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58 MARTINLOGAN FRESCO I/DYNAMO SYSTEM → £5,000 Approx  
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MartinLogan's Fresco i speakers deliver style and stand-  
or wall-mount flexibility – without sonic compromise



# From the shadow of electrostatics

Premium audio brand MartinLogan unveils a wall-mountable speaker system aimed at AV nuts. **Alvin Gold** applauds in our exclusive review



Watching the loudspeaker industry struggling to cope with the demands of flatscreen television displays has been an unedifying sport. Yet this is outclassed by the even bigger compromises made by the manufacturers of the sets themselves, who seem to delight in throwing the baby out with the bath water by sacrificing any pretence of sound quality in the pursuit of ever thinner and smaller form factors. And don't even get me started on the unholy fiasco the industry has made of civilizing the subwoofer...

Well, here's a system designed to match the packaging advantages of a sub/sat array – and it's strikingly successful in the way it does so. Interestingly, it comes from MartinLogan, a loudspeaker manufacturer with an established track record of excellence, which it is patently not about to sacrifice on the altar of diminutive packaging.

So let's get it on record straightaway: as a sub/sat system (albeit one larger than the designation might normally infer), this Fresco i/Dynamo 5.1 system is in a class of its own. It has a tonal balance that's light and open, perhaps a little too forward if I was pushed, but undeniably detailed and analytical, with negligible levels of obvious colouration.

As a 5.1 system, MartinLogan's Fresco i/Dynamo is particularly impressive with the often unnoticed off-stage sounds – the subtle sounds

of water lapping in *Swimming Pool* for example, and the way that the different surroundings modulate speech dialogue quality in the same film.

As so often, it is the more subtle and less in-your-face audio events where this system really struts its stuff, though to its credit it also packs real power in the action scenes of Ridley Scott's sonically excellent *Black Hawk Down*. I suspect you could run out of grunt when playing back this film too enthusiastically, but **the subtly nuanced stuff is, well, subtle and nuanced.**

Speech quality is always crisp, intelligible and genuinely lifelike – someone has done some serious listening while developing this model – and the music and special effects that flesh out most soundtracks are well-defined and colourful, with just a hint of aggression at times.

The Fresco i, the all-purpose satellite speaker for this system, is somewhat of a departure for MartinLogan, which has reworked its favoured electrostatic flatpanel technology for a multichannel audience. Given its style and positioning flexibility, it's ideal for those who want to use their speakers with flatpanel monitors, but without the usual sonic tradeoffs.

The system reviewed here includes five identical satellite speakers (centre, front left/right, and rear left/right, though more could be added).

To augment the bass and create a full 5.1 speaker system, I added

## AV/CV

**Product:** Technically innovative, elegant sounding package, choice of subwoofer is left to user

**Positioning:** Part of MartinLogan's Design range, replacing the older Fresco speaker

**Peers:** Bowers & Wilkins Flat Panel Monitor (FPM) system

MartinLogan's Dynamo subwoofer. Any sub may be chosen from MartinLogan's range and the Dynamo is the smallest and most affordable, yet it is remarkably capable and its compact dimensions suit the Fresco i's stylish attributes down to the ground. A bigger subwoofer (this one consumes little more than one cubic foot of space) will give a bigger bang, but unless treated sympathetically it will be at the expense of musical integrity, control and homogeneity. As small subs go though, the Dynamo is rather exceptional. The team responsible for the voicing seem to share the same kind of sensibilities as those responsible for the brand's traditional electrostatics.

I'd even be tempted to add another: more than one sub will enhance the evenness of the low-frequency output in larger rooms, and allow the system to play louder.

## Mounting excitement

The satellites are remarkably flexible in design. They can be installed on- or off-wall with an electronic equalization switch that can be set as required – with the speakers in vertical and horizontal orientations. They can also be placed on optional floor stands (see picture, left), smaller shelf-stands or specialised, multipivot on-wall brackets.

Boiled down to its basics, the essential idea is that the Fresco i is a three-way hybrid panel/moving coil loudspeaker. It's fitted with two small >





→ Specifications

*Fresco i satellite*

**Drive units:** 2 x 102mm rigid aluminium cone, long-throw units; 1 x ATF (Advanced Thin Film) midrange driver; 1 x ATF tweeter  
**Frequency response:** 75Hz – 20kHz +/-3dB  
**Sensitivity:** 90dB/W/m  
**Power handling:** 150W RMS  
**Dimensions:** 610(h) x 127(d) x 210(w)mm without mounting bracket  
**Weight:** 7.3kg  
**Finish:** Black (various other finishes available)

*Dynamo subwoofer*

**Drive unit:** 10in aluminium cone  
**Frequency response:** 20 – 120Hz +/-3dB via LFE input  
**Variable low pass filter:** 30 – 80Hz  
**High pass filter:** 70Hz  
**Phase:** 0, 90, 180 degrees  
**Amplifier:** 200Watts RMS  
**Dimensions:** 353(h) x 297(w) x 320(d)mm  
**Weight:** 12.9kg  
**Finish:** black

internal moving coil bass/mid drivers with alloy cones, a smaller ATF midrange driver and a still smaller ATF panel which is dedicated to the treble. ATF stands for Advanced Thin Film, and refers to an ultra-thin, low-mass flatpanel diaphragm of a synthetic material called Kaladex, with an etched aluminium coil. The coil carries the audio signal, which interacts with a magnetic field established by rows of very high strength Neodymium magnets each side of the diaphragm. This causes the latter to move, tracing out the music waveform. The magnet field strength is such that there is no need to connect the speakers to mains power, as in a true electrostatic. This technology is, then, best described as a close cousin of the electrostatic.

Another element of the Fresco i is the large mounting plate that can be used to attach each speaker to a wall, and which, thanks to an included hinge, can be angled towards the listener – a procedure well

This is not the easiest of systems to setup, but a little more care and attention at the install stage will give a more exacting, musically-focused result, one that is as suitable for music as it is for film soundtracks.

**The audio files**

MartinLogan has a powerful reputation in the audiophile community, and with this home cinema package, it clearly wanted to produce a system that, as far as could be contrived, is a quality match for its high-end stereo products. And this is exactly what the US brand has achieved. This is no collection of Bose-like singing matchboxes, but an altogether more serious audio proposition. The visual effect and the finish of the high-impact polypropylene enclosures is strikingly attractive, and, in my opinion, looks right in a way that eludes much of the competition.

**The Fresco i is a remarkable speaker**, delivering an exceptional level of flexibility for those who wish to create a stylish system for AV use with the option of wall-mounting, but without compromising sound quality. In tandem with the little Dynamo, the result is articulate for a speaker system of its type, as capable with music as it is with movies. Style without compromise – flatscreen TV owners with discerning ears should form an orderly queue! ●

**Dynamite:**

We created a 5.1 system by adding MartinLogan's Dynamo subwoofer



documented in the user manual. This is how MartinLogan expects most Fresco i buyers to use the speakers, although, when attached to the optional floorstanding columns (as they were tested here) performance shouldn't suffer.



**HCC VERDICT**

MartinLogan Fresco i system/  
 Dynamo sub  
 £5,000 Approx

**Highs:** Articulate; detailed sound; superb build quality  
**Lows:** Needs time and care to setup properly; moderate bass depth using Dynamo sub

**Performance:** 1 2 3 4 5

**Design:** 1 2 3 4 5

**Features:** 1 2 3 4 5

**Overall:** 1 2 3 4 5