

KEL Audio HM-2D large-diaphragm condenser mic

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If a microphone helps me learn about how other mics in my collection sound, then it is worth spending time with it for this reasons alone. The KEL Audio *HM-2d* not only accomplishes this feat, but does so at an incredibly reasonable price.

It's well understood that condensers generally have more accurate transient response than dynamic mics, and same goes for typical condensers exhibiting more "air" at high frequencies than typical dynamic mics. What quickly surprised me about the *HM-2d* is that because of its intentional design, it rolls off air and emphasizes midrange fullness, and therefore, the transient detail seemed less pronounced. While closer inspection revealed the transient accuracy that I expect from condensers, the mic's unusual frequency-response curve had initially masked this fact. I suddenly realized that some of my perception of transient detail stems from focusing only on frequencies at which I notice it.

This unusual frequency response also can help place sounds in mixes. For a folk trio whose acoustic instruments all had rich high-frequency content, using the *HM-2d* alongside the brighter mics on other instruments helped to give immediate space to the mix before I had applied any equalization. When recording a complex electronic setup with harsh high-end, the *HM-2d* helped to de-emphasize the distorted high frequencies without losing any detail.

Following the HM-1 (Tape Op #63), KEL Audio has again released an unusual and reliable microphone at a very sensible price. While designed to complement a budget microphone collection, its atypical sound can prove quite helpful, even when more expensive options are available. (*\$179 direct; www.kelaudio.com*)

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Kel HM-1 - The Tape Op Review

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I always like having a lot of options in my mic closet. There are times that I lean heavily on my most expensive microphones, but I often find it far more helpful to have as many effective, trustworthy options as possible. I'm often surprised by the mic that proves best for a job, so the more choices I have to try, the better. When an inexpensive new microphone comes along that fills a hole in my closet that I hadn't even thought about, I'm always excited.

The KEL Audio *HM-1* sounds very different from my other small-diaphragm condensers, at a very affordable price. KEL's frequency response chart for the *HM-1* is a straight line, which matches the sound of the mic. It purposely lacks the presence peak or "air" that all of my other SDCs provide (and that I turn to them for).

A closer comparison than a conventional SDC would be Audio-Technica's now discontinued medium-diaphragm *AT3525*. The *HM-1* has a bit less transient detail than the *AT3525* — this slower response resembles some dynamic mics more than a stereotypical condenser. For sounds with midrange that needs to fall naturally into a mix without fighting highs or lows from other parts, the *HM-1* can be perfect. It flattered a blunt, cold synthesizer part and landed instantly where it belonged in the song.

Another synth part with too much coarse edginess was less perfect; it captured too much of the high-end's abrasiveness. At the other end of the sonic spectrum, it captured a weird autoharp-like folk instrument beautifully, with just the right coloration. It has sounded consistently interesting on vocals, and while it's yet to "win" in my initial tests, I'm looking forward to the song where it will.

The construction quality feels very solid, and KEL's website describes their quality control processes in detail. (This issue has surfaced in the past with mics made in China, so I admire KEL's addressing it directly.) The KEL Audio *HM-1* is not a versatile "Swiss Army knife" mic; it wasn't meant for that purpose. It's a welcome addition to my slowly-growing mic closet at its affordable price, which includes a custom shockmount and shipping. (*\$149; Kel Audio*)