

CharterOak

SA538 tube condenser mic

CharterOak have been quietly making quality tube mics for the past three years. Their first model is the SA538, a squat-looking condenser reminiscent of a short-bodied U 47. The outer shell is finished in a satin black and appointed with a silver silhouette of an oak tree. The mic is striking in person, and even after viewing high-resolution promotional photos, nothing compares to holding this model in person. Speaking of holding it, be careful; it's almost two pounds. The heft alone provides a hint of what a quality mic this is.

Internally, the SA538 is a dual-diaphragm, vacuum-tube condenser microphone that uses dual 1.07" gold-sputtered diaphragms. The electronics are of US, Slovak Republic, Swedish, and Chinese origin, but the mic is hand assembled and tested at CharterOak's headquarters in Enfield, CT. It is capable of nine pick-up patterns ranging from omni to cardioid. The mic is delivered with first-class accessories, including a locking flight case, better-than-average power supply, and one of the best shock mounts I've ever used. The accompanying cables are coated in supple webbing. The jacketing helps to avoid tangles, allowing the CharterOak cables to gently slide through potential spaghetti. Frequency response is reportedly 30 Hz to 20 kHz.

Sometimes you buy a mic for a specific purpose—like an SM57 for the snare, or an EV RE-20 for broadcast vocal. So, I set out to see what "special purpose" the SA538 might have. To make a long story short, I was having trouble finding where this mic could be a proverbial silver bullet. And that's when it hit me: the SA538 is a mic that covers a lot of ground. So, I tested my hypothesis. I took a rock singer I know who sounds thin and harsh on our Korby C-12, but awesome on our Neumann U 47 FET. Turns out the SA538 hung in there against the Neumann. Very usable. I took another singer who is the reverse and usually only sounds good with the C-12. Voila! The CharterOak worked fine. But before I give the impression that this is just a utility mic, let me finish. We took country singer Ian Thomas, who sounds strong regardless of mic choice, and had him sing into the SA538 and a Blue Kiwi at the same time. In blind A/B tests, I could not pick the Kiwi vs. the SA538. In fact, I was wrong 50% of the time.

Another benefit of the SA538 is it gets along with many different mic preamps. From an API to John Hardy to a Mackie VLZ, the CharterOak gave a solid, detailed performance. Studios with smaller budgets should have no reservation using existing mic preamps with the SA538.

If you're a small studio that wants to buy a nice vocal tube mic, but can't afford both a C-12-ish mic and a U 47-ish mic, you simply have to audition the SA538. While it's not a direct replacement for either, it's a solid performer. Likewise, for location or mobile gigs, the SA538 would be a perfect centerpiece for your mic pack. No need to take a bright and a dark mic, because the SA538 can manage nearly any vocalist type. Its sturdy construction (the tube is protected by a rubber guard) makes it suitable for the rigors of the road.

I only had two concerns with the mic. First, there is no ring mount for positioning the SA538 in tight

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applications. You're stuck with the (well designed—but bulky) shock mount. [A tight-application mount is in the works. -Ed] Second, it seemed to take extra time to find a sweet spot when using it on instruments. In particular, engineers will need to be extra patient when placing it on acoustic guitars.

I believe CharterOak is charging too little for this mic given its build quality and sonic performance. My recommendation is to seek out a demo before more people catch on to this workhorse mic. (\$1499 MSRP, \$1199 direct; www.charteroakacoustics.com) -GH