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9 NEW REVIEWS

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Aston Microphones

Element active moving coil microphone

This microphone is truly the voice of the people



REVIEW BY PAUL VNUK JR., ALEX HAWLEY AND DAVID BLASCOE

In just over five short years, UK-based Aston Microphones has built up quite a roster of innovative and affordable microphone designs. Nothing in the Aston line is a copy or clone of any famous models of yesteryear. Today we're looking at the Element, an active moving coil microphone and the first 'people's microphone' voiced in the court of public opinion.

The Aston 33

Our story begins with the Aston 33—a panel of engineers and artists that now includes more than 600 people (hey, Aston makes great microphones—I never said they could count). The Aston 33 have blind-auditioned and taste-tested all Aston microphones to date during their development process. With the Element, Aston expanded that circle to include the public. Through multiple rounds of blind listening tests, over 4,000 people weighed in with comparative feedback on multiple Element release candidates, alongside big-name classic mics. Once the global selection committee zeroed in on their favorite Aston variant, and when that mic came out on top of the competition, the Element was ready for prime time.

A fresh design

Each Aston mic to date has included

a host of innovative new features, from dent-resistant spring grilles (Origin and Spirit), a built-in laser sight (Starlight), and the multi-voiced, preamp-equipped active dynamic Stealth. With the Element, Aston may have possibly developed the first new capsule/diaphragm design in over eighty years.

Ridyon™

Aston is understandably secretive about its new Ridyon capsule technology, built around a phantom powered, active moving-coil diaphragm that's ultra-thin and very sensitive, offering a super-fast transient response. It's a moving coil type design like a dynamic mic, but the super-thin, 1.5" diaphragm is more condenser-shaped. According to Aston, this allows the Element to deliver high-end condenser mic sensitivity, and the punch and rejection capability of a

dynamic mic, coupled with a natural ribbon sound. The capsule is protected by a large perforated metal disc-style grill.

Back to the egg

The 0.6 lb., 6.4" x 2.28" oval-shaped body fits together as front and back halves, rather than a capsule assembly placed on top of a circular body. A backlit Aston logo glows purple when the Element is powered up. Not just for looks, the sculpted and tapered contours around the capsule and grille perform a similar function as a waveguide on a monitor speaker, lessening stray reflections and resonance.

Shock and pop

The Element fits into a propriety plastic (PTEE) shock mount that's ultra-thin yet strong; it clicks firmly into two tabs on the mic. The mic comes with a large metal pop filter that magnetically attaches to the front of the mic and is reported to be the first of its kind. I noticed that, if the mic gets shaken or bumped, the shock mount will rattle the pop screen for a few seconds.

Elemental travels

As a people's mic, we decided it would be fun to put the Element into the hands of three different reviewers. I tested it out in my studio in Wisconsin. Reviewer and drummer David Blascoe gave it a whirl on drums in his room in Nashville. Finally, Associate Editor Alex Hawley tried it out in Boulder, CO. Each of us wrote our impressions independently—no spoilers with each other.

The editor thinks

My first use of the Element was as a voiceover mic for our inaugural RECORDING Podcast, which features an in-depth interview with James Young of Aston, offering even deeper details about Element design and development; you can check it out at recordingmag.com and subscribe on one of the popular streaming services.

I was impressed by the mic's bold proximity effect, rich midrange presence, and its clarity on speech. It gave me my first taste of how wide

the pickup pattern of the Element is. While essentially a cardioid mic, The Element has a very generous sweet spot, making it an excellent choice for vocalists and instrumentalists who move and sway while tracking. The proximity effect yields an instant radio voice up on the capsule, but as you move away and the proximity effect chills out, the mic never becomes thin or anemic.

I compared the Element both up close and at a distance with a Shure SM7B and an AKG C414 XLS. Its presence is closer to the SM7B, but with greater clarity and a slight upper midrange thrust. It has a thicker, meatier sound than the C414. However, I was impressed that the top end of the two was similar—clear and detailed, but never bright or piercing. I also compared it to a Roswell Mini K47, a mic in the classic U-style FET tradition, and found the Mini K 47 to be the brighter of the two (on its own, I rarely perceive the Mini K 47 to be a bright mic).

Around the studio

I found the Element to be a solid all-rounder in the studio, and especially nice on percussion. Thanks to its generous pickup pattern, it worked well as a single mono mic placed between two congas, as well as a pair of tabla drums. It might be weird to call this mic a great shaker mic, but it did capture shakers and maracas with evenness, despite the player swaying and moving around in front of the capsule.

On strummed string instruments such as acoustic guitar, ukulele, mandolin and mountain dulcimer, it captured a full, rich tone with smooth, non-biting clarity. Here I found the Element worked best with a touch of distance to back down the proximity effect and offer a wide-focus capture of the body and the strumming.

On vocals, the Element offers the best of both worlds: up close, it can be worked for a deep, rich, intimate performance, showing off its dynamic/ribbon tendencies. Or, take a step back and belt it out. —PV

Aston Microphones Element

The drummer says

Upon first taking the Aston Element out of its packaging, I was immediately impressed by its presentation. In three separate boxes, you get the Element, the proprietary shock mount, and the magnetic clip-on pop filter, along with some other goodies like stickers and a pin.

Testing

I set up my Gretsch Brooklyn drum kit in a three-piece configuration (kick, snare and floor tom) with a 17" pair of hi-hats (K Custom Hybrid Crash on top and an A Medium Crash on the bottom) and a 22" K Constantinople Medium Ride. I figured I could find a suitable one size fits all position to capture a balanced, overall image of the drum kit. In addition, I also wanted to sample each drum on my kit and then trigger those sounds in Ableton Live after the fact to have a virtual close mic setup. After trying the mic on the snare and kick, it became clear that its sensitivity and pickup pattern weren't tight enough—the off-axis rejection is unlike an SM57 or other typical dynamic drum mic, so it didn't reject enough of the sound from the rest of the kit for my needs. This is understandable, seeing as this unique new capsule design essentially combines the best of all worlds of dynamic, condenser, and ribbon mics. Instead, I recorded three drum takes, capturing the kit as a whole in three different mic positions. I did one pass with the Element as a low mono overhead, about forehead level, pointed down in the center of the kit between the floor tom and snare drum. Then I tried a front of kit position about 3 to 4 feet out at chest level, angled slightly towards the snare drum. The last position was as a 'crotch mic' (as they say), placed a few inches above the kick on the player side and pointed straight ahead at me. Each position had something different to offer. The overhead position offered more kit attack and less room sound. The position in front of the kit provided more room sound and more overall tone and body from the kit as a



whole, and the crotch position significantly boosted the body and weight of the kick while reducing the attack and slap of the drums. Each of these could be used to its own benefit. Still, I decided that the overhead position was the truest sounding representation of the kit and the one I chose for my session. I sent this take along to Alex and Paul, and you can check out the results of our little jam, written by Alex, on the RECORDING YouTube channel.

Sound Off

Overall, on drums I found the Aston Element to be a bit of an enigma. On the one hand, I found the weight and low-end thump added a lot of oomph to the drum sound. On the other hand, the increased sensitivity, yet slightly rolled-off high end made it a strange new experience for me. The Element high end yields a somewhat rolled off and

almost trashy sound on cymbals. It's not harsh, but there's more of a high-mid presence on the cymbals than I'm used to. Don't get me wrong, I like this microphone, but the new capsule technology that the mad scientists have developed over at Aston is a sound that I can't honestly say that I've experienced before on drums. As mentioned, I wouldn't reach for it when close miking drums, but there are many new and interesting sounds to be found with this as an overhead or room mic.

The Aston Element sounds as unique as it looks. Keep in mind that these particular tests reflect my own drum kit in my own studio, and I'm sure different rooms and different instruments will yield varying results. I like that Aston challenges us to retrain our perception and wrap our heads around new and exciting microphone approaches. —DB

And now a word from our Associate Editor

As an active moving-coil microphone, I wasn't sure what to expect from the Aston Element. A stereotypical dynamic tonality with a darker, punchier midrange? Or would the active component rival a condenser microphone? I found the Element to live somewhere uniquely in between, with enough sparkle and vibrancy in the top end to beautifully capture vocals and acoustic guitars, while still maintaining some of that midrange punch that we expect from dynamic microphones.

Strumming

First up, an acoustic guitar. I found it interesting that it sounded best slightly further away from the guitar than where I usually place the mic. The response is remarkably clear and natural sounding. It has a hint of that dynamic midrange flavor paired with an open and detailed top end. The low midrange is full, perhaps slightly less muddy than other dynamics, but it still has a warm weight. I noticed a slight emphasis in the 850-1100 Hz range, but it's quite subtle. It also has an almost nonexistent noise floor, which helps with softer sources.

In a treated studio, its wider cardioid polar pattern lends to lifelike reproduction for most sources, which is perhaps why I found the sweet spot to be a bit further back for acoustic guitar. The Element captures its sources with realism and width while still offering the benefit of some directivity. It picks up more room reflections than most cardioids, which can either help or hurt depending on your environment. This wide response can benefit vocalists that move around a bit while recording. The Element performed very well in vocal sessions. The open top end creates clarity and intelligibility, while the low mids and bass extension create depth and fullness. While I didn't have a chance to record any rappers, I imagine that its punchy and open character would be well suited for the genre. Its proximity effect is quite

pronounced within a few inches of the mic and can be leveraged for more low end if needed. Even when getting close to the capsule, I found it impressively resistant to plosives, even without its proprietary magnetic pop filter (which looks awesome).

The low noise floor and superb clarity make Element a great voiceover candidate for commercial or podcasting applications. However, recording in a tight and quiet room is hugely important for this type of mic to work, so bear that in mind. It sounded great here in one of Coupe Studios' treated VO booths, but if you plan to use it for podcasting or vocals in an untreated home studio, be aware that it may pick up some unwanted reflections.

The cleverly designed mic clip was very effective and secure, minimizing vibrations while offering flexibility in placement. The LED indicator on the body adds some vibe to its unique appearance, and it's useful for making sure that phantom power is engaged without having to run back into the control room to make sure.

Element certainly punches above its weight class, and maybe above the next one too, as a reliable workhorse for a range of instruments. I'm not at all surprised that so many users voted for this design in blind listening tests—it offers all of the top-end clarity needed for most sources, while sounding punchy and natural throughout the midrange. —AH

The big reveal

There you have it—three views on the new Aston Element. Saving the best for last is the price. The Element comes in at \$199 street, and all three of us agree—that's impressive. I agree with Alex—the Element *does* punch above its weight class, and I can summarize by saying that the new Element is a mic that I find myself reaching for simply because I want the sound it offers; the price, while a huge bonus, just makes owning one sweeter. ➤

Price: \$199

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