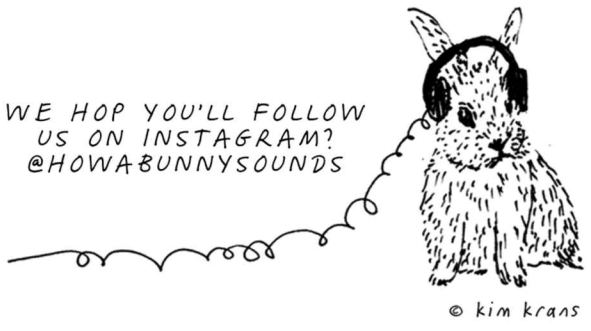

Vanguard Audio Labs

V13 large-diaphragm tube mic

"Smooth like whiskey" — that's how Vanguard Audio Lab's main man, Derek Bargaehr, describes the sound of the *V13* large-diaphragm condenser mic. Vanguard, a small company based in Upland, California, has spent a long time developing a tube mic that competes with upper echelon mics, but at a fraction of the cost of those expensive behemoths. The *V13*, in a glossy pinot noir finish, embodies a large-diaphragm tube condenser made with a custom capsule, high-end circuitry components, dual-triode tube, and custom output transformer. The mic provides a complete feature set, including pad and LF roll-off switches on its body, a cloth-covered cable to connect it to its power supply that sports the familiar nine-position polar-pattern switch, and a VLSM shockmount, which looks like a semicircular metal cage that securely holds and also isolates the mic from vibrations. The whole kit is delivered in a custom briefcase with an additional wooden box to protect the mic. Vanguard pays attention to small details, including a precision-cast badge and chrome details on the mic body, and a sort of X-shaped cutout on the backside of the mic body that allows a glimpse of the tube at work.

I first set up the mic on vocals for a boy band called New District. For alto male voice, I found the cardioid pattern to be full and rich, but not what I would call bright. I turned the polar-pattern selector one or two clicks towards omnidirectional, and the mic sounded a touch brighter and a bit thinner in the mids, which was well suited to this particular pop song. I probably could have engaged the 125 Hz bass roll-off for a tonal change, but switching the pattern toward omni did the trick. While mixing this song, a simple EQ on the vocals brought out as much clarity and open highs as I needed, without any harsh sibilance or the sizzly highs associated with many low-cost LDC mics. The *V13*'s head grille does not have the typical three-layer closed mesh, but instead employs a more transparent screen, which likely contributes to the resonance-free, sweet and natural sounding top end. I try to avoid pop filters with vocalists and instead focus on mic placement, but I would suggest using a good pop filter due to the open headbasket design of the *V13*. The midrange of the *V13*, especially around 200 to 400 Hz, tends to be very present, and when stacking vocals, this frequency range can become a bit congested, but a bit of EQ during mixing can easily solve that issue. I always prefer to begin with a full frequency range and later decide what I might need to take out.

On muted trumpet and flugelhorn in an R&B holiday song, the *V13* held up very well against a very expensive U 47–style tube mic and easily beat a studio-standard TLM 170 R FET mic. The *V13* provided a rich, full tone that sat well in a very full production. Again, the top end felt smooth and extended, but not artificially hyped or bright; and the low mids sounded full, but focused. For solo trumpet, I used the straight-up cardioid setting, but for ensemble recording, the omni setting would provide very natural on-axis and off-axis tones.

As a mono room mic on drums, the *V13* provided a thick and natural sound that felt balanced and realistic. A pair for piano would be fantastic for acoustic styles of music, and a pair for drum overheads would be well suited to almost any style of drum recording when a large, natural, and un-hyped sound is desired. The *V13* tames dynamics a bit, especially in the high frequencies, so cymbals and hi-hats don't sound splatty or harsh.

Tube-tweakers should note that the stock tube is an excellent-sounding, cryogenically treated, European dual-triode that's had its markings removed. For other tonal options in this mic, 12AX7/ECC83 and 12AY7/6072A tubes would be suitable, and worth trying out. A side note: Tube-swapping is a great option, as long as you research the gain, power requirements, and sonic differences of the tubes. Tube life, frequency response, and output saturation are the main concerns with tube swaps of similar function tubes.

Overall, I think the combination of a very thin (3 micron) diaphragm, acoustically open headbasket, and high-quality electronics enables the *V13* to provide both a sound and a build quality that place the mic's value well above its price. Vanguard Audio Labs will soon be releasing additional mics, including a single-body, stereo, large-diaphragm condenser, and a small-diaphragm condenser kit with multi-pattern capsule options. *($699 street; www.vanguardaudiolabs.com)*

–Adam Kagan <www.mixer.ninja>