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Panel games

MartinLogan's Montis doesn't just play at being one of the best loudspeakers around – it is, says **David Price**...



DETAILS

PRODUCT: MartinLogan Montis
ORIGIN: US/Canada
TYPE: floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT: 26.3kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 1,505x322x457mm
FEATURES:
• XStat CLS electrostatic high frequency driver
• 254mm cast basket, high excursion, aluminium coned bass driver
• crossover frequency: 340Hz
• quoted frequency response: 29–23,000Hz ±3dB
• quoted sensitivity: 91dB
• quoted impedance 4 Ohms
• recommended amplifier power: 20–500W

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What's the best speaker in the world? Well, that's a trick question. Of course there *isn't* one. I've heard a number of high end designs – from the B&W 801D to the Focal Grand Utopia – extensively, indeed some have even moved in to my front room as references. I've done active, passive, ribbon, NXT, moving coil and electrostatic. I've played with metal coned drive units, glass fibre, aerogel, Kevlar, paper, carbon fibre and many others – and still can't say which is best. However, one thought that keeps coming into my mind is that in some respects there's *nothing* quite like an electrostatic...

I mean that in a good and a bad way. They do some things sublimely, yet always seem to trip at the final hurdle. Frequency extremes aren't exactly a comfort zone for 'stats, especially the bass; those stretched film panels just can't shift the same volume of air as a large cone being shaken by a powerful magnet. Recognising this, MartinLogan believes in adding a moving coil bass driver to its electrostatics, to give the best of both worlds.

You get the low distortion and linearity and excellent transient speed of an electrostatic panel (thanks to the lightness of the film compared to big, cumbersome cones), along with the prodigious air moving ability of a moving coil driver. But trying to mate the two technologies is about as easy as getting two depressed pandas to procreate in a zoo, *sans* bamboo. Trouble is, they're so different (the drive unit systems, not the pandas). One is very light and fast but doesn't move air so well, the other is big and fat but a bit slow on the transient front. Achieving any sort of happy working compromise is a feat of true Herculean proportions, so unsurprisingly it's so rarely done. Happily, MartinLogan is really rather good at it.

The Montis is one of the company's premier hybrids, and sports a 1,118x287mm panel, underneath which is a 256mm moving coil bass unit set inside its own enclosure – overall it makes for a striking looking speaker measuring 1,505x322x457mm and weighing 26.3kg.

While the speaker is big, it's not massively heavy because plastic film – which comprises much of it – is a darn sight lighter than a brace of metal backed, magnet packed, conventional drivers. The crossover between the panel and the bass box happens at 340Hz, which is usefully out of the area of the audio band where the ear is most sensitive. The bass unit itself is actively powered, via a 24-bit DSP crossover. Output power is said to be 200W, and the company claims a sensitivity of 91dB. I'd say this is realistic; for part of the listening I used a tube power amp of 17W and it showed no signs of stress.

Sound quality

The experience of listening to a top loudspeaker such as this is, in some ways, oddly underwhelming. The

sound is very special alright, and satisfies across a whole number of levels. But it's only when you go back to practically *any* other loudspeaker ever made that you realise just how uniquely talented it actually is!

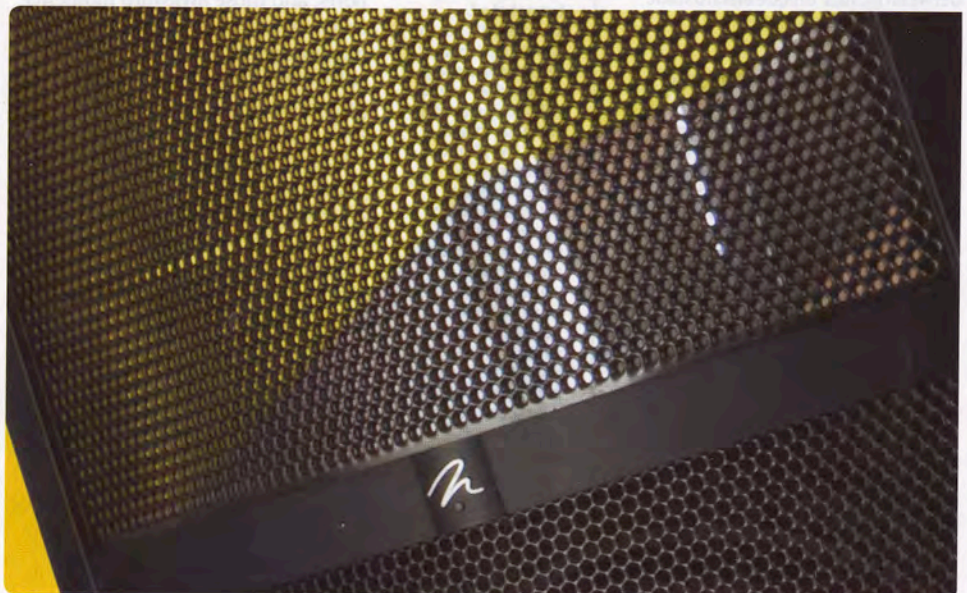
Correctly set up, the Montis is, essentially devoid of *any* significant sonic flaw. That means that, as soon as you put a piece of music on, it's the music you start listening to, and not the speaker. This makes for a very relaxing, enjoyable, involving experience. Unlike conventional speakers – such as B&W's 801, for example – it's not something that puts a rocket up you the second the needle hits the groove. It's not going to give you a visceral thrill – the sonic equivalent of being strapped onto the

The Montis makes so many conventional speakers sound fake, flawed and flatulent...

back of a missile and fired. Rather, the charms of the Montis are subtler.

Cue up the breezy jazz pop strains of Corduroy's *10:28 from Shibuya*, and some other high end speakers I could name would dazzle you with their sparkling treble, subterranean bass, and sheer physical impact. But you don't get that with the Montis, rather best think of it as an open, outstretched hand, ushering you into the mix. Because it's so neutral, it presents an open window through which you fascinatedly peer.

It does go very loud, it's just that it doesn't sound like it because there's so little stress and strain. Instead a spin of the volume knob clockwise



Q&A

Devin Zell

Product manager, MartinLogan



DP: Why has MartinLogan based its business around electrostatic speakers?

DZ: Electrostatic speakers are captivating. They are capable of an extraordinary performance with compelling clarity and pin-point three-dimensional 'sound staging'.

What benefits, and drawbacks, do electrostatic panels have?

Electrostatic panels are ideal for reproducing sounds above 200 Hz. They offer clarity and resolution, ideal dispersion characteristics to minimise room interactions, and they are capable of sounding almost effortless when reproducing complex musical passages. However, both the size and the power requirements of deep bass frequencies are best served by traditional cone woofers. As a result and with few exceptions, every MartinLogan electrostatic speaker is a hybrid design – an electrostatic transducer matched with a cone woofer.

What frequency does the panel crossover to the bass unit, and why was this chosen?

The Montis crossover is positioned at 340 Hertz. This frequency was chosen because it offered seamless blending between Montis' unique electrostatic panel and 10-inch woofer.

How far from the wall would you suggest the Montis is placed?

At minimum, two to three feet from the wall behind the speaker and the same for the side walls. MartinLogan electrostatics are true dipoles. The out-of-phase back wave is an integral part of creating the three-dimensional sound stage for which our speakers are known – and for ideal performance you want the back wave to be delayed a bit. If placed less than two feet from the wall behind the speaker, the back wave will arrive too quickly. Too close to a side wall the reflection from this wall will bounce back to the listener, arriving too quickly, so some distance is required so that the controlled dispersion can minimise this reflection.



SETTING UP

THE MONTIS IS UNUSUAL IN OFFERING 10dB of bass trim at under 100Hz, via a rear panel mounted knob. This is a brilliant feature, and makes tuning the speakers to your room easier than your average £500 floorstander in respect of the lower bass. Upper bass of course can only be balanced by experimenting with the distance between the speaker and the rear wall. Being a true dipole (radiating sound all around) this isn't just important for balancing the bass, but is mission-critical for the overall imaging and soundstaging. In my listening room, the Montis worked surprisingly close to a back wall, better than most other electrostatic designs I have tried.

The issue of toe-in is also vital. I found I needed about 6 degrees in my room; careful adjustment is important as the speakers suddenly seem to snap into focus, giving a wonderfully solid and bold central image when they're angled correctly. When not toed-in properly, they simply give a big, Phil Spector-like 'wall of sound' which is pleasing but not at all accurate. It's fair to say that, in smaller UK-sized listening rooms when you're listening just a little closer up than is ideal, the Montis is rather more directional than you'd expect from a panel speaker – there's definitely a sweet spot.

There's also the issue of height adjustment; the speakers have adjustable rear feet, and experimenting with these yields great rewards, especially in the treble, which opens up when the height is just right. Properly fettled, the music pours out into the room in a totally natural way.

IN SIGHT



- 1 light, rigid alloy frame holds electrostatic panel
- 2 electrostatic panel takes care of treble and midband
- 3 bass level control gives 10dB of trim at 100Hz via DSP
- 4 single wire louspeaker binding posts
- 5 250mm moving coil bass driver, actively powered

simply brings you further into the recording, moving you closer up. Bass isn't digitally retouched, the midband doesn't get a makeover and the treble is left untainted by the clanging of a metal dome creaking in and out at high speed. Instead, it's like all the huffing and puffing of a box loudspeaker has been removed, leaving a pristine wall of sound in its place...

With Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, it renders the sound of a real orchestra inside a real concert hall, making the music wonderfully immersive and expansive yet delicate and detailed, too. Move back to a box speaker, and your brain instantly hones in on the chuffing of its bass ports, and those awkward moments across the midband as the crossovers play merry hell with phase coherence. The Montis makes so many conventional speakers sound fake, flawed and flatulent.

It's only when you play loud, raucous rock music that the Montis discreetly announces its presence. Yes, you still get that walk-around soundstaging – something that gives the lie to the claim that anyone really needs a centre and/or rear speaker(s) to get surround. Yes, you still get that lovely, seamless wash of sound from bottom to top, without the sound of a single sonic contortion from the drive units. But no, you don't quite get the slap round the chops that a big pair of Vivids, B&Ws or Tannoys would deliver. The opening bars of The Smiths' *Headmaster Ritual* tell the story

of a lovely, couth, classy speaker that just can't quite rock out with the best of them. Still, as panel speakers go, it's a revelation!

Conclusion

The beauty of the MartinLogan Montis is its absence of vice. Contrary to what some ageing punk rockers might believe, that doesn't make it boring – the true and upstanding performance, unsullied by deviant behaviour of its mechanical bits, means you simply get closer to the music. No bad thing, surely?

If you're looking for a 'character speaker' then this isn't it. If you want a big box to make everything sound loud and proud, larger than life and better than the original recording, then move on. Instead, the Montis gives an altogether more rarefied pleasure, the satisfaction of having something that takes you right into the recording, in all its beauty. ●

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OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Open, even, musical sound; excellent textuality; superb height and scale; great detail and finesse
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks visceral impact of big boxes; needs careful set-up
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Beautiful high end loudspeaker with a charmingly special sound
- EASE OF DRIVE**
★★★★★

OVERALL

