

Sontronics APOLLO



Sontronics is aiming to build on the success of its Sigma with the active stereo Apollo. Huw Price lifts off...

KEY FEATURES

- Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz
- Polar pattern: Blumlein stereo/figure-8
- Impedance: 150Ω
- Equivalent noise level: 12dB (A-weighted)
- 48v phantom power required

APOLLO

Manufacturer **Sontronics**

Price **£830**

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Long before stereo records were available and wealthy music fans listened to scratchy mono 78s on wind-up gramophones, a British scientist called Alan Blumlein was busy devising microphone techniques that would lay the foundations for stereo and surround sound recording.

Bell Laboratories in the US had already achieved some success with spaced stereo microphone pairs that, like human ears, relied on timing differences to produce a stereo image. This technique's big drawback, however, is that it results in comb filtering.

Blumlein realised that the brain could be tricked into interpreting the differences in volume between two microphone signals as timing differences. Blumlein stereo recording requires two figure-8 microphones placed very close together firing in an 'X' pattern. The signals are panned hard left and right, and since they are so close, comb filtering in the audio frequency range should theoretically be negligible.

Ribbon microphones would seem to be ideal candidates for Blumlein stereo recording, but ribbons are often so

heavy that it's difficult to set them up. Some also have particularly strong magnetic fields, which further complicates accurate setup. Fortunately, most modern ribbon mics have lightweight neodymium magnets and a contained field.

Cross purposes

The Apollo's ribbon assemblies are clearly visible through the sparse and rather flimsy-looking grille. It's actually stronger than it looks, offering decent protection for those fragile strips of aluminium, and Sontronics' lifetime warranty provides extra peace of mind. Its onboard active preamps with electronically balanced outputs require phantom power from a mixer or preamp.

In addition to Blumlein stereo recordings, the Apollo can also be used for middle-and-side recordings, which is a big advantage. Using Blumlein, the fixed angle of the ribbons means you can't adjust the width of the stereo image without moving the mic. Middle-and-side recording enables you to place the stereo pair where it's most convenient, and rather than having to move the microphone to achieve the required stereo image, you simply balance up the mid-and-side signals.

In suspense

The Apollo comes in a sturdy carry case with a padded velvet interior. The suspension mount looks identical to the

Sigma's, and it enables you to get the Apollo right up against any sound source if required. A quality six-pin connector screws securely onto the output socket, splitting the signal between two short XLR-terminated cables labelled upper and lower.

Off balance

For critical Blumlein stereo recordings, both transducers must be evenly matched. We tested two Apollos and in both cases the upper section produced slightly less output than the lower section. This is worth knowing because by pointing two individual microphones directly at the source with the polarity of one side reversed, it's easy to match the volume levels. This is more tricky with the Apollo because the transducers are at a fixed angle.

Nevertheless, we achieved very solid imaging using the Blumlein stereo pattern to record an acoustic guitar trio and a drum kit. For solo instruments, we believe the Apollo performs at its best in mid-and-side mode. A simple solo acoustic guitar recording was spacious yet focused, with an almost tangible physical presence.

Compared to the slightly treble-shy character of Sontronics' Sigma mono active ribbon mic, the Apollo sounds brighter and cleaner, and has a livelier transient response. It couldn't match the smoothness of a Coles 4038, though; the Apollo's midrange sounded more coloured and restricted and the bass was softer.

However, a pair of 4038s would be infinitely less practical for coincident stereo recording and they'd cost nearly twice as much. Ultimately, individual users will have to decide if the hassle-free stereo configuration and the active electronics outweigh the flexibility and versatility of having two individual ribbon microphones. **MATT**

SUMMARY

WHY BUY

- Hassle-free ribbon sounds
- Vanishingly low noise
- Fine case and shockmount

WALK ON BY

- Output level mismatch

VERDICT

Despite its rather gawky looks, the Apollo is a well-implemented active stereo ribbon microphone that seriously undercuts the competition.



MEASURING UP

The Royer SF-24 stereo ribbon microphone (£2,937) is a phantom-powered version of the company's SF-12 stereo ribbon mic (£1,761). Both are based on a vintage Bang & Olufsen stereo ribbon called the BM5. The SF-24's output of -38dB is 14dB more sensitive than the SF-12's. Another alternative is AEA's R88 (£1,526), a stereo ribbon designed around the large-ribbon configuration of the classic RCA 44. But you'll need two low-noise/high gain preamps because it's passive.