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Elinchrom ELB 400 - User's review

October 24, 2017 • 2 Comments

I was looking for new studio lights that were more portable than my existing kit, and had a number of other requirements. I spent some time looking at all the options, reading reviews and specifications, looking at the equipment at trade shows and talking to sales people and other photographers. I had an opportunity to try out Elinchrom Quadra kit in a workshop shoot a few months ago, which was useful experience. In the end I decided on the Elinchrom ELB 400 with two Quadra Pro heads - the "Dual Pro To Go" set - and I purchased this from The Flash Centre, who provided excellent service. The following is my experience with this kit so far.

The ELB 400 provides up to 424 J energy in the two flash heads, powered by a lithium-ion battery that is specified to last 350 full-power flashes on a full charge. In practice I very rarely fire full-power flashes, and the battery capacity has easily been enough to last for a day's shooting. In fact I've not discharged it by more than 50%. Charging is pretty fast with the supplied charger, and if necessary it's OK to charge while the units are in use. You could buy a second battery pack, but for me that would never be necessary. So that's one of my criteria satisfied: forget needing to be near a mains power socket.



The Quadra heads have a 50 W LED modelling light, which are amazingly bright if you like to use continuous lighting or shoot video; a disadvantage is that it's not possible to control the power of these - they are either on or off.

The heads fit easily onto standard light stands (I use cheap Interfit stands which are quite fit for purpose), and each head has a 2.5 m cable to connect to the ELB 400 control/battery pack unit (more on that later).

Supplied in the kit is a 18 cm dish reflector and a 13.5 cm dish with a removable diffusion cap. These are enough to get started but I also purchased a Quadra-to-EL bayonet adaptor, so I could use my existing collection of modifiers (softboxes, octobox, etc.)

on the key light. This adaptor is robust and fits directly to the lighting stand so that the weight of the modifier is borne by the adaptor, not by the Quadra head (which is small and light and couldn't support a large softbox, for example). The EL adaptor accepts the full range of Elinchrom modifiers and compatibles from other manufacturers; most of mine are from the Interfit EX range and they fit perfectly.

Talking about modifiers, I also got the very reasonably-priced Elinchrom umbrella set - one translucent white and one silvered - which very easily mount directly on the Quadra heads with just a push fit. The two dishes supplied with the ELB 400 kit illuminate these well, I've found. These are decent quality umbrellas. In studio set-ups I typically use the white umbrella on the second Quadra head used for fill-in. When working out of doors the silver umbrella is great to supplement natural light.

There are two outputs from the ELB 400 control unit, A and B. A single head could be connected to either, but if you use two heads, one on each output, there is a fixed ratio of power, with the light on output B providing half the power (1 stop) of that on output A.

The ELB 400 control unit allows fine control of the power output. The display shows the power in f-stops and 1/10th of stops, and is easily varied. The range is from 1.7 to 6.0 on output A, and 0.7 to 5.0 on B. That's a useful 5.3 stops range of power. When you press the control to increase the power, the unit charges its capacitors very quickly and there's an audio "ding" when it's ready, which is typically within a second or two. If instead you decrease the power, there's a longer delay before the ding, while the unit discharges power to a resistor (I imagine). This delay can be avoided by simply firing the lights with the test button to dump the energy.



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Despite the very fine control of the power output, the fixed 2:1 ratio of the power outputs from A and B is a bit of a limitation. It's a good ratio, insofar as a fill light (on output B) 1 stop lower power than the key light (on A) is a typical setting for portraiture and other studio shots. The ratio might not be exactly 2:1 if the modifiers on the lights affect the light output. But when I use my 1.1m octobox on the key light, and the white umbrella on the fill light, the ratio is indeed 1 stop according to my metering. Of course I can easily adjust the amount of light falling on the subject from the fill light by moving it nearer or further from the subject. So the fixed ratio has not yet been a problem in practice.

Mentioning moving the lights around reminds me to remark on another thing: the 2.5 m cables provided with the kit are not long enough to allow much movement. So I bought the (expensive) 5 m extension cable, practically essential for any set-up where the two lights are not fairly close together.

The radio trigger provided with the kit is the Skyport Transmitter Plus, which works exactly as you would expect. It allows you to remotely adjust the power output - this is a great facility, as I hate to keep a model hanging about while I walk around the studio adjusting light settings. I take a shot and think, hmm a little less power, and hey presto its done in an instant.

I also bought a Skyport Receiver, so that I can trigger an additional speedlight (which fits in the hot shoe on the Skyport Receiver) and my other studio lights (using the supplied sync cable) from the same trigger transmitter on the camera. In fact by setting the ELB 400 to Group 1 and the Skyport Receiver to Group 2, I can choose to fire just the Quadra heads, just the other lights, or all lights together by a simple button press on the trigger on the camera. Useful while setting up and balancing the lighting in a set-up with many lights. By the way, this Skyport Receiver can itself mount in a hot shoe, and also has a thread allowing it to be put directly on a standard lighting stand, which is what I have done.

Even though the Skyport Transmitter Plus trigger is perfectly adequate, since my bank account was not yet completely empty I also invested in a Skyport Plus HS trigger, and I'm very glad I did. I got the version dedicated to my Olympus camera, but of course there are also versions for Canon, Nikon and Sony. This trigger fits in the camera hot shoe using a neat quick-lock and release lever and its large LCD screen shows the status of the lights, allows me to adjust some of the ELB 400 settings remotely from the camera, and the display shows values such as the power output.

But the really great feature of the Skyport Plus HS trigger used with the ELB 400 is the Hi Sync (HS) mode. OK, if I was really serious about using hi sync I would have bought the Quadra HS heads. But even with the Quadra Pro heads it's pretty effective. It doesn't use the conventional HSS technology where the head emits a series of short flashes as the focal plane shutter traverses the sensor; it's something more sophisticated. And it works. I can sync flash with shutter speeds up to 1/8000. The illumination from the strobe is not perfectly uniform at very high speeds, and there is a reduction in the exposure when you go above about 1/1000 - by about 2 stops when you get to 1/8000 - but it's effective in practice: I can control the light from the Quadra head with the aperture and the ELB 400 power setting, and control the ambient light with the shutter speed. It feels like being able to adjust the power of the sun!



To illustrate this capability, here's an example. I wanted to shoot the stone entrance to Wayland's Smithy, an ancient (c3500 BC) burial mound next to the Ridgeway Path near Wantage. I really wanted to do it at night, by moonlight. But I didn't fancy going up there in the dead of night. Too spooky. So I went on a bright autumn day, and set up a single Quadra head on a tall stand with a silver reflective umbrella (OK, hazy moonlight). The ambient light was metering about 1/15 at f/8 (all mentioned exposures are at ISO 200). I set the flash power on the ELB 400 for a good exposure at f/5.6, and then wound up the shutter speed until the ambient light was almost insignificant in the image - this was at 1/1000. Just to prove it was possible, I did a shot at 1/8000 f/2.8, too. But the shot at 1/1000 f/5.6 was what I wanted, here you'll

see the original and also how it ended up after processing in Lightroom and Silver Efex Pro.



I also used the ELB 400 kit when shooting a wedding recently in a bright and airy chapel with a white domed ceiling, but very low ambient light on a gloomy autumn day. I set both Quadra heads up on a balcony, with their small reflector dishes shining up into the dome. The modelling lights were useful while adjusting the orientation to get fairly even coverage. This provided a pleasant soft light throughout the chapel, which I could easily adjust with settings from the trigger even when I was far from the ELB 400 unit.



To sum up, am I glad that I bought the ELB 400 kit? Yes, I am, it fulfils almost all my expectations, and exceeds some of them. I would have liked to be able to vary the power of the modelling light and, more importantly, the ratio of power on outputs A and B. But in practice these are not severe limitations. The portability, battery charge life, ease of use and versatility easily meet my requirements. The many additional features, including some I have not mentioned here (e.g. rapid sequential bursts to capture a moving person/object like a multiple-exposure) are an added bonus, particularly the Hi Sync option allowing really high shutter speeds to control ambient light. OK, this kit is not cheap, but you get a lot of capability for your money, and the build quality is excellent. I expect this to last me for many years.

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Paul Haley  (non-registered)

24-Apr-20 14:43

Response to Diogo Sousa: The reference to charging while in use is here : <https://www.elinchrom.com/reviews/ELB400-roundup.html>

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Diogo Sousa (non-registered)

4-Nov-19 14:01

Hello Mr. Taylor,

thank you for the review of the ELB 400. You state in the text that it is possible to charge during use, or, by other words, to have it plugged in while in use. I know I read that somewhere, and it is a feature on the ELB 500, but I cannot find any official reference to that in Elinchrom literature. Do you still remember where you read that information?

Best Regards,
Diogo Sousa

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