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
- Power required: 48V phantom
- Power level: 12dB
- Equivalent noise: 150 (A-weighted)
- Impedance: 8Ω
- Blumlein
- Polar pattern: Stereo/figure-8
- Frequency range: 20Hz–20kHz

**MEASURING UP**

The Royer SF-24 stereo ribbon microphone (£2,293) 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 BMS. The SF-24’s output of -38dB is 14dB more sensitive than the SF-12. 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.

**Cross Purposes**

The Apollo’s ribbon assemblies are clearly visible through the sparse and rather filmy-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.

**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 undercut the competition.