

JZ Microphones BT-201

You can rely on the Latvians to think slightly radically when it comes to defining a concept for a new microphone. **JON THORNTON** finds himself magnetically drawn to the interchangeable capsules of this stick mic.



The folks at JZ microphones have never been, shall we say, conservative when it comes to the physical appearance of their microphones. The Black Hole, for example, is memorable for being about the only large diaphragm capacitor microphone whose body you can see straight through. It was perhaps inevitable then, that when Juris Zarins' (*The JZ. Ed*) company turned its attention to the small diaphragm stick design, they would come up with something that stood out from the crowd.

That's harder than you might think after all, there doesn't seem to be that much you can play around with in terms of physical form, but the BT-201 somehow manages it. A small diaphragm capacitor design, featuring a range of swappable capsules, the BT201's body tapers down to a narrow point before widening out again at the capsule end. There was something vaguely familiar about the shape that I couldn't quite put my finger on, until I watched a video on the company website. Hold it by the capsule end and it looks like a baseball bat — hence, allegedly, the BT designation.

But there's more to this design approach than simply a strange shape, there's some genuine innovation here in the way in which the capsules are interchanged. Rather than the more conventional screw-on or bayonet arrangement, the capsules are held in place magnetically. Swapping them is simply a matter of pulling one off and putting another in its place — and this arrangement is a lot more secure than it sounds. As well as speeding up operations, it also means no possibility of accidentally crossing (and ruining) a thread. The tapering body also means that the capsule assembly is potentially more immune to any masking effects by the body — so perhaps there's function to accompany the form in this case.

Discrete components are employed in the microphone's electronics, and the output is transformerless. Quoted specs are a sensitivity of 11mV/Pa, with self-noise weighing in at 12dBA. Four capsules are on offer — an omni, cardioid, wide-cardioid and a wide cardioid with an integral -20dB pad. It's available singly or as a stereo pair with three of these capsules included in each case (omni, cardioid and wide cardioid). The fourth capsule option (wide cardioid with -20dB pad) is available at additional cost.

The stereo pair supplied for review ships in

a very compact wooden case with two of the BT201s plus three capsules for each but strangely no mic clips are included. There is an optional elastic suspension, which from the pictures on the website looks like one of those clever Rycote InVision mounts. Generally the microphone feels well put together in terms of build quality with a solid metal body and lack of any internal switch-gear keeps things simple and rugged looking.

With a price point of Euro 1059 for the stereo pair, it's hard to see where exactly the BT-201 is positioning itself in the market. It's not at the lower end, but is priced somewhat below the established high-end competition of Neumann, Schoeps and DPA. But there's nothing like a really tough test to begin with, and with this in mind the omni capsule was loaded on and compared with a DPA 4006.

First impressions are that the BT-201 is somewhat noisier than the DPA, and that its tonality is a good deal sharper, with quite an obvious lift in the high frequencies. On acoustic guitar this isn't entirely unpleasant, but when set on a cello things start to sound scratchy rather than bright. You also notice a little more murkiness around the low-mids with the BT-201 compared to the DPA although both microphones deliver a nice solid low end, the DPA has more definition to the fundamentals and harmonics.

Switching over to the wide cardioid capsule, and switching the comparison microphone to a Schoeps CCM-22, and if anything these sonic characteristics are slightly magnified. Slightly more forward, less LF extension — nowhere near as smooth as the Schoeps — particularly on the cello. It doesn't suffer, though, from a terrifically aggressive proximity bump, which means that you can get things quite close to source without too much of a 'scooped' sound in the mid range.

Moving on to a drum kit with a pair of BT-201s fitted with the standard cardioid capsule and set up as a spaced overhead pair and the JZ offering fared much better. There's a good sense of detail and transient response here and the slight increase in working distance seems to suit these microphones better. Cymbal sounds and the initial 'thwack' of the snare keep a life-like detail without sounding smeared or thrashy and I actually preferred the sound here to the CCM-22s, which sounded a little softer

overall. If anything, they sound like a pair of AKG C451s with a little more solidity in the low-mids.

The final outing was in the recording of a brass band — this time as a coincident pair using the wide cardioid capsule, and again using the Schoeps as a comparison. This confirmed that if you give these microphones a little distance, and you can live with the self-noise (not really an issue with a brass band, quite honestly), they are capable of giving some very good results indeed. That slight sharpness to the sound when used close-up now translates to a nice 'reach' to the sound, with good levels of HF detail. Yes, they still struggle a little in comparison with the Schoeps in terms of resolving that low-mid complexity, although this is less obvious with brass than with strings.

All of this makes reaching a judgement quite difficult. If the BT201 occupied the same price point as the DPAs and Schoeps, then there would be no contest — but it is significantly cheaper. A fairer comparison might be a Neumann KM184, but the BT201s offer the added flexibility of interchangeable capsules that the Neumann doesn't for a similar price. If you need that added flexibility, then the BT-201 is a worthy competitor. ■

PROS

Very neat and quick capsule change arrangement; flexibility in capsule choice; nicely balanced sound at a distance; price.

CONS

Quite noisy in comparison to others; no clips supplied; can sound a little too forward and bright when used close to source.

EXTRAS

The JZ pop filter offers a distinctive 'curved cone' shape and employs two screens. The main benefit of this design is claimed to be reduced reverberations and, therefore, improved fidelity. The new accessory comes with the new Black Hole microphone shockmount. The pop filter and shockmount are patent pending and are available at a suggested retail price of Euro 339.



Contact

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