

Dirk Brauner

Brauner Microphones is celebrating a decade this year and its company founder still can't believe the success he's had. He talks about the technology, the secrets, the passion and the art of microphones.

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DIRK BRAUNER GREW UP with a strong interest in electronics, music and natural science and designed his first electronic circuit when he was 14. He was in a professional recording studio for the first time at the age of 18 and was amazed and fascinated by the sound of old vintage valve mics. He wanted one but could not afford the rare types that attracted him and wasn't satisfied with newer alternative designs. 'There was an element missing I could not describe at that time and that some of these old microphones had and then I discovered that tube gear in general was different. The sound was so much more natural and attracting,' he says.

This fascination with valve gear led him to create his own and he studied tube circuits and built preamps, power amps and guitar amplifiers and discovered that tube electronics allowed him to 'sculpture' the sound in fine detail and offered an enormous variety of colours and possibilities. He had his own 8-track recording studio and with his microphone experiences still strong in his mind, in 1993 he designed his first large diaphragm tube microphone — the first prototype of the VM1. 'It took me about one and a half years to learn about all the different aspects of tube microphones and I finally ended up with a microphone that was the essence of what I admired: a microphone that sounded truly natural, had an extremely low noise floor, fully variable characteristics and that was built like a tank,' he says.

The final VM1 of 1994 was built entirely for his own purposes and Dirk claims he never planned to make a business out of it. But then people heard it and borrowed the mic and liked it so much that they urged him to build one for them too. He founded Brauner microphones in 1995 and the VM1 played a big part in the renaissance of the valve mic in the mid 1990s. In ten years Brauner has enjoyed enormous success and is now regarded as one of the premiere mic companies in the world.

What is special about Brauner products?

We follow a different approach from anyone else in the market. Many microphones today are built to a budget, which does not necessarily mean they are bad! Some Chinese microphones are really good, even superb when you look at the price performance ratio. The technical specs are good and they sound good too. They are still light years away from the technical standard we can do in Europe, but that is a matter of time and most people don't even need such high standards since the market has changed so much and we have so many semi professional people in our industry today — they don't care about all these wonderful technological details. I don't say this with disrespect, whoever comes up with a great result 'did it', no matter how he got there! But high standards make a huge difference — at least to the people who know the difference and are able to perceive it.

This is one of the reasons why the high-end microphone market has changed into a niche market, but this might pass when the Chinese catch up and

they'll do so soon enough, I think. But I don't fear Chinese microphones or any other competition. If you are unique you are unique — anything else is a copy. Look: there are such an awful lot of Neumann copies on the market — do any of those reach Neumann standards? Not even close! And they never will. You cannot wipe away those strong roots and all the decades of experience.

I want to talk about what is special about Brauner microphones but it is also a question of what is special about German microphones, since I'm part of this culture and I would be lying if I said I was not influenced by it. There can be no tribute strong enough for what Georg Neumann did — he was a genius — but I built my reputation not just by following because I have my own thoughts and took my own steps in my own direction, which is totally different and will become even more different in the future. Different from all other concepts.

I am in a niche market that will always remain a niche market because there are so many things that industrial mass production cannot do. It cannot care about the individual product outside of given margins. As high as these margins might be and as good as the products can be that are made in industrial mass production, they have to compromise at a certain point. They will never be able to reach the quality and originality of a manufacturing process that allows no tolerances and that is not compromised with regard to every single product that is being built. There is a huge world that you cannot squeeze into fixed margins and that cannot be automated and this different process of manufacturing does allow you to be free of all these limitations. Have you ever seen a robot listening to a microphone for hours and tweaking it until it is perfect? And also there are so many secrets, so many little details that you cannot see and these secrets I'll never tell. They make our products unique.

Which microphone designs have you admired as being pivotal to the evolution of the species?

Without a doubt, the condenser microphone in general. This concept still offers a lot of interesting variety in so many aspects and the condenser microphone principle will surely always remain. But there might be things coming that will be new. I've been 'brainstorming' with Mr Heisenberg and Mr Plank and we've come up with some interesting ideas. Question is if these ideas work in practice and how long it will take to make them real.

How has the manufacture of Brauner mics changed in the last ten years?

It has mostly changed in details. The basic design is still the same. All the small things you improve when you learn how to do it better over time and when you are in love with a subject as much as we are there is barely a single day without an 'aha!'

You don't do a small diaphragm mic, why?

Schoeps does small diaphragm mics. The best in the world. No one can do this any better. Why should I do small diaphragm mics? A great small diaphragm tube mic could be interesting though.

What is the critical element in a Brauner mic?

The whole mic is the critical element and this is also why we are different. We always look at microphones



meet your maker

from the holistic standpoint. Everything counts and the sum of all defines the final result. Most people focus on the capsule or a special tube or a special design concept. It is far more than that. It is an organic process. You cannot just build it around a single piece. There is such a strong interaction and such a huge variety of possibilities within microphone design and even within a fixed and a single concept of realisation there lies such a great potential of stray and uncertainty that you can only focus on each final product and all of its different aspects to make it constant. That involves a very clear and detailed understanding of what you do. In every single step of manufacturing you have to exactly know what you have to do to achieve that one result you are looking for and you have to focus on this entirety rather than getting lost in a single detail only.



What differentiates your designs from cheaper models made in China?

Its soul and its nature. A Brauner is more than a technical thing; it is a piece of authentic art. Each is individual and unique but clearly part of just that one family. We build to our understanding of the microphone as a piece of art rather than a science. Not just to meet fixed standards, like being technically, price-wise or marketing-wise in a certain range; it's where we are unique. I see some competitors trying to



follow our approach but I see very few really getting close and they are not necessarily always the ones that claim to do so.

How can you remain competitive from a price standpoint?

Through being noticeably unique, noticeably different and always worth the money! You'll find nothing like a Brauner microphone. I'm not saying you will find nothing that you'll like better — just nothing the same and nothing like it. It has a spirit of its own and our huge success speaks for itself. We don't care about being competitive. We just care about our passion, regardless of price. Brauner microphones are entirely built in Germany, which is much more expensive, but it is worth it, since the value is higher and we also want to secure our workers' and suppliers' jobs. It is also a responsibility for this German part of culture to remain and to keep it vital. This culture cannot just be established in a different part of the world. Yes, it comes at a price but it's more than worth it since you own a piece of authenticity that will remain. I also think that we are still offering an excellent price-performance ratio. A Brauner microphone is like a Rolex watch — it will never lose value and it is built to last longer than a lifetime.

If there is still technical progress to be made in traditional mic designs, where can it be made?

At Brauner! As I say, there is more to it than just bits (and bytes) and pieces, more than specs and dBs, marketing and money. There's the dream of the perfect microphone. Dreamed by people who love microphones and who know what a microphone really is — a way into a different world, a world that has its own rules. The world of the electro acoustic form of art. Understanding how we can be the most natural part of this world, that's where real progress is made and that's where we will even further differentiate ourselves from the rest of the market — through our future development. There's a lot we have learned and a lot that we are working on that is another huge step forward from where we are today and we are at a very high level already. We don't want to decrease from that and the progress will be made in the understanding of the nature of the human perception of sound and in the understanding of the nature of the subject we are dealing with and how to expand our view and possibilities. We are experiencing some very fascinating aspects that will result in future products.

Where do you stand on the digital microphone issue?

On the side of sound, dynamics and versatility!

Do you regard your mics as instruments or tools?

Both. It is just the perspective from which you approach and use microphones — the perspective of an artist or the perspective of a technician. Again, how you get there doesn't matter; what counts is the result. When you create an image, and this is what we do when we record, we need to focus on how we make this image transport the information we want it to contain in the way we think is best for maximum effect. Keeping the impression of this image as a whole and perceiving things in their entirety is what matters and not to get lost in details.

That to me is the art of recording and also the basis of my understanding of how to master my field in this art — the art of microphones. ■