

Studio Sound April 1999

Coles and beyer are continuing a tradition; all the ribbon models they produce (which in the case of Coles amounts to the entire catalogue) have been around for years and we should be grateful that they are still around in the face of industry indifference. It is even more surprising to find a new company introducing a new high-end ribbon, but that is what Californian manufacturer Royer Labs has done with the R-121. Royer draws clear parallels between ribbon microphones and valve circuitry, suggesting that in the same way that enthusiasm for semiconductors obscured the merits of valves, so the advent of the condenser microphone made the world forget just how good the ribbon could be.

The R-121 is a lovingly built, slim, side-firing microphone whose internal construction is just visible through the grille when it is held up to the light. This shows just how long and narrow the 2.5-micron thick pure aluminum ribbon is, rather like some of the now-defunct models from people like Reslo and Grampian. The body is again much more reminiscent of a small side-fire condenser than of an original ribbon classic, and comes as standard with a bulldog-clip spring stand mount. An optional extra is an unusual suspension mount where a similar bulldog clip is hung in an elastic web, attached to the stand by a base that clearly carries the Audio-Technica logo for reasons I am not privy to.

Its manual makes claims for its performance that are by now familiar from the other ribbons on offer here. Its frequency response graph is even flatter than the others with a maximum excursion of 3dB between 30HZ and 16kHz, and no significant lumps and bumps in between. Once again the published polar behavior, figure-of-eight as expected, is almost completely uniform at all frequencies, and certainly far more so than any condenser you will ever see. Although it claims sensitivity surpassing that of 'classic' ribbons, it remains very low at -54dB ref 1V/Pa, and actually comes across as less sensitive than the 4038. At the same time its non-existent noise contribution makes for a very clean sound given a sufficiently quite preamp.

Sonically the R-121 stands up more than adequately alongside the older ribbons, displaying similar attributes of smoothness, extended frequency response and low distortion. Put it up next to a 4038 and the sounds are essentially similar, although the big thunderous bottom end of the Coles is a little tamer in the Royer. The important common characteristic is the natural flatness

of the response, with no mid or top-end coloration to speak of, and the same lack of strain during loud passages. Again this is a sound that would not shame a top-flight condenser.

For many of us a favorite stereo microphone setup is the classic Blumlein pair of 90° figure-of-eights, and in many ways the ideal way of achieving this is with a pair of ribbons. Something like a 4038 is simply too big physically to make for easy rigging of a crossed pair, but the smaller dimensions of the Royer make it much more feasible. Indeed the only problem I found in sticking a pair next to each other was the magnetic attraction between them pulling them together. Having sorted out a sensible configuration, the behavior of the pair was just what Blumlein would have wanted, with a clearly defined stereo image and uniform frequency response across the stereo stage - often the Achilles heel of an otherwise good array. The next step is a single-point stereo ribbon microphone, which apparently Royer has in the pipeline.

Copyright 1999