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MartinLogan Montis loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom

MartinLogan has a special place in the heart of audiophile enthusiasts. Despite many on the English audio scene feeling that the UK 'owns' electrostatics through the medium of Quad, MartinLogan sells well here. And the Montis is the latest iteration of MartinLogan's hybrid approach, which combines an active dynamic bass unit with an electrostatic mid-top panel.

The Montis is at the base camp below the Summit X. The two share more in common than you might expect, with both using the same electrostatic panel. The principal difference in fact is the use of two bass drivers in the Summit X and one bass unit in the Montis. That makes the Montis notionally similar to the Spire loudspeaker it replaces. However, the Montis shows how much loudspeaker technology can move forward in a few short years.

The key to the Montis' bass is the combination of 250mm long-throw aluminium woofer in a sealed cabinet, a 200W power amplifier, and – perhaps most significantly – a move away from analogue filtering to DSP network control, which takes on equalisation, limiting, and filtration. The net result makes the Montis slightly easier to install (it means just one level control on the rear panel) and helps integrate that bass unit with the 112cm tall CLS (curvilinear line source) panel. MartinLogan has several proprietary technologies attached to the panel and the cabinet, including the XStat panel and the AirFrame it's attached to, the MicroPerf stators, and the Vojtko filtering and 24-bit DSP. Naturally, it bristles with custom-wound audio transformers, air-core coils, and high-grade polypropylene capacitors. However, these elaborate technologies are deceptively simple to use, leaving owners with nothing more complex than one 100Hz dial (with a $\pm 20\text{dB}$ scale), the choice of spikes or feet, and speaker placement to play with. In other words, the Montis is the loudspeaker equivalent of a swan; graceful on the surface, but there's a lot of work going on underneath.

The combination of the slim, curved, and transparent stator panel resting on a matching bass, er, base, gives the loudspeaker a design refinement that is rare among loudspeakers. This applies to most MartinLogans, but is worth restating periodically; unlike many loudspeakers that hark back to a time of marquetry or reflect a brutalist school of minimalism, the Montis is one of the few loudspeakers that could be considered attractive by non-audiophiles. It's the view-through panels; they give the speaker a user-friendly demeanour. According to the manual, Montis is comfortable with any amp from 20-500W, but I'd err on the side of power to drive these speakers the way they'd like to be ridden.

The manual is exceptionally good at describing both the raw and fine tuned installation, and is closer to 'a good read' than most. It describes the way to position your speakers, how to fine-tune that positioning (and in particular, what to listen for when fine-tuning), room acoustics, troubleshooting, a history of electrostatics, and more. Some of these aspects relate specifically to





▶ MartinLogan speakers or electrostatics, but a lot is solid, universally-applicable audiophile gold for the wannabe loudspeaker installer.

The loudspeakers benefit from taking the installation seriously, so it's worth taking time over. The speakers should begin with the centre of the front of the panels roughly 60cm from the rear and side walls respectively, and the listener seated at least as far from the speakers as the distance between the speaker, but not more than twice the distance between the speakers (and not close to the rear wall). You should then adjust toe-in using a torch from the listening chair, and then adjust the speaker position to get the best bass response, stage width, and imaging. The manual suggests a trial-and-error method for final placement which is almost perfect (it misses out on two things in my opinion; that electrostatics frequently need to settle after movement, and to mark out the speaker position with low-tack masking tape at the start of the fine-tune process, for millimetre-accurate adjustment and in case it all goes wrong and you need to re-start the process). In terms of partnering equipment, the Montis is extremely unfussy. It respects great quality audio, but does not demand it, and does not throw a sonic hissy fit if it isn't partnered with the world's best sources. The loudspeaker itself is fairly sensitive and capable of playing loud, and not simply 'loud for an electrostatic'. It works best with some power behind it, and it doesn't need the gentle touch of Class A to sound good.

It was the last week of Wimbledon when I wrote the first draft of this, and it occurred to me that Montis is all about the inner game of audio. It taps deep into the audiophile DNA, making a sound that is as captivating as it is beautiful. This is a speaker for people who cry at operas, but it's also for people who play air guitar to ZZ Top, and those who compose poignant haiku in their heads while solving grand-master grades. If you don't have some choral music in your collection, the Montis will gently, but firmly, direct you in the direction of Thomas Tallis, and in particular the Tallis Scholars singing Spem in Alium [Gimell CD]. The precision and purity of the voices, coupled with the sense of space in recreating the Merton College chapel in Oxford, gives a sense of religious passion so profound that it makes me want to burn some witches.

I then played 'Son of a Preacher Man' from Dusty Springfield's immortal *Dusty in Memphis* album [Philips CD], and she was singing for me, just for me. And, in the manner of all good 1960s albums, she's there front and centre, singing into a sweet tube mic with an equally sweet tube mic amp behind that, the backing vocals are panned left, the horn section and percussion panned right, but not sharp left or right. It just sounds wonderful. ▶

"The Montis will gently, but firmly, direct you in the direction of Thomas Tallis... The precision and purity of the voices, coupled with the sense of space in recreating the Merton College chapel in Oxford, gives a sense of religious passion so profound that it makes me want to burn some witches."

▶ If all this might make you think of something soft, rolled off, and incapable of playing rock, guess again. Out came 'IM the Supervisor' from the Infected Mushroom album of the same name [BNE, CD] and gave it some throttle. And it's perhaps there that makes the Montis shine; no careful handling, just speed, accuracy, and level. If you want to get really nasty about this, I even played 'Shake Yer Dix' by Peaches from her really rather unmentionably-named album and it rocked out with its... well, you know.

It would be remiss of any reviewer of hybrid loudspeakers not to discuss the integration between dynamic bass and stator mid-top. But it's a non-issue; the integration simply happens. The bass flows into the midrange and vice versa as if you are listening to one drive unit, not two different technologies. In fairness to MartinLogan, the company nailed this some time ago, especially with the Summit X, but this brings that fluidity across the bandwidth to the Montis level, and if you know how difficult that is, you also know how much respect it deserves. There wasn't a single plot hole here; the bass is fast enough to keep pace with the panel and when correctly dialled for the room, the sound is seamless.

This turns the Montis into a kind of gateway for dynamic loudspeaker users. The pace and solidity of the Montis sound thanks to that bass driver will find favour with those weaned on box speakers, and they will be won over by the expansiveness of the electrostatic panel, possibly for years to come. The pithy way of summing this up; you come for the bass line, but you stay for the vocals.

In a way, the Montis is a more European-friendly loudspeaker than the Summit X. This may be a sweeping generalisation of truly epic proportions, but the combination of room size, room construction, and an acceptance of the kind of loudspeakers that work well in such rooms, means audiophile bass is something to be tamed here, and delighted in 'across the pond'. The Summit X, with its greater bottom end authority, can potentially over-drive the bass in our typically smaller, solid-walled rooms, while the Montis is the more comfortable match. This is, in fact, more a function of installation rather than criticism per se – correctly set, the Summit X has even greater bass control along with bass depth. However, it is a sad indictment of many systems (especially those that are one or two users away from a professional installation) that the quality of set-up is 'more honoured in the breach than in the observance'. While good installation is important in any system, it is critically important in electrostatics and the balancing of a bass unit to the stator panel. That there is slightly less to get wrong with the Montis (from a European perspective) should make it a better sounding loudspeaker in a wider number of homes. Very highly recommended. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, two-driver, floorstanding speaker with electrostatic panel and active, DSP-driven sub-bass enclosure.

Driver complement: One 1118 × 287mm electrostatic transducer; one 254mm cast basket, high excursion, aluminum cone with extended throw drive assembly, non-resonance asymmetrical chamber format.

Crossover frequency: 340Hz

Frequency response: 29Hz – 23kHz (±3dB)

Impedance: 4 Ohms. 0.52 at 20kHz

Sensitivity: 91dB/W/m

Amplifier power: 200W/ch (4 ohms)

Inputs: One pair custom multiway connectors

Dimensions (HxWxD): 1505 × 322 × 457mm

Weight: 26.3 kg/each

Finish: Black Alloy with Black Ash, Dark Cherry, or Zebrawood as standard. High Gloss finish also available

Price: £9,800/pair standard finish, £12,900/pair high gloss finish

Manufactured by: MartinLogan

URL: www.martinlogan.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

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