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Kel Audio HM-2D Microphone

In a crowd of me-too designs, something genuinely different

Review by Darwin Grosse

In these days of microphone excess, it's rare that a company chooses to occupy its own ground. Canadian mic maker Kel Audio, a relative newcomer to the microphone wars, is creating affordable condenser mics that change the way you think about the whole issue.

In this case, we are reviewing the Kel HM-2D, a large-diaphragm condenser that Kel claims as the soul mate of large-format dynamic mics. The result is a microphone that sounds very different from competing brands.

In review

The appearance of the HM-2D mics is quite misleading. They look like typical large-diaphragm condenser mics, with an attractive black finish and a sturdy, effective shock mount. While good-looking, they are not what they appear to be; they sound is shockingly different than that of most inexpensive condensers.

When I first got the pair of HM-2Ds in for review, it was the day of a live recording at a local coffee shop. I cracked open the box, saw what they looked like, and assumed that they would provide the typical large-diaphragm sound. Boy, was I wrong.

I slapped up the mics for room recording just in time for the start of the show. When I brought them up in my monitoring room, I thought I'd mislabeled something; it sounded like I was monitoring SM57s! Of course, this provided the opportunity for a head-slap; Kel Audio is adamant about the unique voicing of their mics, and it's obvious that they would provide something different in a large-diaphragm offering. I plowed through the set, now aware that I had made a mistake in mic choice. To my ears, these mics aren't a great choice for room mics, but that wasn't what they were meant for.

My next opportunity to use them was for a guitar overdubbing session, and it was a golden moment. Here was a great application for the HM-2D; the midrange punch was *The Right Stuff*, but the large-diaphragm condenser format meant that the high end was very detailed and the overall dynamic range was much more evident. I loved it on three different amps (a Line 6 Spider, a Fender Champ and a Marshall combo), and put it in first-call position for this application.

Given its usefulness with guitars, I thought the HM-2D might also work well with a male rock vocalist. In this case, I was helping a friend lay down some track on his portable digital recorder. He was having problems getting the articulation he wanted using an SM58, so we replaced it with the Kel. This gave us what we wanted: a "tough" sound, but with a clarity that wasn't present with the dynamic mic.

As a final test, I asked a friend to help me record some drum loops and brought the Kels along for a try. They were too large for typical snare positioning, but they sounded great both under the snare and above the toms. My friend is a strong-armed player, and I also found that placing the mics about 3' from the front of the kit (at about the height of the toms) could give me a full kit sound without being overwhelmed by the cymbals and hi-hat. This wouldn't work for a lighter hand, but for this drummer, the balance made for an open but distinct drum sound.

Conclusion

Despite appearances, the Kel HM-2D isn't your everyday condenser mic. From my experience (and, on later reading, in Kel's own description of typical uses), this is an interesting alternative to dynamic mics and not nearly as "fuzzy" as cheap tube mics; the HM-2D provides many of the benefits of a condenser mic combined with the gutsiness of a dynamic. If you are expanding your mic locker, you should strongly consider the HM-2D as an interesting and useful addition to a basic mic collection.

Price: \$179

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