

PRO AUDIO REVIEW

Reprinted from October 2000

equipment
review

Marshall Electronics MXL V77 Tube Condenser Microphone

by Loren Alldrin

If there's one trend I've truly enjoyed watching over the past decade or so, it's the plummeting cost of large-diaphragm condenser microphones. A natural byproduct of this trend is the falling cost of tube condenser mics. Previously, tube mics used to be found only in high-end commercial studios, but today's studio owner has many under-\$1,000 tube mics to choose from.

One of the least-expensive tube microphones available is the new MXL V77 from Marshall Electronics, a company now offering several models that redefine condenser mic price points. At just \$699 list, the V77 is the least-expensive tube condenser mic I know of, one that puts this class of microphone within reach of more people than ever before.

Features

The V77 is a tube condenser mic with a fixed cardioid pattern. Its 1.06" (27mm) diaphragm element easily qualifies the mic for true large-diaphragm status. The dual diaphragm design element is in contrast to mics that use a single diaphragm and "mechanical" system to cancel sound coming from behind the microphone. I generally prefer dual diaphragm designs, finding their patterns to be more predictable and their off-axis sound less colored than those of single diaphragm designs.

Although it doesn't take much-added circuitry to coax additional patterns out of a dual-diaphragm element, the V77 sticks with cardioid in the interest of maintaining the lowest-possible price-point. There are no switches on the V77 at all — no low-cut filter and no pad. The V77 starts distorting at 122 dB, which is

quite low for a mic in this class.

When testing microphones that inhabit the low end of the price range, I expect to find ho-hum construction and a flimsy accessory package. That's not the case here — the V77 pleasantly surprised me with the quality of its construction. The microphone itself feels solid and well designed, as does the compact high-voltage power supply.



Perhaps most impressive is the V77's elastic shockmount basket, which holds the mic in a steel spring bear hug. The basket is easy to position and effectively isolates the microphone from shock. It actually stays where you set it. What a concept.

In use

I tested the V77 with a variety of instruments and voices, and I'll admit I started testing with a bit of a bias. Just as I've come to expect less on the physical design and construction of inexpensive microphones, I expect to hear a few flaws as well. The V77 surprised me, delivering a nicely balanced and articulate sound with no glaring problems whatsoever.

Large-diaphragm microphones fall on a continuum from darker in overall character (AKG SOLIDTUBE or Neumann TLM 193, for example) to brighter (Røde NT-2, CAD E-300). The V77 takes the middle ground. Its sound is not overly hyped on the top end, not excessively dark and not scooped in the midrange. The V77's midrange response may be its most appealing character — clear and open, without unwanted resonances or peaks. The mic's bottom-end response is strong but doesn't come across as muddy or unnatural.

Vocals cut with the V77 about 8 inches off sounded excellent. The tracks were clear and full, with only the occasional sizzle of unwanted sibilance. The mic's bass response makes for mean plosive pops, so use a mesh pop filter for upclose vocal work.

The V77 did a very nice job on strummed acoustic guitar, controlling the treble frequencies that often result in an irritating sound. Percussion (shaker, dumbek, tambourine, rainstick) also came across very detailed and natural with the V77. The mic's clear midrange was an asset for these sounds. The sound wasn't a direct hit for the finger-picked guitar, where I would have preferred a little more high treble sheen.

The mic's polar pattern could be described

At a Glance

Applications:
Studio recording

Key Features:
Dual large-diaphragm element;
fixed cardioid pattern; elastic
shockmount basket

Price:
\$699

Contact:
Marshall Electronics at
800-800-6608; 310-390-6608;
www.mars-cam.com

as a rather loose cardioid, which has benefits and drawbacks. The benefits are a forgiving sweetspot and smoother off-axis response. You could tuck the V77 pretty close to a small group of singers for example, and get reasonably consistent sound out to nearly 90 degrees off-axis. The downside is that there is more room ambience and bleed from whatever is happening behind the mic.

The V77's rather low noise floor (17 dBA) was never a problem. What may be problematic, however, is its low max SPL spec. With a max SPL of just 122 dB (at 0.5% THD), the mic may break up in front of very loud guitar amps or heavy-handed drummers — and there's no on-mic pad to help. On the plus side, the V77 may put you further into

the tube's nonlinear transfer characteristics (the tube sound) than other tube microphones at a given SPL.

Summary

It's obvious that Marshall had to eliminate a few things to get the V77's price so low. What was not eliminated, however, was quality of sound — no apologies need to be made for the V77's sonics. The V77's sound is balanced and quite versatile, making it a great investment for those without the budget for numerous mics (which happens to be, by amazing coincidence, the exact market Marshall is targeting). If this describes you, the Marshall V77 deserves a place on your list of mics to audition. It's a bargain.