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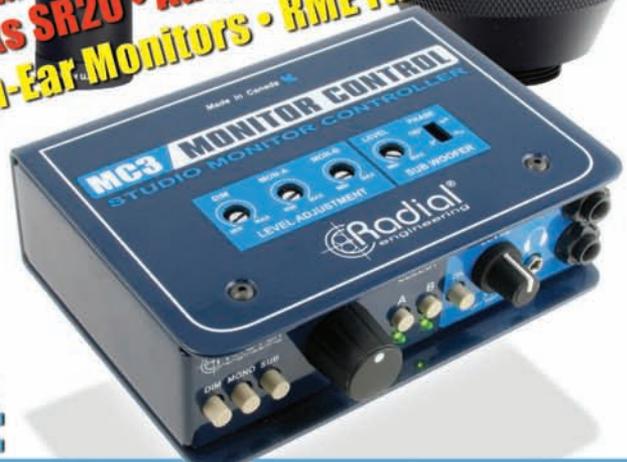
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BY PAUL VNUK JR.

Earthworks makes mics known for their distinctive looks and their pristine and accurate sonics—"stay-out-of-the-way", hi-fi, ultra-clean. Most models in the Earthworks catalog lean toward a focus on instrument recording, but recently, in our February 2012 issue, we took a look at what Earthworks calls the world's first High Definition Vocal Microphone, the SR40V, a robust hand-held condenser with a phenomenal 30 Hz to 40 kHz frequency response... and a \$1000 street price.

Earthworks' other mic with vocal aspirations, the SR20, started life over a decade ago as the SR69. Although it shared the famous tapered Earthworks look and sonic signature with other mics in the line, what made it unique was a special screw-on metal sleeve enclosed in a foam windscreen that allowed it to perform not only as a top-notch instrument microphone but as a full-on handheld vocal mic for studio and stage as well.

Earthworks SR 20

The flat-to-infinity Earthworks sound in an affordable multipurpose mic

This month we look at the current SR20, with a newly redesigned metal grille wind-screen attachment as well as its new fit and finish. It's more approachable for smaller studios than the high-end SR40V might be, and its dual character lets it provide a surprising range of useful applications.

Form and function of the SR20

Without a screen, the SR20 is similar to most of the other Earthworks models. If anything, its tip is a tad chunkier than those on some of the company's upper-end models, but only slightly.

Without the screen attachment, its 8 1/2" aluminum body weighs in at a scant 0.3 lbs. Its base is 7/8" wide, and just over halfway up it tapers down into the 1/2" tip that's typical for Earthworks mics with their tiny capsules.

While 90% of Earthworks microphones are finished in a shiny brushed stainless steel, this mic—since its SR69 days—was at one time offered in multiple colors. The current production model comes in a matte black finish that is slightly textured, most likely to diminish handling noise.

When coupled with its windscreen attachment, which is just shy of 2" across at its widest point, the mic grows to a full 9" in length.

I was never a fan of the original windscreen found on the previous models, and I like that the SR20 now looks like a traditional handheld; from a distance it reminds me just a tad of Shure's SM87, only in black. The metal grille makes it much more durable, especially since foam windscreens like the old one tend to wear and tear easily over time.

The SR20 has two windscreens in one. The first is as described above, and made for vocal work, however the head basket unscrews to reveal a thick inner foam windscreen that hugs the mic more tightly; this is handy when used on instruments in a drafty environment like a stage, or on instruments played by heavy breathers, for example next to a violin's f-hole.

The SR20 ships in a foam-lined hard plastic box and comes with a traditional mic clip. Normally I don't see the need to discuss mic clips in a review, but while I appreciate how snugly this one holds the mic in place, I did not like that it is so tight that there is no way to get it on or off the mic without scuffing up the microphone's finish.

Specs

After countless reviews of mics with "20 Hz to 20 kHz" frequency responses, I find the SR20's honest 50 Hz to 20 kHz response refreshing.

The capsule is touted as being a "pre-polarized first-order cardioid" (it does require 48V phantom power) coupled to a transformerless output. It has a 10mV/Pa sensitivity, a 145 dB MAX SPL level, and a 22 dB noise floor. Normally I would describe the various frequency peaks and dips, but in the SR20 all you need to know is one word—*flat!*

A tale of two vocal mics

I received this mic for review at the same time as the SR40V that was reviewed for our February 2012 issue. Initially I was so wowed by the SR40V that I quickly relegated the SR20 to instrument duties that I will detail below. But once I got past the shock and awe of its big, expensive, and expensive-sounding sibling, I was able to hear that that on many levels the differences between the two SR mics, while still present, were not as vast as I was expecting.

Whether live or in the studio, both microphones are of course ultra detailed and share a similar sonic weight in a mix. If you solo them, however, their differences become clearer. Since the SR40V's range is extended in both directions, it has a touch more weight and air, and it is a microphone that a skilled singer can really play to and finesse; however, in my review I did notice that if you have a loud singer who eats the mic it will sound as if the



diaphragm is being pushed a tad hard. Also, the SR40V is a hypercardioid mic that offers a touch more rejection of bleed and other instruments than the SR20. As to SPL and noise floor the two are quite similar.

Now if it just sounded like I gave the impression that the SR20 is a second-class citizen to the 40, let's look at its strengths. Overall the SR20 is actually a touch more forgiving, especially to those singers who like to eat the mic. It also gives the illusion of being just a tad warmer, especially up close with its proximity effect in full bloom.

Like its sibling, and most other Earthworks microphones, its off-axis response is just amazing! I was skeptical when I read it on their web site, but I will confirm that even at a full 90 degrees off axis the overall tone of the source remains quite consistent. I will also concur that the pop filter really works well and plosives are kept nicely in check.

Where the less expensive SR20 truly wins is with instrument miking. In my opinion the SR40V is quite possibly one of the best hand-held vocal mics ever made, but it's less suited for instruments than the SR20, which is a true utility mic.

No playing favorites

Both on stage and in the studio I used the SR20 on drum overheads, snare, acoustic guitar, violin, congas, mandolin, tube amplifier, and piano.

On acoustic string instruments a mic like this is a clear choice, literally! The sound it picks up is as rich and full or as thin and jangly as that of the source. While sources like acoustic guitar are a given with this mic, if I had to pick a favorite it would easily be mandolin. It just grabbed the rhythmic "chuffs" and put them perfectly



On percussive things like congas, and especially as drum overhead (I only had one to test), this is a mic that gives exactly what it gets; cymbals are crisp and bright, but it's a clear sound, not a spitty or harsh sound like the cheap bright condensers many of us are used to.

What surprised me the most was how much I enjoyed the SR20 on electric guitar cabinet. It was a clear and present sound with great detailed bite in the top end. It sounds like a strange statement, but it really captured the breakup and buzz of the amp quite well.

Lastly on piano, I can't say it was as nice as the Earthwork's dedicated PM40/PM40T PianoMic system (reviewed September 2011), but that's not too surprising given that the PM40 is a matched pair of omni mics (on a spaced bar) that go from 9 Hz to 40 kHz and costs far more. However, since I usually filter out everything below 60–80 Hz in a live situation anyway lest I get copious amounts of feedback, the SR20 did its job accurately. While the PM40 system uses omni mics, the SR20's very smooth and accurate off-axis pickup helped the mic be a tad less directional than many other condensers are inside a piano.

Conclusions

In this day and age there appear to be two schools of thought when it comes to stocking your mic locker. One is to have a vast selection with a different or favorite mic for each application and source. The other and often more practical side says to have one or two mics that can cover a broad range of bases.

For studio or stage, the Earthworks SR20 is a microphone that can fit nicely into both categories, and at a street price of \$600 this is also one of the most affordable models in Earthworks' current line up. With or without the screw-on grille for vocal

Its off-axis response is just amazing! Even at a full 90° off axis the tone remains consistent.

into the mix on a live bluegrass/folk date. Since this mic only goes down to 50 Hz, it leaves out much of the mud and rumble and adds to the feel of clarity; naturally, because of that lessened bass response, it would not be my first choice on an acoustic bass, kick drum or bass cabinet.

use and wind control, you'll like what it does for your choice of recording tones. ➤

Price: \$899 (\$599 street)

More from: Earthworks,
www.earthworksaudio.com

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