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MAGICO'S NEW S5

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Magico S5 loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom

What happens to an *enfant terrible* when they grow up? Do they continue to be outspoken or rest on glories past? This is the dilemma Magico has faced, and overcome brilliantly, with the S5. The company has already shown what it can do, time and again, with products like the Q1 and Q5, producing models that redefine what was thought possible from a loudspeaker. The S5 is a mark of increasing maturity, and depth of understanding about the wider loudspeaker market.

The Q series shows what Magico can do without a safety net. Unconstrained by the limitations of price at any given point, the Q models are exercises in loudspeaker engineering excellence. Which is why a two-way standmount loudspeaker ends up costing as much as the Q1. Not to denigrate the design process that came up with the Q-series one iota, but when you start introducing the constraint of building down to a price – even when that price is far removed from what might constitute ‘budget’ – you quickly separate the truly innovative designers from those who simply throw money at a project. The S5 strongly points to the former.

Not that there's much sign of being built down to a price. Replacing the V3, the S5 loses the stacked birch ply cabinet of its predecessor, but goes without the elaborate alloy-Meccano skeleton of the Qs. Instead, it sports heavily braced half-inch thick aluminium extrusions throughout, in more of a curve than a boat-back; making for a ‘none more dead’ cabinet and sore knuckles if you try rapping it. A radical departure for Magico, the S5 marks the beginning of the end of the Henry Ford school of colour choice. The S5 doesn't just come in black; but gloss and even matt colours as standard, as well as any automotive high-gloss you can think of for a premium. However, I somehow doubt


there will be many orders for these loudspeakers in British Leyland Harvest Gold. It even comes with (Shock! Horror!) a protective grille.

The single-wired, sealed box loudspeaker is a three way design, all using Magico-spec drive units; a 25mm beryllium dome tweeter, the 150mm Nano-Tec midrange unit derived from the Q series and a pair of 250mm hybrid Nano-Tec bass units. These last differ from the more exotic units seen in the flagship range, by virtue of a separate dust cap in place of a one-piece cone. In theory, the inclusion of a dust cap should cause some phase cancellation directly in front of the cone compared with the one-piece drivers, but if this is the case it is negligible in the extreme.

With a pair of 250mm bass drivers and a whole loudspeaker system capable of coping with 1.2kW, Magico claims it's possible to hit a clean 118dB in room, and reach down to an impressive 22Hz. That's not just ‘impressive’ in a headbanger sense (although 22Hz does mean that dropped D tuning so beloved by metal guitarists is so far within the loudspeaker's remit, you get to hear everything); it means if suitably partnered, it has a dynamic range that comes closer to both the source material recorded and the real-world force of the instruments making that recording. That means revisiting old, well-trodden favourites like the Kleiber/Beethoven 5th Symphony anew, being shocked once again at the sheer energy of that first movement everyone knows so well. It's possibly the most well known sequence of notes in music, and yet what everyone forgets when playing it through a stereo system is it's actually the sound of an orchestra being flung at you, loud, forcefully and insistently. You get that with the S5. And as a result, music played through these speakers has a stunning capacity; not only in the superlative sense, but in the deer in the headlights manner. Music here – if you hook these babies to something with the guts to let them fly – is all about guts and passion and drama. You engage with the music on a very deep, caveman level, and that applies just as much to something like Paul Simon's *Graceland* as it does to sounds red in tooth and claw.

We have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to music today. An impoverished student with a laptop and an internet connection is capable of hearing in an evening more music than Cosimo de' Medici could have heard in a year. But with that wondrous accessibility comes complacency, and the S5 short-circuits that complacency. The S5 reminds us that music is not a disposable thing, but something to be engaged by and cherished. Play dinner jazz through these and dinner is spoiled and forgotten as you muse over the merits of Wes Montgomery's octave-laced solos. Play Billie Holliday singing ‘Gloomy Sunday’ and... well, just don't leave any sleeping pills lying round.

Describing the Magico's overall performance is fairly easy. It doesn't put a foot wrong. It has a taut, yet powerful and deep bass, an exceptionally fluid and open midrange and an extended, airy treble with absolutely no sense of sharpness or ringing. You could roll out practically every recording in your collection and the S5 will give it its best shot. The S5 is no magic wand; thin, weedy and compressed sounds will end up thin, weedy and compressed. ▶



"The S5 reminds us that music is not a disposable thing, but something to be engaged by and cherished. Play dinner jazz through these and dinner is spoiled and forgotten as you muse over the merits of Wes Montgomery's octave-laced solos."

MAGICO

▶ But the sound is not unlistenable, unless the studio engineer irretrievably punished the music. In this respect, the S5 even outperforms its bigger brothers, which don't take prisoners in the loudness war. By pulling back from the absolute definition of the Q models, the S5 can make something like Oasis still playable (whether you still want to play Oasis today is another matter entirely). Best of all though is that bass. It underpins and grounds the music in the real world and when you play something like 'Surfin' from *Below The Bassline* by Ernest Ranglin, you begin to realise just how important really gutsy bottom end is. This plays that beautiful, reggae bass like it was in the room, with all the rhythm and energy it needs to sound live and exciting.

The bass is worthy of an observation. It needs control. The S5 may have a sensitivity rated at 89dB and be a relatively stable four-ohm load, but that doesn't tell the whole story. Those 250mm bass drivers go long, deep and powerfully so, and to make them give of their all takes a lot of driving force. The loudspeakers need a big room and they like to be driven hard (I'm working on cashing in on the whole *50 Shades of Grey* thing). I'd recommend a few hundred watts, good current delivery and something fast sounding; this is perhaps why Magico often ends up being used with DarTZeel, Spectral and VTL.

Once that box is ticked, the performance is outstanding. It sort of deals with the critical questions asked of an audio reviewer by highlighting the shortcomings of other devices; not in a 'loudspeaker in search of an amplifier' way, more in a 'oh, that's what it should sound like' manner. Like many



UK reviewers, when it comes to faintly nebulous, hard-to-pin down terms, I'm less attuned to microdynamics than my American counterparts, but the S5 is rather like taking an Open University course in 'Understanding Microdynamics'. It shows you precisely what the term means, and why those fine changes within the dynamic whole are so important. It's not the springs across the bottom of the snare, it's the squeak of the fixtures holding that snare spring in place, normally lost in the mix, which the S5 is so adept at that makes all the difference.

This isn't a panacea, because there is no panacea. There will be those who found their loudspeaker happy place years ago and have no intention of leaving it. There will also be those who demand something different from their loudspeakers than Magico will ever offer. And there are those who seem to have an ideological connection with rival brands. But there will also be a lot of swearing going on, as people come to terms with a loudspeaker that fells some of the real giants in audio, at its price and way, way beyond.

In the introduction to this review, I mentioned that I consider the S5 to be an expression of Magico's maturity as a high-end loudspeaker builder. Here's why. Products like the Q-series are uncompromisingly excellent, and as a consequence demand an equally uncompromised level of understanding on the part of the listener. While those who simply want a completely honest musical transducer will find the Magico Q concept to be the best loudspeaker range they have ever heard, if you want your music gently warmed up, cooled down, brightened, heightened or smoothed over, then you'll end up buying pretty much any loudspeaker apart from a Magico. The S5 is the exception, and as such it's the transition or the gateway into that extreme honesty that Magico brings to audio.

Many of us have unknowingly cut our audiophile teeth on products that make music sound different than it is in reality, like the LS3/5a's 'fuller than the real thing' piano sound in the middle register. As a consequence, when faced with the bare truth, some find it a touch too bare. They have to unlearn the years of audiophile loudspeakers before they make the jump to the Qs. And that's what the S5 does so well. It has all the Magico traits (exceptional mid-range clarity, wide bandwidth, powerful solidity of a broad-as-the-room image and that snap-focus in on the music), but it also has some of the characteristics of those speakers we were weaned on. So it has the sort of effortless, inviting transition across frequency ranges of a good panel loudspeaker, the big, powerful, solid and deep bass of the best American dynamic boxes, and that flyaway, clean and insightful treble found in the most popular Euromasters (oddly, this identifies itself by



the comments of those who hear the loudspeaker, "it's like such-and-such loudspeakers, but more so"; the fascinating part of this is the diverse range of loudspeakers the S5 ends up sounding like). In the process of sounding like a better version of what you currently use, the S5 gives us a sweet taste of what can be on offer if we make the grade and the jump upwards. There's no urgent drive to go Q; the S5 is an end in itself, not simply a means to a higher end. And in many cases, I can see people being more comfortable with the S5 than its bigger brothers, because the sound is less uncompromising. But I imagine there won't be many people who could go back from Magico, once they really get under your skin.

We audiophiles can be a contrary bunch, at times. We sometimes set our sights on buying a less-good flagship instead of a product like the S5, simply because it's not the top of the range. We want the best, and if that is financially unattainable, the next one down the range is sometimes viewed as a compromise too far. This is deeply flawed thinking; to many audio companies, the S5 would represent design without compromise. In fact, to many audio companies, the S5 would be so uncompromising a project that it would never leave the prototype stage. Instead think of it this way; the S5 is that £100,000 full-range behemoth loudspeaker you always dreamed of in the 1980s, just made smaller, cheaper, more compatible (both with amplifiers and with modern life)... and better.

One of the great things about audio in the second decade of the 21st Century is all bets are off. In the last few years, we have seen amps the size of a pizza box outperform a floor full of electronics and clever, cheap little DACs take down many a top-class digital player. And we've also seen a crop of loudspeakers priced from around £20k to £35k capable of confidently outperforming every 20th Century loudspeaker known to man, irrespective of cost. The Magico S5 easily joins and – thanks to that near 20Hz bass

performance – likely tops that illustrious list. The only ugly truth about its performance is if you are clinging on to a pair of nine-foot-tall, cost as much as a house loudspeaker designs from the 1980s or 1990s, they just met their match. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Driver Complement: 1x 25mm MB30 beryllium dome tweeter; 1x 150mm M380 Nano-Tec cone midrange; 2x 250mm hybrid Nano-Tec cone bass

Sensitivity: 89dB

Impedance: four ohms

Frequency Response: 22Hz-50kHz

Recommended power: 50-1200W

Dimensions (WxHxD): 38x122x36cm

Weight: 86kg

Price: £30,000-33,000 per pair (depending on finish)

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