

Brauner VMA

Now rightly associated with the very best microphone brands by mic cognoscente, Brauner has grown from strength to strength. It's latest offering delivers wonderful innovation. **JON THORNTON** tries very hard to remain impartial.

DIRK BRAUNER'S MICROPHONES have always been small objects of desire as far as I'm concerned. And I'm not just talking about their sound here — although anyone who has auditioned one will probably testify that it's an experience that does absolutely no good to your bank balance. No, what I'm referring to in addition to their sound is the way they look and feel. There's an incredibly tactile sense about them, and at the same time they feel so well engineered as to be almost indestructible — kind of Philippe Starck crossed with a Challenger tank.

For some time now, the ultimate Brauner creation has been the VM-1, which since its introduction has attracted legions of fans. However, the introduction of the VMA ups the ante as the most expensive microphone in the Brauner range (UK£3999 + VAT). So is it the ultimate object of desire? (*I've a feeling I know what the outcome is going to be. Ed*)

Physically, the microphone itself looks almost identical to the VM-1, a long slender metal tube topped with a side-addressed dual gold-plated diaphragm. Build quality is, as usual, exceptional — the microphone is less machined than hewn out of metal. Accompanying the microphone in the high-quality flightcase is the power supply, which connects via a locking 8-pin connector. Also in the case is a suspension mount, which encases the whole body of the microphone and locks it tight with two rotating rings at either end, and the smartest looking metal and foam popshield I've seen for a long time. Again, this circles the entire microphone, and screws onto the shockmount assembly — although in practice this is a little fiddly to accomplish.

The front panel of the PSU has a continuously variable control for polar pattern, moving between omni and fig-8. The rear of the unit sports the power switch, 8-pin connector to the microphone and mic output on XLR. There is also a three-position earth-lift switch on the rear, giving a choice of a hard earth connection, lifted earth and a 'soft' (capacitor decoupled) earth lift.

Directing attention back to the front-panel for a moment also reveals an innocuous looking toggle switch, simply labelled 1 and 2. This is the VMA's unique selling point, and accomplishes what the sales literature boldly describes as 'two microphones in one'. In position 1, the VMA performs and behaves exactly like the standard VM-1. In position 2, by virtue of some tweaking around with capsule biasing and switching alternative component sets into circuit, the VMA takes on a more traditional 'vintage' sound.

Never having auditioned the VM-1 before, but having been so impressed with Brauner's Phantom in a previous review that I had to buy it, I was understandably keen to get going. Female backing vocals were the first port of call, with the VMA in position 1 (the VM-1 setting). First impressions are excellent — the impressive focus, detail and transient response, particularly in the high frequency range are

similar to the Phantom model. But whereas the Phantom can make you feel that you are next to the singer, the VMA in VM-1 mode adds a certain lift to the high-mids that makes the sound a little larger than life. This is not unpleasant, and the valve based preamp design is almost certainly having an effect here, giving an ever so slightly 'hyped' sound to the mid-range, but a very progressive one in the context of female vocals.

Switching to male vocals gives the first real indicator of Dirk Brauner's thinking behind the VMA. The VM-1 setting here somehow sounds a little off kilter at times, as the high mid lift has a more pronounced effect that sometimes seems at odds with that incredibly extended HF response.

toggling the switch over to mode 2 makes a surprisingly big difference. High frequency extension is still there, but sounds softer — almost as if it's rolling off a little earlier. There's a distinct difference in the perceived transient response as well, as the higher registers of the voice and the associated breath and spit sounds seem to blend into the mid-range more.

The mid frequency lift, as a result sounds more pronounced and, dare I say it, warmer. Certainly a useful sound for that 'big' male vocal, but an acquired taste too. One engineer on the session commented that it sounded like printing vocals slightly hot to analogue tape and then banging them into Pro Tools.

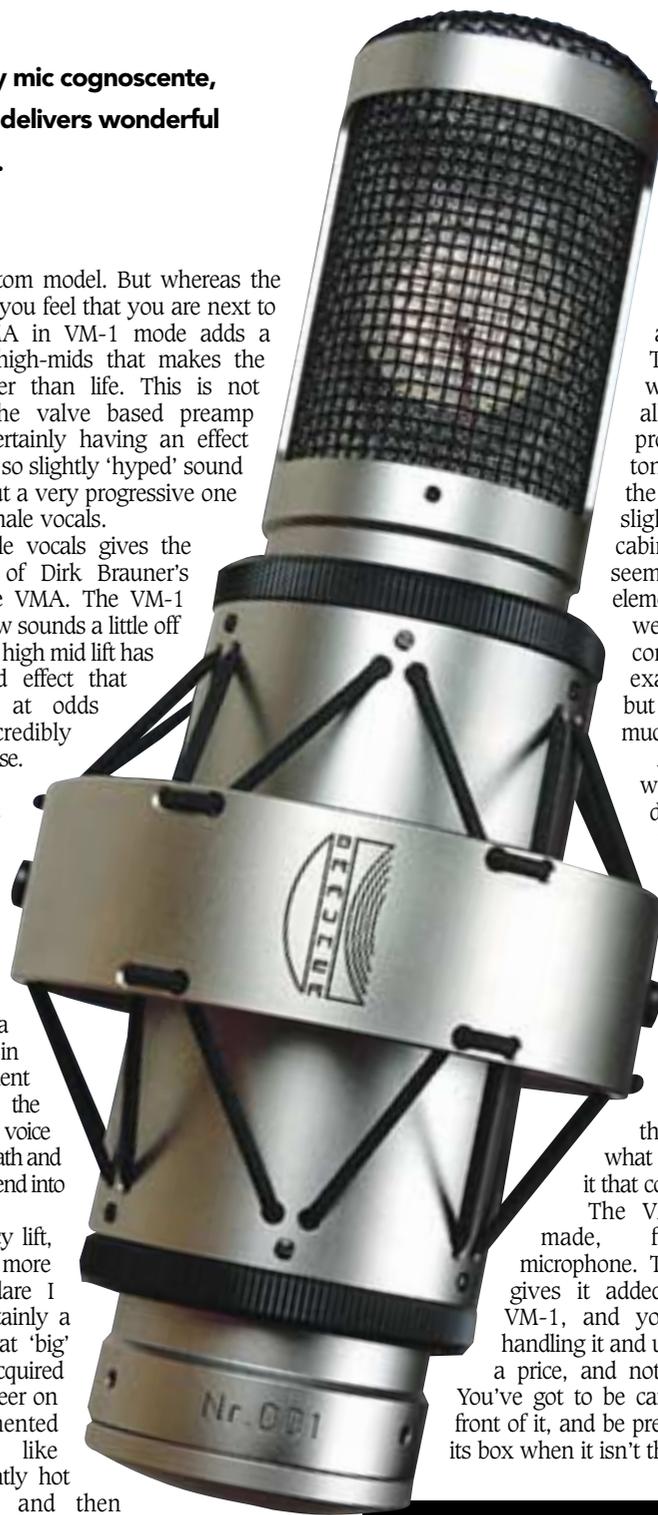
It was a similar story when the VMA was tasked to some other roles. As a single overhead on a jazz drum kit, something the Brauner Phantom excels at, the VMA sounded a little overbearing, and almost lacking mid frequency depth of field in exchange for a slightly fuller sound. Admittedly, the live room was a touch 'honky' in the mid range, and I suspect the VMA was revealing inadequacies in the room as much as anything else, but it was never going to be the microphone of choice in that application.

Electric guitar was generally more successful, with the VMA in both settings proving to be a flexible performer

both relatively close to a guitar cabinet, and at slight distances. The variable pattern worked well here, allowing some very progressive and useful tonal control when the mic was positioned slightly off-axis to the cabinet. Still, the VMA seemed to pull out elements of the sound that were not necessarily complimentary — not exactly harshness, but perhaps a little too much HF and HMF detail.

At this stage I was getting a little disheartened, until we returned to female vocals, this time with a different singer. And the VMA performed beautifully, a truly breathtaking recording full of intimacy and life. A reminder, then, that however beautiful the microphone, it's what you put in front of it that counts.

The VMA is a beautifully made, fantastic sounding microphone. The dual mode switch gives it added flexibility over the VM-1, and you will never tire of handling it and using it. But it comes at a price, and not just a financial one. You've got to be careful what you put in front of it, and be prepared to put it back in its box when it isn't the right choice. ■



PROS Superlative build quality; amazing definition and response; it really is 'two microphones in one'.

CONS Doesn't come cheap; sound may be a little too 'hyped' for some tastes or applications in 'vintage' mode.

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