

Rihanna's Engineer Greg Ogan on World-Class Vocals

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REVIEW

BY PAUL VNUK JR.

Cathedral Pipes Notre Dame Tube Condenser Microphone

Awesome sound to match unbelievable looks

One of my favorite new audio-gear trends in the past few years has been the rise of custom mic builders. Second only to custom car geeks, these folks take the classic mic designs—usually those that start with C, U, or E—and then tinker with their favorite recipe of capacitors, transformer windings, grille covers and more, until they come up with a microphone that offers a classic heritage, but with each designer's own special signature flair.

I have been test-driving a mic that's one of the most pimped-out reimaginings of the venerable Neumann U47 that I have ever seen: the Notre Dame from the folks at Cathedral Pipes.

This ain't your Grandpa's vintage mic!

The Notre Dame, like all Cathedral Pipes mics, is handbuilt in the company's California facility by company founder Charles Dickinson. The line currently contains 4 models: The Saint Jean Baptiste FET condenser, the Seville ribbon, The Regensburg Dom (also U47-inspired), and the king of the castle, The Notre Dame.

These are some of the blingiest mics on the planet, featuring shiny chrome bodies with color fades, coats of arms, and more. The visual icing on the cake is that each microphone's grille and capsule assembly is internally lit with glowing, colored LEDs. There have been a few microphones in the past to have lighted capsules, like Korby's Red and Blue models and at least one Heil mic, but I am not sure if they used similar technology.

Overall I would be curious to hear Chuck's tales of where his chrome covered coat of arms and bright internally-lit capsules came from... there are no other mics on the market that look like these!

The Notre Dame in all its glory

The Notre Dame is inspired by the U47, but due to the demise of the old steel tubes used in the original Neumann, the Notre Dame uses a glass NOS Valvo/Phillips GmbH PF86 tube, giving the mic just the slightest hint of U67 character as well.

Staring with the outside, the mic body is indeed a replica of a U47 down to the dimensions and look of the head basket,



although by design the head basket is a tad more open than the original. The mic is finished in a shiny chrome with a white enamel fade and a large Cathedral Pipes coat of arms badge. Its head basket glows a warm white!

Internally this mic illustrates the loving design of a custom builder, with hand-chosen components at every turn. The capsule is Charles' own take on the Neumann M7 capsule, handmade in his Orange County shop. All components are personally chosen by Charles, including the Cinemag CM-2461 NiCo output transformer, Wima MK4 and Solen capacitors, and a monstrous paper and oil coupling capacitor (almost the size of the PF86 glass tube!) made by Tobias Jensen.

Cathedral Pipes offers no specs on the mic at all, but we don't listen to spec sheets... we'll make do with our ears.

And ALL the trimmings

Before we jump into the Notre Dame in use, we must talk about the kit that it comes with. I'll cut to the chase and let you know that I have never seen a microphone package done this well before, and I'm pretty sure you haven't either.

It starts with a deluxe oversized roadie-style briefcase custom made by GOMC (short for Get Off My Case). Inside is a thick, deep die-cut foam lining topped in a harder red foam—everything in the package is the same matching red and white. The kit includes a Rycote shock mount, again custom made for Cathedral Pipes in white and red. There is a matching red pouch which houses a red power cable for the power supply and a custom-made red multipin mic cable with a threaded lock that screws to the bottom of the mic like the cables of old. The cable is made at Cathedral Pipes HQ using special OCC (Ohno Continuous Cast) copper wiring.

And then there's the power supply. One of the first things that drew Editor Mike Metlay and me over to the Cathedral Pipes booth at the 2014 AES show, beyond the bright glowing microphones, was this power supply. You should know that Dr. Metlay





Cathedral Pipes Notre Dame

REVIEW

is a former nuclear physicist, and this power supply looks like a Geiger counter, so it was a “moth to a flame” thing. [So sue me. —MM]

In addition to its large red aluminum handle and power switch, covered by a safety mask like a fighter jet’s missile arm switch, the power supply has a unique way of selecting its polar pattern. The Notre Dame has a fully variable polar pattern that is selected by a red Neve-style

knob, but rather than boring markings on the top of the unit for showing the chosen pattern, this power supply uses a repurposed voltage meter whose needle moves smoothly from Figure-8 through Cardioid to Omni and all points in between.

Sonically this design is smooth and very finely adjustable, as you can tune the pattern to the precise sound you are after. There is no click or thump as patterns are selected, as there would be with

For comparison I put it next to a pair of other high-end tube U47-style mics, an Australian Beesneez T-1 Tribute and the Pearlman TM-47 (Reviewed September 2014).

None of these mics is a full-on clone, but they are all greatly U47 inspired as well. Just as no two vintage U47s sound the same, each of these three mics easily had its own thing going on while simultaneously sharing a similar sonic weight and feel.

As I mentioned in my previous Pearlman review, the T-1 and the TM-47 both exhibit a similar low-end weight and midrange punch, with the T-1 being a tad rounder and more solid and the TM-47 having more air, making it more easily “stackable” over multiple overdubs. Throwing the Notre Dame into the mix, I found it to have a touch more low-end girth than the T-1, while its top end was closer in tone to the highs of the TM-47, but a hair smoother and less airy to my ears. There is no clear “winner” here; I found it fascinating how each mic’s sound was audibly unique and yet beautiful.

This mic, like any good U47 inspired design, will work on anything, but in a very forward, full way. I liked it more on lead vocals, where it was fully front and center, but a little less so for stacked backing vocals, where I prefer something a tad more open like a C12 or Telefunken ELAM flavor. The Notre Dame is a killer voiceover mic and has a wonderful deep low proximity effect.

On acoustic guitar the Notre Dome captures a huge classic round fullness, but it would not be my first choice if I was after bright and jangly acoustic tones. All in all the same could be said for most sources, which make it a great choice on bass cabinet, front of kit, and non metallic percussion.

Loud and proud

This mic makes a statement in every way possible. First-time clients, walking into a session and seeing the whitish glow from this shiny beast, will be intrigued, impressed, and hopefully inspired. Sonically, if you want big front-and-center beauty, the Notre Dame sounds as impressive as it looks.

Finally, I find the care and quality that went into the power supply, the package, and all of its extras to be second to none. There is no mic kit I have seen in a decade and a half of studio work and reviewing that compares to it... none!

What I really cannot believe is that the whole package comes in at \$2400. I just don’t see how that’s even possible with its impeccable fit and finish, loads of extras, and classy sound—but I’m not going to argue about it, and neither should you. I can’t wait to test-drive more Cathedral Pipes mics in the future! ➤

Price: \$2400

More from: Cathedral Pipes,
www.cathedralpipes.com

