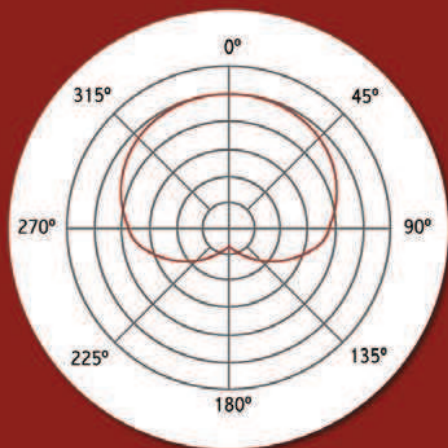


view

by Paul Vnuk jr.

A new manufacturer makes an impressive debut

Lauten Audio Horizon

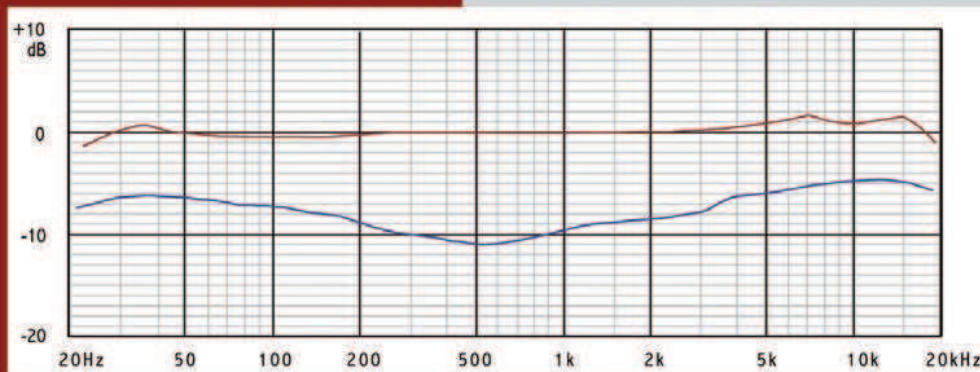


The Horizon microphone is the first product from California-based Lauten Audio. It is a lollipop-style, single-pattern, large-diaphragm tube condenser that is recommended as a general-purpose microphone for both studio and stage applications.

Tech-speak

The Horizon features a cardioid polar pattern, a 20 Hz–20 kHz frequency range, a 20 dBA self-noise level, an output impedance of <200 ohms and a 140 dB max SPL level (when padded). It has a milled brass body and a pad with selectable 10 dB and 20 dB attenuation. Lauten states that it uses a “rare” NOS military-grade tube, high-resolution capacitors and a custom-wound output transformer.

For the tube newb: “NOS” means New Old Stock—an original vintage tube, not a modern remake, but one that’s fresh from its original box, *not*



one that's been used before and removed from a piece of old tube gear in order to be reused.

Kit and kaboodle

Housed in a custom briefcase, the Horizon package includes the mic, an external power supply (about the size of an average pro DI box), two mounting options (hard and suspended), a 7-pin XLR cable, a felt mic bag and a full-color printed manual.

The Horizon is solid and heavy with a detailed fit and finish. You could almost hammer nails with this thing, and since Lauten recommends this mic for live as well as studio use, a build quality of this caliber is important. The included accessories are equally rugged, especially the custom designed, thick, nylon banded suspension mount.

Sonic claims

Lauten claims the Horizon to be a "full-bodied workhorse" microphone.

The included (albeit initially confusing) frequency response graph, shown on the facing page, shows two curves: the first (in red) is essentially flat from about 200 Hz to 2 kHz with a low-end rise around 35 Hz and high bumps around 7 kHz and 18 kHz—the response of what I'd term 'a flat microphone'. The second curve (in blue) is overall 5 to 10 dB quieter with a significantly boosted low end (almost 20 to 200), a large dip around 500 and a significant sloping rise back up from 1 kHz to 18 kHz.

Tube Microphone

There is no explanation in the manual as to what these two curves represent—Lauten explains that they represent the mic's on-axis (red) and 90° off-axis (blue) frequency response, and that users can use this to their advantage and subtly color the mic's response by changing its placement. I agree that this is a useful technique, but after my evaluation I don't hear the mic as being nearly as flat on-axis as the red curve would suggest. It doesn't sound *bad*; it's just more solid in the highs and lows vs. the mids to my ears.

Sonic impressions

Thanks to its dual pad, this mic can handle a very hot SPL level. I found the -10 dB setting optimal for almost every application with only a few (quieter) exceptions. Unfortunately I could not find anything in my studio loud enough to justify engaging the -20 dB pad (anyone got a small jet engine handy?).

Aurally, the Horizon is very tight and focused, with a strong off-axis rejection; it consistently exhibited a big and extended low end, extended and smooth highs with a very forward presence.

In session

The Horizon excelled on percussive applications such as toms, tablas, congas and djembe. It worked especially well as an external kick-drum mic (about a foot from the source) where it captured large tight lows without sounding muffled or muddy. It is equally nice on tambourine and cymbals where crispness sans harshness is desired.

Using it on a guitar amp in tandem with a Shure SM57, one guitarist exclaimed that this was the best recorded guitar sound he had ever gotten. What makes the Horizon

so successful in this case is that it fits around the mid-heavy SM57 like a glove, allowing the engineer to tailor the tone's fullness through mixing and mic position, rather than through eq.

On acoustic guitar, it brought out the guitar's lows without being boomy, while highlighting the brightness of the strumming, and while this would not be my favorite setup for a solo acoustic recording or a folk album, a sound such as this is quite modern and will cut through a rock mix well.

Thanks to its tight, forward nature the Horizon also is an interesting choice for overhead applications, where it can capture the instrument sound cleanly, without highlighting the sound of the room (great for recording in less desirable spaces). It can also be used to great effect as a heavily compressed room mic without excessive noise buildup.

On flute, the microphone's forward nature made the flute seem piercing, and on violin it highlighted too much of the violin's screech and bowing. In these instances a dark-voiced mic was a much better choice, and dark is not an adjective to describe the Horizon.

On the human voice

On vocalists, both male and female in a variety of styles (rock, jazz, folk and traditional gospel), the Horizon was again a great choice when mix-cutting presence and crispness was desired, but like many vocal mics it was often singer- and style-dependent and not always the best choice for every genre.

A female gospel singer summed it up nicely in that she really liked the forward, crisp sound, yet it was not what you would hear on a gospel record.

For voiceovers and speech however, one word—*wow*. With a pop filter six inches from the mic to control sibilance and plosives, the Horizon could easily become my go-to mic for most voiceover work. The Horizon's forward nature was big yet naturally pleasant without sounding hyped.

Finally, this could be a great mic for recording very quiet sources for sound design and Foley applications. Thanks to its low noise floor, you can get ultra-clean levels on tearing paper, or lighting a match...you could probably hear a pin drop!

Final thoughts

The Horizon is unique and highly useful for a broad range of applications. From build to shape to sound, its qualities exceed those of many other tube mics in its class, and it has a boutique vibe at a non-boutique price.

Welcome to the world of pro audio microphones, Lauten Audio—you're off to a very promising start. ☺

Price: \$799 (\$719.99 street)

More from: Lauten Audio, 5201 Great American Parkway, Suite 320, Santa Clara, CA 95054. 877/721-7018. www.lautenaudio.com. Dist. in USA by Summit Audio, Inc., www.summitaudio.com.

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