

PORTABLE LIGHTING

Zylight Z90 LED Lighting Instrument

by Michael Hanish

These days, a big trend in lighting is with LED instruments. These have been around for a while and have been manufactured in many configurations—from large panels to small, camera-mounted instruments. The chief attractions of these LED fixtures have been their small weight, low power consumption and cool operating temperatures. Until fairly recently, however, LED instruments were uniformly white in color. To obtain different color temperatures, users needed to employ gels, as with other lighting instruments. Several years ago, Zylight developed the HD-LED (high density light emitting diode) module, a sandwich of LEDs, optics and electronics, which casts a wide and even light, and is programmable—not just for brightness, but also for color temperature.

FEATURES

The most recent product from Zylight is their Z90, a one-pound instrument that functions equally well as an on-camera light or a standalone instrument). It's roughly 2-by-3-by-5 inches, with a 1/4-20 threaded socket on top and bottom. The business end is a 2-by-3-inch HD-LED element made up of programmable RGB LEDs, which throws a 130-degree beam width at full intensity. The control end consists of a large dimmer knob, two smaller inset dials, several push buttons, status mode lights and a digital display for color temperature.

There's also a power tap on the side that accommodates an AC adaptor (110-220 V) or a battery connector (7-24 VDC). Current



Front and rear views of the Zylight Z90 LED lighting fixture

draw is about 30 watts at full intensity. Connectors are available for most popular camera battery systems. Zylight also makes available an optional pocket-sized battery that can power the light for three to four hours on a charge.

Controlling the Zylight is very straightforward—the power button is at the upper left, and the large dimmer/intensity knob rotates from zero to 100 percent brightness.

The Z90 basically operates in one of three modes: white, gel, or color. Modes are switched by holding the top (right) thumbwheel for about a second—small lights will indicate the selected mode.

White mode yields either daylight or tungsten white color temperatures, selectable by pushing either button on the middle and lower left as factory presets. The gel mode outputs white light, adjustable from 2500 K to 9000 K in 50 degree steps, with adjustable green color

correction. Color temperature is shown on the digital display. The color mode provides adjustment of hue and saturation by using the top and bottom thumbwheels.

The top control wheel cycles through red, green, blue, and all the intermediate color combinations available, while the bottom wheel provides adjustment of the color saturation level of the light being produced. In this mode, the digital display shows the percent of saturation. The unit allows you to save two presets in the gel mode and two in the color mode for instant recall.

One very interesting feature of the Zylight is Zylink. However, I was not able to evaluate it for this review as I only had access to only a single light. Zylink is a wireless system for controlling multiple Z90s and/or Z50s (the smaller and slightly less featured sibling) from one light. To set up the inter-light linking, you simply push and hold the bottom thumbwheel until the Zylink indicator glows, then select a chan-

nel (up to 10 are available, although the Z50 is only channel one-compatible), and when the master light is adjusted, all the linked lights jump to the same setting.

IN USE

I had the extreme pleasure to use a Z90 on a recent shooting trip in London. This was a run and gun affair—just me and a line producer trying to capture three major interviews and about 20 locations for B-rolls all over the city in four days.

Traveling light was the watchword, as I had to lug everything and do extremely fast setups. The interviews were in offices or homes; places where existing light might or might not be the way to go. I was vastly relieved when, three days before departing on the trip, I heard from Zylight that a Z90 would be made available for me to take along for evaluation purposes. Zylight provided the light and a number of on-camera mounts and arms, as well as a Li-Poly rechargeable battery. (This is a very light and compact unit that they recommend.) This was welcome news, as I was shooting with a Sony PMW-EX1, which is a notoriously power hungry unit. All in all, the light, battery and charger added only about three pounds to my load of gear.

Two of our interview sites had windows that served as light sources; however, both needed some fill light in order to balance

the look. In the Z90's gel mode, it was easy to dial up a warm and balancing tone and intensity for the scene.

The third interview setup, in a British Museum inside office with some sort of weirdly filtered interior courtyard light from one side, got a more front-on treatment. Thanks to the wide beam of the Z90, illumination was very even, and not harsh. It provided a bit of warmth to counter the window's filtered light.

Setup and lighting instrument placement were incredibly easy, thanks in large part to the small size and weight of the Z90, along with its ability to be smoothly fine-tuned. I plan to use the Z90 extensively in similar future setups, and will probably bring along a monopod lighting support for extra height.

Using the Z90 on the street as a camera light was equally easy and satisfying. Mounting the Z90 in the EX1's hot shoe fortunately didn't add much weight or distort the (already somewhat precarious) balance, and the light's battery slipped easily into my pocket. The fixture was very easy to pop out of my camera bag and onto the camera for those few moments—mostly in tunnels and beneath bridges—when I needed quick (and sometimes colored) illumination.

Deployment was easy, and the fixture was adaptable to most any situation. The other really nice thing about using the

Zylight as a camera light in run and gun situations is the fact that it doesn't immediately get blazingly omelets-cooking hot and then require a long time to cool down before you're able to stow it away.

SUMMARY

There are so many great things about the Zylight Z90—and its smaller sibling the Z50 (see the Zylight Web site for features and pricing)—small size, low weight, small power draw, extreme flexibility in color temperature, saturation, and intensity, along with a reasonable price tag.

This flexible lighting instrument is really smart: a light that is small and portable, yet bright enough to use as a main light source. It can be adjusted for just about any color temperature, saturation, or intensity without need for gels or filters. It's an instrument that doesn't get unbearably hot to the touch and has an estimated life span of 50,000 hours between factory calibrations. I don't know if this is a revolution in portable lighting, but it just might be. Zylight's Z90 is worth every minute of your consideration for a place in your shooting or studio lighting kit.

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