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RECORDING
The magazine for the recording musician

RECORD YOUR BAND

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MXL CR89 Condenser Microphone and RF-100 Reflection Filter

A very competent affordable mic, and a way to use it well in less-than-perfect rooms

Back in our March 2013 issue we took a look at MXL’s then-new CR30 large-diaphragm condenser microphone. The CR30 was rich and clear, with a great sound that made it a perfect choice as an entry-level microphone. Its worthy sound was complemented by its stylish looks, and when I say stylish, we are talking about an entire microphone finished in black chrome... hence the CR designation.

This month we look at the big brother to the CR30, the CR89. As you might expect, the CR89 is also part of the black chrome line, but rather than being entirely emblazoned in a metallic finish, this time just the capsule assembly and end cap are finished in the dark shiny metal. The body of the CR89 is finished in a matte black that looks just as classy.

Black, chrome, big and bold

An update of the older MXL V89, the CR89 comes in a standard kit with an aluminum flight case, a black and gray shock mount, and a famous MXL cleaning cloth. You may chuckle, but as with the CR30, trust me, you’ll want to keep your shiny mic fingerprint-free!

The CR89 is housed in one of MXL’s larger diameter bodies. According to MXL, this design minimizes body resonance and also features a tuned grille cavity that reduces standing waves and harmonic distortion. The mic is 2.5” x 7.3” and weighs 1.85 lbs. Buildwise it has a very nice feel to it and a fantastic fit and finish that truly rivals many of the more expensive mics on the market.

It has a gold-plated 6 micron diaphragm in a 32 mm pressure gradient cardioid capsule. It is a transformerless design and internally makes use of two Nichicon Muse electrolytic capacitors. Like most MXL mics, it also internally uses Mogami wiring.

The specs and the sound

It has a 20 Hz-20 kHz frequency response, a -30 dB ref: 1 V/Pa sensitivity, a 150 ohm impedance, a 138 dB maximum SPL, a signal-to-noise ratio of 80 dBA (Ref. 1 Pa), and an Equivalent Noise Level of 14 dBA (IEC 651). Its frequency response has roughly a 5 dB rise from 80 to 190 Hz, a slight 500 Hz bump, and a 2-3 dB bump from 4 to 10 kHz.

Sonically the CR89 has a solid and full low/midrange with a top end that is more smooth and natural than it is bright. However, the top end is not dull or rolled off either. It offers up just enough highs to be open, yet not overly bright, and only gets sibilant if the source itself is on the harsh side. Personally I am always thrilled to see budget mics move away from the “brighter is better” trend. It is also a very clean and quiet microphone.

Off axis, its level rolls off slowly rather than having a sharp cutoff as many mics do; in other words it has a wider cardioid pattern than most. Tapping the mic body will produce a dull ‘ting’ rather than a full-on ‘ping and ring’ as on many inexpensive mics.

In use

I put the CR89 right to work, cutting demos and scratch tracks for an upcoming recording project, mostly on acoustic guitar and male and female vocals. Additionally, I took it for a spin on voiceover and podcasting duties. The first two things I noticed were the overall pleasant top end, and that despite its low end rise, it has a very minimal proximity effect that stays consistent from a foot up to an inch away. It spoke well of this mic that the producer on the project and I kept commenting on how many of the female lead vocalist’s scratch takes through this mic could easily be the final vocal take.

A few weeks later, during actual tracking on the album, I selected the CR89 to try it out on acoustic guitar. I placed it just off the soundhole, coupled with a Neumann KM 84 on the 12th fret. Originally it was just for me to get more test time in for this review, but everyone involved was so impressed with the full yet controlled sound of the CR89, coupled with the brighter string sound from the KM84, that the tracks made the final cut!

Conclusions

This is a very impressive mic, especially considering its $349.95 street price. I would consider this a second-tier entry level microphone, compared to your $100 to $200 fare. It offers a sound and build quality that will keep it around even if and when you move up to higher-end models in the future.

The RF-100

In addition to the CR89, MXL also sent along one of the company’s RF-100 Reflection Filters. Often known as portable vocal booths, the RF-100 is a 5-panel absorption device made to closely surround a microphone and minimize room reflections as well as lessen background noises.

The RF-100’s 5 panels fit together with large thumbscrews allowing it to fold up when not in use. Each panel features pyramidal style sound foam on corrugated metal. The RF-100 clamps directly to a mic stand. The microphone can attach to the stand’s own boom arm, or one can use the simple mic mount extension, included with the RF-100, that screws onto the top of the mic stand and holds the mic in the center of the RF-100. This works well, with the caveat that for heavy tube mics I would go with the mic stand’s own boom arm for matters of weight and balance.

The RF-100 is sturdy and well built. It can get top-heavy on a cheap stand, so use a decent stand with a wide base and you will be fine. I really like that the whole contraption clamps to the actual stand tightly and sturdily, in comparison to many competing models where the device mounts onto the top threads of the stand.

In use, the RF-100 does what it is designed to do and offers a tighter, cleaner vocal sound that is not subject to the reflections in a less-than-perfect room. I find these devices invaluable for podcasts and voiceover work in addition to sung vocal tracks.

Prices: CR89, $349.95; RF-100, $399