

Brauner Phantom

Fast tracking its way in to the microphone manufacturing elite, Brauner has got there through hard graft, attention to detail and a single-minded mission statement. Against such a backdrop, an 'affordable' Brauner would seem elusive. Stand corrected. JON THORNTON



IN 1994, DIRK BRAUNER set up business in an old barn in Germany with a single aim – to make the best microphone that he possibly could, and one that remained true to the traditional values of German microphone design and manufacture. Since then his virtually hand-built microphones have achieved an enviable reputation among the professional audio community. The ever-growing list of Brauner converts universally praised the openness, transparency and musicality of his first design, the VM1, and subsequent designs such as the Valvet.

All of this craftsmanship and attention to detail came at a price though, in the same way that an Aston Martin does. So when I was asked whether I'd like to review Brauner's new 'low cost' microphone, I jumped at the chance.

The Phantom is something of a departure from Dirk Brauner's previous designs. In the first instance, it is the first microphone he has produced that doesn't feature a valve-based preamplifier, using instead a solid-state design. Second, it is cheaper – although you could never describe it as a cheap microphone in any sense of the word.

The review model shipped in a small aluminium case, and the mic comes complete with a shockmount. The shockmount is an alloy, push-fit type that grabs the body of the microphone very securely indeed and is one of the first clues about the attention to detail and engineering tolerances in evidence here. This shockmount arrangement, coupled with the relatively small microphone body (17cm x 5cm) results in a very compact package that is easy to position exactly where you want it. My only reservations were the very long lever that tightens the shockmount onto the stand adapter. Its length and relatively narrow diameter could lead to over-tightening, or even breaking, of the lever with over-zealous use.

The microphone itself is finished in satin nickel, and it's obvious that no corners have been cut with regard to the overall construction and finish. Legending is engraved rather than printed onto the microphone

body, the switches have a very positive action, and the mesh grille that encloses the side-fire capsule isn't going to come apart in a hurry. And if you need reminding about its provenance, a unique, engraved serial number is very prominent on the front of the microphone.

The Phantom is a standard pressure gradient transducer microphone, and offers three switchable polar patterns – cardioid, omni, and figure-of-eight. A cheaper still, cardioid-only variant is also available. A switchable 10dB pad is included, which you might find yourself using a lot, as the mic has a very high output level in comparison to other large diaphragm studio condensers. Any form of high-pass filter is notably lacking, and the company literature suggests that this is to not compromise the amplifier design by introducing phase shifts caused by unnecessary equalisation.

The review model wasn't supplied with much in the way of technical specification, or an individual frequency plot – and while the brochure quotes a frequency response of 20Hz to 22kHz, it doesn't mention a deviation figure. Still, this gave me the perfect opportunity to just listen to the microphone without the distraction of numbers.

In use, the Phantom was compared with the ubiquitous U87 and a Sony C800. On an acoustic guitar, the first thing that strikes you is a terrific bass extension, which manages to sound convincing and free of any lumpiness in response, even when the cardioid pattern is selected. The midrange sounds natural and refined, and the high frequencies seem to have a solidity about them that made the C800 (one of my current personal favourites) sound frankly dull in comparison.

On vocals, these traits were very much in evidence again – the bass extension is more pronounced as proximity effect comes into play, and this might not suit naturally full voices when looking for that close, intimate sound. Interestingly, some vocalists found the lack of any pronounced mid-range presence lift to be problematic on headphone mixes. This might mean playing around with the headphone cue a little to make some vocalists feel more comfortable. Also, the off axis response of the cardioid pattern seems to fall away rather steeply, which is very noticeable if the vocalist moves around too much. Where the Phantom really shines, though, is in its transient response. On acoustic guitar and percussion, the high frequency transients gave these instruments an uncanny realism and definition in the control room.

In the interests of completeness, the Phantom was also set up as a room microphone with the omni pattern selected. Here, perhaps, it proved to be just too revealing for its own good – and the characteristics mentioned above made it less pleasing as an ambient mic for a drum kit than the aforementioned C800. This may have been exacerbated by the fact that it also seemed much more sensitive to positioning in the room than either of the other microphones – possibly due to differences in its omni response.

Despite this, I was very reluctant to put it back in its

case. At this price point, the Phantom is up against some very well established competition. But is it really an Aston Martin for Ford Mondeo money? Frankly, yes. I couldn't spot any serious compromises with this microphone, with the exception of the minor precautionary quibble about the shockmount.

I'd almost go as far as to advise you not to audition this microphone if funds are tight. If you do, the chances are you'll never want to give it back. ■

PROS

Famous Brauner sound quality at a more affordable price; superlative build quality and finish; compact package makes positioning in tight places easy.

CONS

Potentially fragile lever on shockmount; wallet-damaging potential.

EXTRAS

Brauner co-operated with SPL on the creation of the Atmos multichannel microphone system with SPL providing



the electronics and Brauner the mics. The Brauner ASM 5 adjustable surround microphone is based on five matched microphone heads from the VM 1

with the view to providing the recording engineer with a platform for experimentation.

The LCR mic heads are positioned 17.5cm away from the centre and accommodate continuous adjustment of the polar pattern characteristic of each mic, from omni up to figure-of-eight, remotely from the Atmos 5.1 Surround Recording Console via a 12-pair screened multicore cable. The positions of all mic heads are additionally variable by +/-90 degrees.

As 5.1 surround recording solutions go, it's one of the most complete packages available and applies itself easily to studio and live recording, outdoor recordings, and mixing and postproduction in music, TV and movie productions. It's been employed on the creation of a number of sound effects CDs and both manufacturers have representative and stunning demo material available that illustrates just what the system is capable of.

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