

Lauten Audio

Horizon tube condenser mic

The Lauten *Horizon* is a cardioid tube mic with a shock-mounted, large-diaphragm capsule and a two-step pad. The mic ships with a shock mount, a hard mount, a power supply, and a 20 ft Gotham Audio cable with double Reussen shielding and Neutrik gold-pin connectors—all fitted snugly into a rugged aluminum case.

It's an attractive package, and the mic itself is quite stunning visually, with a sexy conical body (think U 87) and a lollypop-style head. In a sea of mid-range microphones that sometimes seem engineered to look cooler than they sound, the *Horizon* is just funky enough while maintaining a classic style. Everything about the mic is solid and very attractive. My only reservation is regarding how the mic threads into the mounts; it's not terribly smooth and takes a little work to seat properly. It's a minor complaint, and overall the whole package feels very high-end.

The -10/-20 dB pad switch is a key feature, because the *Horizon's* output is intentionally quite hot. Brian Loudenslager, founder of Lauten Audio, explained that, in part, they were aiming to help people recording with lower quality preamps, such as those often built into consumer-grade interfaces. The reasoning is that with a hotter signal off the mic, you'll rely less on the preamp to get things up to proper recording levels. Somewhere between the hot output of this mic and the headroom of a consumer-grade preamp, there is a good match that will conceivably reduce the noise and distortion sometimes inherent in lesser preamps. It's good to see a mic designer address these issues.

The sound of the Lauten is what I would call "toppy", meaning that it accentuates the upper frequencies where the sibilance of a vocal lies, and there's a familiar harmonic richness to the top end that I associate with other tube condensers, like Ela M 251s and U 67s. Compared to an AKG

C 414 or a Neumann U 87, the *Horizon* was noticeably brighter on male vocals, cutting through the mix more, but not in an annoying way that would require a lot of de-essing. On upright piano, just inside the open top lid and through an API 512C preamp, it was exceptionally bright—ideal for cutting through a mix dense with guitars, but perhaps too bright for other applications. I hung a pair of the *Horizons* at knee level as stereo drum mics, about 4 ft in front of the kit, and was very happy with what the mics did with the cymbals. Again, it was the brightness without harshness that helped liven up the sound of the drums as I brought those tracks up into the mix. With the *Horizon* on the outside edge of a guitar amp speaker (which I was combining with an MD 421 on the center), I was able to capture the dark tones nicely, but again got a surprisingly present top end, too.

You're probably getting the picture of how I think the *Horizon* could fit into a wide arsenal of mics, bringing a very usable upper presence to the sonic pallet—the perfect foil (no pun intended) to a dark ribbon mic, for example. And if you don't have a tube mic in your closet, the *Horizon* will deliver that harmonic richness that is so particular to tube mics, without breaking the bank (\$720 street). For someone with limited mic choices, the *Horizon* could be a great complement to an SM58, SM57, or other dynamic mic, offering a very different and equally usable sound. If you're in the market for a condenser mic in this price range, I would give the *Horizon* serious consideration, as it delivers a sophisticated richness that I associate with mics many times the price. (\$799 MSRP; www.lautenaudio.com)

—Allen Farnelo, www.farnelo.com

Aphex

Headpod 454

We have a small B-Room here at The Hangar with a Digi 002 and a Rolls HA43 4-channel headphone amp. So when Aphex asked if we'd be interested in reviewing their *HeadPod* unit, I said sure, I can do that. Both units are similar in that they both power four sets of cans with individual volume controls. The Rolls is black, the *HeadPod* is white. The *HeadPod* adds a master volume and your choice of individual L/R balanced TRS input jacks or one unbalanced stereo TRS jack. They both use wall warts, but the Rolls is 12 VDC while the *HeadPod* is 12 VAC. AC or DC? Great band name there somewhere.

Comparing headphone amps is a tricky business. For this test, engineer Bryce Gonzales and I each picked a song we knew really well and had heard on headphones before. Using two pairs of Audio Technica ATH-M30 headphones (my second favorite set of cans after the ATH-M50s, which sound amazing!) we first compared the Rolls to the high-end headphone reference amp in our Grace 802 monitor controller. After level matching the tracks and getting the hang of quickly switching between headsets, we both agreed the Grace was much cleaner and open sounding. Kind of what you'd expect from a \$1500 headphone amp compared to a \$100 amp. In defense of the Rolls however, it didn't sound fifteen times worse than the Grace; it actually sounded okay. But the Rolls had a peaky upper midrange that I suspect would quickly get tiring after a long session. Next, we repeated these tests with the *HeadPod* and the Grace. The peaky midrange in the Rolls was absent in the *HeadPod*. The Grace still sounded a bit more open and hi-fi, but the gap had been narrowed quite a bit. So, if you're looking for an inexpensive 4-channel headphone amp, you should definitely consider the *HeadPod*. It's a few bucks more than the ultra-cheapy units, but your ears will probably thank you after long sessions. (\$249 MSRP; www.aphex.com) —JB



"Radial has made it simple for us musicians who don't necessarily want to become 'on-the-gig programmers'. Whether I'm in the studio or playing live, I'm never without my Bassbone!"

Will Lee
(George Benson, Bob James, Billy Joel, Dave Matthews, Spyro Gyra)

"With the Radial JDI, my bass comes through extremely clean, very quiet and with a smooth transparent low end. I use my Radial DI for everything."

Tony Levin
(Peter Dinklage, King Crimson, Mark Knopfler, John Lennon, Paul Simon)

"The Bassbone is just what I have been looking for... I can maintain the integrity of two instruments on stage or in studio with control over the balance and keep my high standards for my low notes!"

Nathan East
(Eric Clapton, Michael Jackson, Quincy Jones, Phil Collins)

"I have to say - this is one fabulous little gizmo! Nice sound, versatile as well. I can be modern or a little edgy, dirty and even woofy. I record straight from the Bassbone to ProTools. Well done Radial!"

Benny Reitveld
(Santana, Miles Davis, John Lee Hooker, Sheila E, Larry Coryell)

"When I tried the Radial JDV, my bass sounded better than I had ever heard it sound. It came to life, natural, pure and with plenty of level."

Mark Egan
(Pat Metheny, Sting, Bill Evans, Joan Osborne, Marianne Faithfull)

"The Radial JDV has become a staple in my studio and in my live rig. It sounds great and I love the versatility it affords me in any situation."

Dave LaRue
(Steve Morse Band, John Petrucci, Vinnie Moore, Joe Satriani)

"I use my Radial DI for everything!"

~ Tony Levin