Rode NT2-A

Simon Leadley finds a mic that's well suited to even the barest of mic cabinets.

When you're looking for a new microphone, particularly in circumstances where the existing mic cabinet looks a little bare (which is often the case with smaller home studios), you typically want one mic that will work in a number of situations on a variety of instruments and, ideally, one that offers a number of polar patterns.

The venerable Rode NT2 has been a popular mic in that regard since its release over ten years ago and since then Rode has released an army of alternatives to choose from. Now, its successor (perhaps in name only), the Rode NT2-A has arrived, offering more polar patterns, a new dual-diaphragm capsule (identical to the transducer found in the Rode K2) and superior sound quality to its predecessor.

Character Reference

The NT2-A is a front-address studio FET condenser microphone with switchable patterns (omni, cardioid and figure-eight), a dual high-pass filter (active at 80Hz and 40Hz) and a –5dB or –10dB pad, all of which are controlled via easily accessed switches found on the front of the mic just below the grille. Beautifully constructed from nickel-plated cast metal in a fashion typical of the new breed of Rodes, the NT2-A mounts to your stand of choice with a sturdy clip that fixes to the screw thread at the bottom of the mic. This setup is simple and effective, but for those of you after a more sophisticated suspension mount, the SM2 shockmount (which screws to the base in the same fashion as the clip) can be purchased separately from Rode.

Rode Noise

The self noise and electronic noise of the NT2-A are excellent both in practice and on paper, so you can be sure this mic will never contribute noise to your recording chain.

Like the other 'new breeds' at Rode, the electronics of the NT2-A are constructed using modern computer-assembled surface mount technology designed to minimise noise and hum, the results of which are reliability, improved specs and whisper quiet operation. With a self-noise of a minuscule 7dBA, this mic produces virtually no audible electronic noise whatsoever; even at very high gain levels you have to strain your ears to hear it. The on-axis response of the mic, on paper, is also good, with a gentle rise above 10kHz that adds presence.

I've had the NT2-A for a good period of time now, which has allowed me to test it in a variety of configurations with a number of sources, from vocals and choir to acoustic guitar and harmonium. I've also compared the mic to a few of the old favourites in my mic cabinet (yes, I actually have a mic cabinet now, and it's likely it will be getting bigger and better over the coming years). However, back to matters at hand…

Armed with an NT2-A I've recorded as many musical, vocal, dialogue, and exotic instruments as I've had the need to capture over the last few weeks, comparing and getting to know the mic in a number of situations. Interestingly, there were virtually no situations where I put up the mic and went, 'Oh well, better get out the old blah, blah, blah… this just isn't cutting it'. The NT2-A sounded great on all sources. It was quiet and accurate and the different polar patterns allowed me to use it in circumstances where a fixed-pattern mic would have been far less effective. The mic has a nice smooth top end (thanks at least in part to the newly developed capsule) that doesn't sound too sibilant on vocals, and a tight and accurate bottom end, which exhibits none of the 'wooliness' common in the lower harmonic register of many large-diaphragm condensers, even when placed close to the hole of an acoustic guitar. For vocals it's accurate, without possessing the 'character' afforded by some tube mics. There again, depending on what you're recording and the sound you're after, accuracy can either be a shortcoming or a benefit. But for mine, the accuracy of the NT2-A equates to versatility and is therefore in no way 'limited' by this characteristic – quite the contrary. So-called 'character' of tube mics can actually be a problem when you're trying to capture the 'real sound' of an instrument without any colouration. To this end the NT2-A is excellent.

Enlightening Comparisons

Comparisons with other mics were also very enlightening. Without 'naming names' or 'mentioning the war', the NT2-A held its own against every mic I compared it to. Sure, there were differences, and I could throw stupid audio comparisons like 'warmer', 'airy' and 'open' into the mix but the main thing is that the mic was damn close to other benchmark mics we all hold dear to our hearts. The NT2-A performed admirably in the studio regardless of whether it was 30cm away from a drum (the NT2-A can actually handle up to 157dB with the pad engaged – handy when recording jet engines during takeoff…) or picking up the nuance of a wind instrument. For vocals it was equally convincing.

I really tried to find fault with this mic for the sake of this review but couldn't, in the end, find a single one – it really is a great performer in its own right. My only criticism is that it doesn't come in any other colours. No, I'm not kidding. We were recording an Indian orchestra live for a DVD release at Trackdown recently and the art director asked me if I could replace the NT2-A "with a black one" as the silver mic was too conspicuous for the camera! I called Rode some time later and they said, "Sure, although the nickel finish is our trademark, we could get some black bodies made up for you!"

Which brings me to one final point to mention regarding service. All electronic equipment will get damaged at some point in time, either by the user or as a result of general wear and tear. From my own point of view (living in Sydney) it's nice to know that Rode is just down the road (no pun intended) and they can, and *will* repair the mics that they sell at a very reasonable price. I had a couple of dynamic mics from another well-known manufacturer recently that I sent off for repair, only to be told that they would cost more to repair than to buy new – and these mics aren't cheap either! So I got them back and pulled them apart (as they were apparently worthless anyway) and found that two wires needed re-soldering to the capsule. Ten minutes and 10 cents worth of solder saved the mics and simultaneously sunk the reputation of the mics' representatives here in Australia.

Backyard Science

In conclusion, I would recommend the Rode NT2-A to anyone looking for a well-priced, no-compromise multi-pattern condenser microphone. It sounds great, is well constructed and is made right here in our own backyard, making it cheaper for Australians to purchase than our US and European compatriots (for a change!). I would like to see Rode manufacture a companion pop filter that could use the screw mount on the bottom of the mic at some point in the future – if they did it would be icing on the cake. The NT2-A is an all-round winner that's versatile enough to take on the innumerable miking tasks that the world presents. AT

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Price

- *$895; SM2 Shockmount: $107.80*

A Second Opinion – Terry Manning of Compass Point Studios, The Bahamas

At Compass Point Studios, I have had many great microphones available to me over the years, including Neumann U47, U48, M49, U87, U47 fet, U89, KM84, AKG C12, 414, Telefunken ELA M251, Sennheisers of various models, Beyer, Sony, Shure, EV, Soundelux, Gefell, and more. In other words, some of the best, most respected, and yes, most expensive, microphones in the industry...

I've certainly enjoyed the luxury of having such great mics around, and have relished each for their various strengths. However, there have been times when I've found myself using an unfamiliar microphone, either because someone has brought a 'new' microphone into my studio, or I've been working in another facility with a different mic collection. And once or twice I've been 'forced' into using a newly designed or manufactured lower cost mic.

I was always disappointed when I compared such microphones to my trusted old friends, the Neumanns, et al. Highs were often artificial or 'fizzy', frequency response ragged, and quality sound character lacking. Because of this, I had developed a preconceived bias against all inexpensive microphones, whether I had tried them or not. I already 'knew' what sound these mics would give me (or rather, what they would not), so there was no point in using them. I had become a microphone snob. And really, I didn't think this was a bad thing to be, and in most cases, I still don't!

So when I travelled to Australia recently to track a new production I was initially disappointed to find that the mic closet at the well-appointed Sydney studio had only a few of my old friends in it, and none of them were the high-end tube or condensers! But there were lots of Rode microphones… my choices obviously were to either hire in some mics, or try out what the studio had to offer. I already 'knew' that Rode mics were less expensive than my old favourites, and therefore of lesser sound quality. But they looked nice, so I figured there was no harm in at least trying them out. I put two Classic IIs on drum overheads, two NT5s on (drum) room, a K2 on bass amp, an NT1000 on rhythm guitar, and another K2 on (lead guitar) room. (There were a few mics other than Rode employed, including a Shure SM57 on snare and close lead guitar, an AKG D112 on bass drum, and Sennheiser 421/441s on toms.) Immediately I was pleasantly surprised at what came through the monitor speakers. No fizzy highs, a smooth frequency response, and plenty of 'character' in the sound quality. These weren't the 'cheap' mics I had expected. They sounded very much like my old and trusted friends. What was going on? As I continued with overdubs, I employed several of the Rode models in different situations and they never disappointed. The Classic II and K2 tube (valve) models had true 'tube warmth,' yet lower noise than I was used to with my older tube faves. The NT5s seemed every bit the equal of the KM184, and the NT1000 was a quality, versatile performing condenser that was at home in almost any situation.

So I have to admit that I was indeed a microphone snob. I was prejudiced against any mic that I wasn't familiar with, especially ones that were inexpensive to buy. And I will also admit that I was wrong. While I still believe it's true that many currently made low-cost microphones are inferior in quality to the well-known vintage models, it's not true of Rode. So Compass Point Studios now has its own set of Rode mics in the closet! Of course I won't completely replace all of the old favourites, but I now have another quality, viable option to try on any given singer or instrument.

Terry Manning has engineered and/or produced albums for Booker T & The MGs, Sam & Dave, Led Zeppelin, George Thorogood, ZZ Top etc. For more on Terry Manning and his engineering work with Lenny Kravitz, check out Issue 3 of AT.