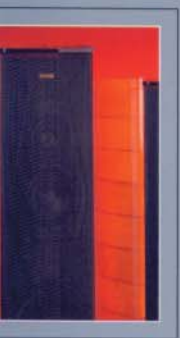


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MartinLogan Summit

Hybrid electrostatic technology scales new heights with MartinLogan's latest creation

PRICE: £8,498 per pair CONTACT: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 @ www.martinlogan.com

We first saw and, of course, heard the new MartinLogan Summit at last January's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. It was demonstrated in prototype form behind closed doors, and proved to be one of the highlights of the show. In this case, seeing is very much part of the deal – the Summit replaces the Prodigy and there is a clear family resemblance in their broad groundplans. What you can't see without having the two side by side is that the Summit is much smaller than the Prodigy. It has much sharper lines overall, the base section, which houses the moving coil drivers, is much more compact, and the electrostatic panel has a much thinner surround.

Of course, size by itself means very little, and merely calling one model a replacement for another could be just a form of words. But the Summit is not only physically smaller at 32x150x52cm (the Prodigy stood at 42x180x71cm, WxHxD), it is more sensitive at 92dB/watt/metre and has a wider frequency response, extending down to 24Hz for -3dB (the Prodigy made it down to 28Hz).

There are still ways in which this comparison could conceal the real situation, but it turns out that the two inhabit the same playing field. Even the panel crossover frequency, which isn't always quoted consistently in MartinLogan's literature, and which is clearly relevant, turns out to be the same for both, at 270Hz. So this is a speaker that should offer more than the Prodigy in a smaller, better looking and more easily accommodated package, and which incidentally costs considerably less – the Prodigy cost £11,998 per pair in the last price list in which it appeared (in 2004), while the Summit is just £8,498 per pair.

But as far as we understand, MartinLogan has not suddenly decided to cut its margins to the bone. What has happened is a full redesign that involves the implementation of new technology in an attempt to devise a more realistic proposition for its market both in price and practicality. The brief for the Summit was clearly very challenging, but the brief also extends to superior integration of the moving coil and electrostatic drivers.

Much of the development work has been carried out on the electrostatic panel, and the new design is a radical, though evolutionary improvement. The panel still features the curved profile that MartinLogan has always used, giving a vertically oriented cheese-wedge shaped dispersion pattern in the forward plane, and a converging pattern to the rear, which makes it less of a 'sweet

spot' design and easier to integrate into room acoustics. But the way the panel is terminated is different with the Summit.

The edges are encapsulated into an insulated liner around the perimeter, and embedded in the frame, which has changed from a thick wooden door-like style to extremely thin and very stiff aluminium. The top and bottom sections are solid billets of milled aluminium, drilled out to take tensioning truss rods that run through the long vertical sides and are tightened to give a stiffness said to approach concrete. A combination of the new termination and the frame, and changes to the 'Xstat' diaphragm technology means that the effective radiating area of a panel is increased by a factor of about two compared to previous designs.

“With the new styling, and clearly improved value for money, the Summit is a stunner.”

The other major change is to the bass section, which operates more like a subwoofer than a passive bass section. There are two proprietary 25cm bass drivers, one forward facing and one base-vented, driven by well endowed 200-watt power amplifiers with massive toroidal transformers at their core. Like most subwoofers, active equalisation is used to generate the required output response, from a system that is designed to minimise distortion and maximise control, while minimising the use of acoustic resonances (ports, resonant cavities and so on).

SOUND QUALITY

Even the prototype pair in Las Vegas, heard under less than ideal conditions, was a revelation. And this held true for the production pair that we eventually received for our test. As always with electrostatics, however, the first task is to fine tune them to the listening room, which is achieved in the Summit's case by making separate adjustments using rear panel controls, one centred on 25Hz, and the other on 50Hz, both with a +/-10dB adjustment range. Out of the box, the default settings in our test room were excessively warm and woolly, but careful adjustment quickly led to a response shape in which the bass appeared to belong to the mid and treble in a seamless and consistent manner. But the Summit is unforgiving in one respect: it sounds more coloured and doesn't image properly if it is

cramped at the rear. Allow a clear couple of metres space behind the panels if you can, and experiment as small changes can have a dramatic influence on the sound.

MartinLogan is correct in its assertion that the bass integrates better with the mid and treble. The bass certainly extends well, but it has a tauter, drier feel than we recall of the Prodigy, more in keeping with the electrostatic panel. This improving trend is one that has been noted in previous years, but the step up this time is more dramatic. It could even be described as a quantum leap, and the overall result is much more homogenous and harder to distinguish from the adjoining midband.

The electrostatic element of the speaker has also been improved, though not quite out of all recognition. There is a quality to

MartinLogan speakers that is not completely neutral, as well as a defined and recognisable coloration that the best moving coil speakers manage to more or less sidestep. Transparency, however, remains a key strength of the electrostatic design. Notwithstanding the colorations, which in any case are mild, the Summit offers supreme clarity. It appears to respond, and to stop, quicker on the whole, which is perhaps the reason why small residual colorations are disproportionately audible.

And herein lies the Summit's greatest strength, which was identifiable time and time again with music from most genres – even studio-based rock and electronic material worked well though the Summits. But as always it was acoustic music using recognisable instruments in real-life acoustics that sounded the most breathtakingly 'real'. The Summit has a percussive quality with plucked or pizzicato strings and piano that was not previously part of their repertoire, and solo voice and choral ensembles alike have an unusual radiance and purity.

Despite the coloration artefacts previously identified, which are largely associated with the upper bass and midband, and which are clearly energy storage effects, the Summit has a precision, clarity and speed that tells another story altogether – that of a speaker that is unusually responsive to the musical input. With the new styling, and clearly improved value for money, the Summit is a stunner. **HFC**

Alvin Gold