



Hi-Flyer

ABC MiniCrane Review

By Mark Brindle

You've all seen the type of shots achieved by using a camera crane on virtually every movie or TV show from Hollywood blockbuster's to Top of the Pops. The camera sweeps up from the action to a panoramic view and pans across the trees then back down again into the action. The moving camera adds an extra dimension to your video productions.

This review focuses on the ABC MiniCrane – the smallest, lightest and cheapest crane in the ABC range. Weighing in at only 4.5kg it's lighter than my Vinten tripod and when packed is only 1 metre long. This light-weight crane comes at a price in terms of functionality, though – it's too light to support a remote head and so really competes in the jib-arm space. Given this limitation, the MiniCrane allows some really impressive shots to be made without the need for extra crew and without the risk of putting your back out.

The secret to the weight of the crane can be seen in the construction of the aluminium tubular sections – they are not hollow but have a triangular brace running through the length of them allowing the sections to be narrow and light whilst retaining strength.



Configuration

The crane comes in four sections so you can choose the length to suit your requirements – use just the top and bottom to make a short jib arm when space is tight for indoor shots or go for the full length outdoors.

The crane has a tilt adjustment for the camera head end - which can be set at virtually any angle necessary. Plus an adjustment for whether the camera automatically tilts as you raise and lower the crane – from a fixed position - from no tilt to full tilting. This feature gives you a much wider variety of shots but it takes a lot of practice to master the adjustments. The ABC website has a better explanation of this feature.

Assembly

The crane can be assembled and operated by one person without using any tools. With practice and space, you can build the full sized crane in less than 10-minutes. You also need to add your LCD monitor, zoom/focus controller and AV cables to allow you to control and view the camera output when operating the crane.

You need to make sure your tripod is level and secure. I tend to use a locking dolly to secure the tripod and some 'boa bags' to weigh down the tripod legs. The tripod you use needs to be able to support approx 10kg weight.

The flat plate of the crane attaches to any (50/75/100mm ball) video tripod. You need to remove the tripod ball head and then screw the plate down by hand from underneath. Having been used to a ball levelling tripod head, it is quite frustrating trying to level the tripod with the flat plate – you do have a bubble level to work with but this part still takes time.

Once the first section of the crane is attached to the tripod you can fit the weight bar before attaching the tubular sections of the crane and the final section with the camera plate. There are locating 'dots' on the sections to

make sure you fit the parts together correctly. The aluminium sections are well machined and the fit is very good.

Once the crane is built you need to attach the supplied steel cables to add rigidity to the crane before attaching the camera. The crane is supplied with several sets of wires – one set for each length. The cables have hooks and eyelets so they fit together well. The crane has three 'outriggers/struts' which are used to tension the steel cables. You push them up to apply tension and flap them back when you want to dismantle the crane.



Counter-weights are not supplied so you will need some old gym weights (round centre hole) or similar to counter balance the camera weight. The counter-weight bar is not very long so its best to use a selection of weights from 5kg down otherwise you may run out of space on the bar. The crane also has a 'hanging bag' to allow for fine trimming weights to be either hung or placed in the bag. With some trial and error you can work out the counter-weight required for your camera to balance properly.

The MiniCrane has a screw hole for a monitor bracket but does not ship with one. You can either buy one from ABC or other specialist manufacturers or make one to fit. The LCD monitor should be no more than 7-inches otherwise it will not fit in the space between the crane plate and the outrigger arm and could impede the crane movement. I use a Lilliput 619GL-70NP/C/T monitor but I would probably go for a slightly smaller one if given the option again.

Accessories

Other necessary accessories include a LANC extension cable to allow you to connect a zoom/focus control, plus a spare AV cable to fit your camera and an AV coupler and extension cable to allow you to view the video on your monitor. I've also added a Manfrotto quick



release camera plate to the crane camera plate as I was not happy with the single screw holding my camera to the crane camera plate, plus the obvious advantage of moving the camera between the crane and handheld use.

You will also need something to keep the cables tidy. I use small Velcro straps to keep the cables against the crane.

Usage

The ABC MiniCrane is designed for small cameras. I regularly use the crane with a small Sony PDX10 and tested the crane with the Sony Z1E – which actually fits better in terms of camera balance. The PDX10 with large batteries can sometimes become 'off-balance' and be too back-heavy, so care must be taken with the crane adjustment and movement to avoid it tipping back. The maximum supported camera weight is 5kg.

Safety

When using a crane you will also need to take into account extra health & safety measures. You will need to ensure that nobody is within the perimeter of the panning movement of the crane and that the crane is secure whilst making adjustments to the weights or crane tilt set-up.

I last used the crane as part of a five-camera shoot at a charity gig in London in December. If anyone is interested in seeing the footage then the live DVD will be out in the Spring and will be available for sale on my website. I have used the crane for other productions including downhill mountain biking on a forthcoming documentary, and plan to use it as often as I can to add that extra dimension to my filmmaking. ■

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Notes: Sincere thanks go to CVP for the loan of the Sony Z1. The ABC MiniCrane 350/520 costs £1695+VAT (for 3.5M version) £2395 + VAT (for 5.2M version) and is available from CKE Distribution www.cke.co.uk. The manufacturer's website is www.abc-products.de