Røde NT1-A

The original NT1 gets a major overhaul. Andy Stewart reports.

There must be some motivating vibes lingering in the air around Sydney's Olympic Games site that continue to effect the people at Rode. Ever since they moved to within sight of the Olympic venue (to the suburb of Rhodes – appropriately enough) Rode has been shipping out new products like there's no tomorrow. The latest gold medal-winning performance comes from an update to one of the original Rode track and field stars, the NT1. The new microphone is the NT1-A.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the original Rode NT1, a few basics about the NT1-A should be pointed out first of all. Like its predecessor, the NT1-A is a large diaphragm, side-address cardioid pattern condenser microphone. It sports a one-inch gold-plated capsule suspended in a rubber housing, which is tastefully and securely housed in a sturdy metal skin. The NT1-A is a simple design, eschewing any low frequency roll-off or pad switches.

The NT1-A is, at a glance, almost indistinguishable from the NT1. Internally, however, a minor revolution has taken place. For anyone who is familiar with what conventional resistors, capacitors and ICs look like, the original NT1 is fairly typical of what you might expect on a condenser microphone's circuit board. There are familiar components laid out in a conventional manner – but not so the new NT1-A. Rode's new baby has virtually nothing recognisable on its board beyond a small handful of capacitors that are huddling together in apparent fear for their lives!

Rode has completely redesigned the electronics of the NT1 to fall into line with its adoption of new surface-mount manufacturing techniques, the result of which is the NT1-A – a microphone with improved tonal performance and vastly improved specifications. In a simple test that involved turning up both microphones with 60dB of preamplification, the NT1 had quite a noticeable (though respectable) amount of self noise (13dB), whereas the NT1-A had basically none. Well, actually the microphone has 5dB of inherent noise – which to my understanding is the lowest noise floor of any microphone available for under $US500. It is low enough for even the most paranoid noise-Nazi to cope with and is about five times quieter than my Neumann U47. Switching between the NT1 and NT1-A was akin to applying noise reduction to an audio track – "here we have some hiss, and… now it's gone". The difference was quite obvious, although admittedly this was at a headphone listening level that made the shirt I was wearing sound like Christmas Wrap. Nevertheless the impressively low self-noise of the NT1-A is its greatest attribute, making it well suited to the recording of quiet sound sources or anywhere where a noise floor is exposed (usually quiet studio environments).

On a more macroscopic level, the Rode NT1-A has a few other differences worth mentioning. The outer casing has been updated to make it consistent with the other microphones in the range. The new satin nickel finish is a definite improvement on the 'public hospital grey' of the NT1 – a colour choice I never really understood. The grille assembly is also slightly larger on the NT1-A – although you really need both microphones in front of you to perceive this difference.

Sonically the NT1-A seems to have a little more in the extreme highs and less midrange presence than the NT1, making it a slightly smoother and more comfortable microphone to use on vocals and stringed instruments. I would still like to see a little more 'maturity' in the overall sound of the microphone, but at this price point, it's very difficult to level criticism. The cost of the NT1-A is, in fact, the same as the NT1, which will suit people on a budget and speed up the phasing out of the NT1 quite considerably I suspect.

The new surface mount technology has also improved some other specifications. The microphone has a wider dynamic range, a slightly higher maximum SPL rating (137dB) and improved sensitivity. However, one criticism I will make is that in the manual the frequency response graph has a vertical scale of ±40dB. This scale is so large that it makes the response curve appear deceptively flat, and makes the graphic information less than useful – Rode certainly aren't alone in this practice and other mic manufacturers should also take note.

For anyone looking to buy a simple, cost-effective condenser microphone the NT1-A is an obvious candidate. It is well suited to a wide range of recording tasks, and is built to a high standard of manufacture. It's as quiet as a church mouse, relatively inexpensive and perfect for recording low-level sound sources onto digital formats. If you don't like hiss building up in your recordings, courtesy of noisy mics and preamps, have a listen to the NT1-A – you won't hear a thing.

Manufacturer Info

- *Rode Microphones*

Email: support@rodemic.com
Website: www.rodemic.com

Price Guide

- *US$349 (comes with SM1 shockmount)*