


# AEA A440

If it sounds as good as it looks, this must be one hell of a ribbon mic.

**Text:** Greg Walker

 I've used a lot of ribbon microphones in the last few years, from standards like Royers and Coles in expensive studios to Reslos, Octavas and my battered, noisy (and much loved) old RCA 74B at home. Yet none of these quite prepared me for the appearance of AEA's new ribbon superstar, the A440. Before the mic arrived for review I got a rare commendation from AT's Editor, Andy Stewart, who rang and told me in hushed tones to "just sing into it!" Then I received an email from Mixmasters guru and Australian AEA distributor, Mick Wordley, to the effect that I was not to have sex with his mic while it was with me for the review period! 'Woah, alright, so it's big and expensive,' I told myself, and then made a mental note not to be overawed by the look of this thing and to judge it on its sonic merits alone.

When AEA's latest creation finally arrived I opened the box and was confronted by a rugged maroon carry case that looked not unlike a small esky. Inside this was the mic itself in a classic RCA-style twill zippered bag. I took the mic out and put it on my desk and then... I just looked at it for a long time.

## UNLEASH THE BEAST

The AEA A440 represents a synthesis of everything Wes Dooley and his team at AEA have learnt about ribbon mics in the last 30 years. Cosmetically, it's similar to the old RCA 44 B/BX models of yore (and AEA's faithful recreation of that mic, the R44C), but under the bonnet it's a thoroughly modern ribbon microphone, sporting high SPL capability, a very low self-noise (equivalent to 6dB SPL, A-weighted) and JFET active electronics that utilise all the goodness of 48V phantom power. AEA uses authentic 'New Old Stock' ribbon material and hand builds these mics to order.

Clearly the aim here has been to spare no expense and create a high-end 21st century ribbon mic that retains the best aspects of the tone of the old 44s while bringing a lot of recent technical innovations to the table. The build quality of this mic is amazing – the cast bronze and machined brass swivel mount fittings alone are things of great beauty. The A440 is, quite simply, a physically imposing and sensational looking mic. It weighs a proverbial ton (3.45 kilos), and at 31cm long by 11cm wide, it radiates some serious studio presence. Put this mic up on a stand (and a very sturdy one at that) and watch your studio immediately transform into a more classy, even somewhat timeless music-making environment. Put it up in front of a singer and watch their eyes light up as they magically begin to channel Frank Sinatra... I'm not kidding either, the A440 really has that kind of psychological effect on people, and this in itself is a powerful tool in the studio.

## REALITY BITES

Looks are one thing but as we audio boffins know, today's striking newcomer is tomorrow's cut-price eBay fodder. Having used AEA ribbon mics before, I knew the A440 would be good, the question in my mind was simply *how good?*

But before I divulge how this mic performed in real-world recording scenarios, I'd like to make a few observations about ribbons in general. I've always enjoyed recording with ribbon microphones. I love their characteristic ability to convey realism and space as well as their pleasing lack of high frequency hype.

When used correctly, and with the right kind of performers, they convey an old-world warmth that no other microphone comes close to. Ribbons, however, also bring with them several limitations. Naturally they tend towards the dull end of the spectrum, which often means they require considerable amounts of EQ to lift up their top end, either during the tracking phase or in mixdown. The fixed figure-of-eight polar pattern is a pain in the arse as often as it is beneficial (I often find I need to batten off the far side of the mic to eliminate roomy clutter when close-miking), and, generally speaking, ribbon mics are far from the all-round studio workhorse that a good quality large diaphragm condenser often can be (anyone recorded a whole album with just ribbons lately?).

## PERFECT PITCH

Bearing all that in mind, I initially used the A440 during a hastily arranged session recording a Latin band, where I threw the mic straight in the deep end on sax, clarinet and flute. The results were beautifully natural and clear – I didn't need to EQ these instruments at all to have them cut through the mix, but they still had a lovely presence and smooth tonality to them. This was a live recording with plenty of bleed through the other side of the ribbon and I enjoyed the low woody room sound in the mix as well. Later that night I put the AEA up on vocals and found a silky smooth vocal tone straight off the bat; again plenty of punch in the mix, and again, no EQ required. At this point I was starting to be seriously impressed.

The next tests were back in my smaller room doing electric guitar tracking. Using the A440 through a Universal Audio 2108 mic pre, I placed the mic about four metres away from a Fender amp cabinet. In tandem with a Beyer M88 right up close to the speaker cone, the results were spectacular. While the Beyer provided all the bite and detail, the AEA delivered the missing weight and body of the sound as well as sympathetic room reflections to create some fantastic and powerful tones. I have been pulling some of the best electric guitar sounds I've ever gotten using this combination and the AEA definitely excels at this task. I used the A440 in a similar role on a drum kit and again it gave the overall sound more weight and colour although it also tended to show up the limitations of the room I was tracking in (low ceiling and very hard surfaces). In both these applications, the ribbon mic on its own wasn't exactly amazing sounding, but in combination with the close mics, the results were extremely impressive.

On close-miked acoustic guitars, percussion and strings the A440 delivered the kind of classic soft detail associated with '40s, '50s and '60s recordings, which allowed me to really go to town and create some beautiful 'vintage' sounds. When I switched to my Chandler Channel preamps and added a little analogue top-end boost, the A440 took me to another level again. Recording acoustic guitars and soft vocals with this chain took me to vintage tone heaven. Last but not least I did a session recording a surf band with drums and two electric guitars live in a large room and placed the AEA right between two classic fender amps (a Princeton and a Tremolux), with one side of the ribbon facing each amp about 10 feet away and the null side rejecting the nearby drum kit. I'd say the ribbon makes up about 70% of the total guitar sound in the final mix and it sounds bloody fantastic!



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### SERIOUS BIDDERS ONLY

During this review period I've found the AEA A440 an absolute joy to work with, and overcoming years of habit and arming the 48V phantom power on the ribbon mic pre became a daily pleasure. This mic surprised me many times by delivering sounds that were near perfect in terms of their tonality and ability to sit sweetly in the mix, from brass to guitars to vocals. Musicians loved recording with it and, to a man, were very impressed by its sound. I'll go out on a limb here and say that the AEA A440 is as good a vocal and guitar microphone as I have ever used, right up there with any vintage Neumann, Telefunken or AKG condenser you care to name. On a whole range of other instruments it proved itself to be without doubt the best and most versatile ribbon microphone I've recorded with, and many times I noted that the mic required little or no EQ. Where some equalisation was required there were always a whole host of great sounds lurking amongst the frequencies waiting to be revealed, and the low noise floor helped keep the options open in these situations. As a room mic, its openness and honesty will reveal your room's deficiencies if they're too numerous, but at well over \$8000 (and that's before audio prices go through the roof due to our fading Aussie dollar) I don't imagine this mic will end up in too many bedsits anyway.

This is a very serious piece of kit that delivers through-the-roof performance to match its stunning looks. It's sure to knock engineers and artists for six when they get a chance to use it. ■



### NEED TO KNOW

**Price**  
\$8750

**Contact**  
Mixmasters Productions  
(08) 8278 8506  
sales@mixmasters.com.au  
www.mixmasters.com.au

**Pros**  
Incredible sonic performance with low self-noise and high SPL handling.  
Very very sexy.  
Built like a tank by hand.  
Individually tested and matched to reference standards by people who talk like Elvis.

**Cons**  
Very expensive.  
Requires a heavy duty mic stand and can't be swung about like an SM58.  
Very very expensive.

**Summary**  
A true modern classic in ribbon design with active electronics and updated old-school tonality. Looks a million bucks and sounds like it too. Get all your mates down at the recording club to pitch in and buy one together, then 'borrow' it and head for the hills!