversized, knuckled thumb screw at the clip's pivot point. Slick.

## Quibbles

I would have loved a -10dB pad on the mic. Due to the HM-1's high output level, I couldn't use it with the preamps on my RME Fireface without overload when recording a loud Mesa Boogie amp. The capsule wasn't distorting, the RME was. Moving to a different preamp solved the issue, as would have an external pad (I've made some since). I wouldn't fight if KEL included a low-cut filter, but for the price, I'm not going to demand it. My other complaints about the mics I received (no shock mount, no carrying case) have been addressed by KEL; having looked into

after-market mounts and Pelican cases, this justifies the price increase.

## **Conclusions**

I've had my pair of HM-1's for around three years, and I love them. My only regret is not picking up a third at the introductory price. Both the sound quality as well as the "if it gets bumped around, who cares?" factor makes the HM-1 one of the few microphones I almost always have set up in the studio, ready to go.

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