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MEASURING AND MONITORING LIGHT

Sekonic's L-478D Meter Offers A Multitude of Exposure Tools

I always have a high-quality light meter at my side. Although digital shooters are frequently foregoing the use of a light meter in favor of other exposure evaluation tools, such as a waveform or histogram, there's no tool like a good meter when your lighting environment is complex: when you have to match previous footage (and you measured values and ratios beforehand), when you're monitoring moving sunlight and balancing for changing exposure throughout the day, or when you're dealing with fog/atmosphere.

Quick Take

Product: Sekonic L-478D

Pros: Modern touchscreen control. Great light sensitivity. Accurate.

Cons: Case isn't as protective as older Sekonic cases. Ergonomics could be better.

Bottom Line: An excellent modern meter with some unique abilities and an advanced touchscreen control.

MSRP: $399

Online: www.sekonic.com

digital VIDEO Excellence Award

The Sekonic L-508 has long been my meter of choice. Its combination of an incident and spot meter is a great value and its accuracy has never let me down.

Meters have evolved over the years. The L-478D is Sekonic's first touchscreen meter. It offers an incredible array of exposure tools beyond simple intensity measurements. The meter has features for both still and motion imagery; settings for filmmakers are further divided into Cine mode (for DSLRs) and HD Cine mode (for video cameras). I'll focus on the "Cine" options here.

In Cine mode, the meter provides frames per second, ISO and shutter angle controls. The list of presets is extensive. Although the difference in exposure from 24 fps to 23.976 is impossible to distinguish on a lens, I appreciate the meter's precision. You can add up to 20 customized frame rates between 1 and 1,000 fps for easy access.

The meter offers a variety of shutter angles, with steps every five degrees from 5 to 270 in addition to more than 25 presets and 20 additional customizable shutter angles. ISOs range from 3 to 409,600 in 1/3 steps.

The L-478D is also capable of filter factor exposure compensation. There are 24 default filters in the meter, from basic NDs to a variety of color corrections, in addition to five open slots for your own filter compensation factors. If your favorite polarizer is a stop and a third, as opposed to the normal two stops, it's easy to make that a preset in the meter so you can pull it up anytime you like. Up to four filter compensation selections may be used simultaneously.

Brightness may be measured in lux or foot-candles (fc) and candela per square meter (cd/m²) or foot-lamberts (fl) along with your f-stop reading, which I really like. The sensitivity of the meter is impressive. I got the meter to read as low as .1 fc, which is extraordinary.

F-stops range from 1 to 90 in 1/3 steps.

The meter has an auto-dimmer function that I found distracting. I turned off the meter's auto-dim function and was surprised to see that the screen still dimmed. I realized that the screen will auto-dim, regardless of the setting, when you're taking measurements in extremely low light. Below .46 foot-candles, the screen dims so that the brightness of the screen itself doesn't bias your reading.

The incident "ping-pong" (called the lumisphere) is retractable for "flat disc" single illumination readings, appropriate for measuring flat subjects (such as greenscreens), lighting ratio or intensity of illumination. This is a great feature. Retract the lumisphere to read individual light sources to adjust them to the desired ratio. Extend it to take an exposure reading for three-dimensional subject position.

The lumisphere is removable. Replace it with the 5-degree viewfinder (optional accessory) for reflected-light spot measurements of specific subject areas. This is useful for distant objects such as landscapes or for metering subjects that generate light, highly reflective surfaces or translucent subjects.

Perhaps the meter's most powerful feature is exposure profiling, which measures the dynamic range of your camera. The first step is to shoot a target (Sekonic offers Exposure Profile Target and Exposure Profile Target II as optional accessories, though you may also use a target from X-Rite). You will shoot photos at the proper exposure, three stops over and three stops under, then import the images into the Sekonic Data Transfer Software on your computer. Enter ISO and incident and reflected shooting data and the software will create a graph of dynamic range and clipping points for your camera. Then connect the L-478D meter to your computer via USB and transfer up to ten camera profiles.

Further, if you take an exposure reading at your "key" stop, you can tell the meter what your midtone reading is, where you're putting Zone V. After you set that, exposure latitude warnings will alert you when the exposure exceeds the range of the camera. This is a phenomenal way to make sure you're seeing what you want to see, especially when you are shooting raw footage and what you're seeing on your monitor is a LUT that may or may not represent the full dynamic range of your camera.

Having said that, I didn't have the resources to determine the accuracy of Sekonic's exposure profiling. For now, I have to accept that the software is accurate—or at least fairly close to the mark—and work from there.

I frequently use my meter's averaging function. On most meters, if you take a reading at your Zone V and save it to memory, you can put the meter into AVE mode and it will display any additional readings above or below the memory reading. Instead of showing you that the highlight is *f*/8 and 3/10, it will show you that it is 2.3 stops *over* your memory reading of *f*/4.

The Sekonic meter expands on this capability, showing you on an analog scale how far over or under your reading is from the memory, as well as allowing you to store up to nine memory readings. You can see all nine represented on the analog scale. If you've included a profile, it will also show those readings within the dynamic range, represented visually on the scale.

The meter is light, about 4.6 oz. without batteries. I miss the somewhat more ergonomic shape of the L-508 meter. The L-478D is more rectangular, perhaps to approximate the feel of a smartphone. It's not uncomfortable to hold, but it's also not fitted to my hand at all.

All in all, the meter performs fantastically. It has a wealth of functions that put it firmly into the "smart" category of modern meters, at a reasonable price point for the versatility. **dv**

L-478D with X-Rite ColorChecker Passport

Sekonic Exposure Profile Target II

The 5-degree viewfinder accessory for measuring reflected light