



Blue Microphones enCORE Series

By: Mark Johnson

OK, for the benefit of full disclosure... As a card-carrying member of "Old Guys in Audio" and a FOH guy, I have to admit to a certain affinity for consoles and microphones. Obviously, there are other pieces of gear in the signal chain, but, in addition to being two of the most basic building blocks of a sound system, consoles and mics are two of the tools in the chest that help a mix engineer exercise creativity in the overall mix.

Blue Microphones has been around since 1995, and has largely produced microphones for the recording industry as well as a line of USB mics and accessories, the Mikey mics for iPod and iPhone, and the now-discontinued Cisco Flip video camera. Blue garnered its reputation primarily for manufacturing good-sounding and dynamic-looking mics for studio applications, all at a reasonable price point. In this case, Blue does not relate to color, but is an acronym for: Baltic Latvian Universal Electronics, though the company has taken the Blue theme and creatively and playfully applied it to some product names.

Having primarily a live sound background, I was aware of Blue Microphones and their reputation, but hadn't really considered them as something that I would ordinarily use. When I heard the company had designed and manufactured

a line of mics for live application, now I was really interested. The enCORE series marks Blue's entrée into the live sound arena. The series consists of four microphones: the enCore 100, the enCore 200, the enCore 300, and the latest entry, the enCore 100i.

As opposed to the recording environment, live sound production presents a whole new set of requirements for microphones—sure, they have to sound good, but they have to be durable enough to withstand the rigors of the road, in addition to dealing with the other things that come into play that don't rise up too often in the studio—like handling noise, stage volume, and feedback.

The enCore series continues Blue's reputation for designing and manufacturing distinctive-looking mics, and, while these are good-looking units, they also appear up to the task of holding up to the constant manhandling that is part and parcel of live sound. I dare say these things are built like tanks. There is a family resemblance in each mic within the series, which is distinctive but not out of place in a live environment. All share the same style barrel of heavy gauge metal machined with ridges to help provide secure handling, with the only exception being lack of ridges on enCore100i. (Designed primarily for miking instruments, the enCore 100i

has a smooth body, since instruments don't have to worry about sweaty palms.) There is also a heavy-duty ring around the midsection of the grille on each mic in the series to provide reinforcement against lateral blows—or maybe the odd footfall...

There is an elegant utilitarianism about these mics. And it extends even to the carry pouches, which are plush-lined canvas envelopes, with a silkscreen of the mic's model name on the outside and a tag with the model number stitched on the side. They are well-thought-out and look like something direct from the Lands' End catalog. An overlap keeps the mic secure, and there are no zippers to jam or break.

As I said, these mics are built like tanks and have quite a heft to them. I was surprised at how substantial they are, so I decided to weigh them. The 100i weighed in at 11.1oz, the 100 came in at 13.6oz, the 200 tipped the scale at 14.3oz, and the 300 at 12.7oz, as compared to a Shure SM57, outfitted with an A2WS windscreens, which came in at 10.5oz or an Audix OM5 at 11 oz. One would think that, with so much dense material making up the barrel, that handling noise would be nil, although that was not the case. While it's not over the top by any means, there was more than I would have expected in all models, except the enCORE 300—which was probably accomplished by their unique method for attaching the mic element. More on that in a bit.

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The enCORE 100 comes in a gunmetal gray finish and has a stylish appearance with a chrome pop screen. The cardioid pickup pattern is loose enough and falls off smoothly at sides to allow for people working “off the mic” to get good sound and still have plenty of gain before feedback. I used the 100 in a speech application with non-professional speakers, and I was able to maintain good tone and gain even at times when the speakers were well away from the microphone. And with an MSRP of \$99, the price/performance makes it competitive with the other utilitarian vocal mics available on the market. The price point makes it a good vocal mic to have in situations when multiples are needed. You get good-sounding mics, yet they won't break the bank.

The enCORE 200 has a matte black finish with a pol-

ished copper grille; it is a high-end-looking vocal mic with polar response characteristics similar to the 100. I really liked the sound of this microphone. It's bright enough for live vocals without being too overbearing or harsh. I used it on a female gospel singer who's quite powerful and can get a bit edgy at times, though even on dynamic songs I never felt any undue edginess. The vocals remained smooth, yet powerful, throughout. The low end is fuller, and the mic comes off as a bit smoother overall than the 100. The mic uses 48V phantom power for an unique active dynamic circuit; while it's not a condenser microphone, phantom power is required for the mic to operate properly. It's like the best of both technologies—the sturdiness of a dynamic plus the smoothness of a condenser. It will pass audio if 48V is not applied; it will just be very low level and noisy. There's a discreet tiny red LED in the barrel of the mic that indicates if power is applied; it is positioned right where the mic would normally be handled during normal use. So the chances are slim to none that the light would be a distraction during performance. The MSRP is \$149.

The flagship of the series, the enCORE 300, comes in a matte black finish with a shiny polished black wind screen and possesses a styling similar to its siblings, though the condenser capsule is cradled in a configuration akin to mounting a diamond in a piece of jewelry. A small “cup” supports the base of the capsule and five “fingers” extend from the barrel to support the mid section of the capsule, which is pretty much surrounded by a heavy-duty screen mesh. The logo sits in a frosted white background that glows a faint blue when 48V is applied. It's all very tastefully done. The overall sound is very smooth with a solid low-frequency response. J.D. Sumner (who held the *Guinness Book of World Records* for 18 years for lowest bass note sung) would have liked this mic. The cardioid pickup pattern provides good side and rear rejection and tonally drops off smoothly at the sides. List price is \$199.

The enCORE 100i is the newest player in the line. Designed primarily for instrument miking, the nonreflective matte black finish blends in well with the stage environment. It's got a punchy sound that's useful for guitars and drums. I can also see it working well on brass and some woodwind instruments. Compared to the others in the line, it seems to have less low end—though, in fact, it's there when you need it. The mic provides a very tight cardioid pickup pattern (much tighter than the others in the series) with good rejection at the back and sides. I used the mic on an electric guitar, and that good “crunchy” electric guitar sound came through without any significant EQ other than some high pass around 80Hz. I had more than enough low end, and the upper mids were solid and smooth. It makes it easy to place and keep the guitar in the overall mix. The MSRP for this mic is \$89.



The soft grip mic clips are universal to all the models, since the microphones share the same barrel dimensions. Though the clips themselves seem a little big (the mics slide in almost up to the Blue logo), that's the only way to get the mic in or out (slide it). It would be nice to be able to set the mic in or out of the clip without having to thread the cable through the narrow opening on the top. And the ridges (except the 100i) rub against the clip when you insert or remove the mic resulting in a zipper noise. Though the clips hold the mics securely, it seems like they were a bit of an afterthought.

The documentation that comes with the mics and what's on the Blue website shows a familial frequency and polar response for the series—and, in fact, they all do exhibit similar tonal and performance qualities—but the geek in me would like to see info with a bit more detail than what's provided in the user guide or on the website.

In order to compete in today's marketplace, products need to work right and sound good out of the box—that's pretty much a given. With Blue's background in offering quality studio products at a competitive price point, in making the move to live applications the challenge would be to make the products roadworthy, durable, with a nod to ergonomics (how easily you can use them—yes, even for a microphone—is as important as how they sound), while keeping the style quotient up to what we've come to expect from Blue.

The enCore microphone series sounds great and looks cool. The mics appear to be well-constructed and durable; time will tell, though I suspect they'll outlast us all. I appreciated the little touches added by the industrial designers and product engineers: discreet indicator lights on the ones that require phantom power, ridges on the barrels for more secure handling, lateral reinforcement on the grilles, and, of course, the style, the look of the mics. Most importantly, I appreciated how they sound. The enCore Series from Blue Microphones has provided live sound mixers with a very solid set of creative tools with which to work.

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