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# High Life

David Price finds Martin Logan's Summit loudspeakers a truly uplifting experience...

I don't think Martin Logan – the man or the company – will be best pleased by me beginning my review of his (their) new Summit loudspeakers with a long preamble about a rival's product, but so be it. I shall start with a paean of praise to the mighty Quad 989 electrostatic.

These vast, swingeing, behemoths are one of the most musical loudspeakers I've yet heard, in their way. They are brilliantly capable, supremely endearing, visually arresting and obviously charismatic. Unfortunately, true to the best traditions of British design (Lotus cars, Norton motorcycles, Millennium Bridges, et al.), the 989 is obviously flawed. Not to put too fine a point on it, it embodies brilliant thinking yet displays rank amateurism too.

Now, I have a feeling that Quad won't be too offended by this, as they are a company peopled by extremely able folk, and – basically – they know. Off the record, in the lobby of the Marco Polo Metropole Hong Kong last year, a certain Quad man admitted to me that, "the mechanical engineering of the 989 is less than ideal"...

In a sense, it's all the more impressive that the 989s sound as good as they do, considering they sway like a hi-fi PR guy in the hospitality lounge of an international airline. Their wobbly wooden frames are not in the 'hewn from granite' category; in fact, if you stand on the base and gently push the speakers to and fro, you'll find that – in the immortal words of The Smiths, they "Oscillate Wildly"...

Well, we know that, and they know that (and their replacements, just about to arrive, are dramatically better in this respect). My point is that the 989s, bless them, stand in dramatic counterpoint to the MartinLogan Summits. The latter – a direct price rival – are built a hundred times better, with all the right things in the right places, stunning aesthetics and a sound to match. Are they comprehensively better than the Quads? Not really, but they're certainly superior in some respects, and inferior in others, and in this review I'm going to try to explain the pros and cons for you.

The Summits are, as the name suggests, quite large. At 1500x320x520mm, they're pretty much as tall as the Quad 989s, but they're only about one third as wide. The electrostatic treble and midrange panels are naked and semi-translucent, which makes them look magnificent. Quad, by contrast, cover theirs in cloth – which is terribly English, I suppose, but not exactly sexy. At the base, the MLs feature boxes with two active 10" bass drivers (one forward firing, one downward firing), and on the back are level and crossover frequency controls offering  $\pm 10$ dB trim at 25Hz & 50Hz points.

This, in case you hadn't guessed, makes the Summits 'hybrids'; they are not 'pure' electrostatics like the 989s, and this is for the better, and the worse. Electrostatic panels are great in some ways; fast and with excellent dispersion (vastly better than a



standard speaker with conventional drive units), they're like listening to a Phil Spector-like 'wall of sound'. They're also very smooth and couth at most levels, until they're overdriven when (without the help of protection circuitry), sparks start to fly. They're delicate, and subtle, and so much more consistent than moving coil drivers, all of which seem to want to do their own things, and what the midrange driver wants to do is invariably different to that of the bass unit and/or tweeter...

Trouble is, electrostatic panels have about as much puff as forty Woodbine-per-day asthmatic – they're not exactly barrel-chested, physical, fire breathing monsters. A good, large (i.e. 12") lightweight paper or carbon fibre moving coil bass unit can flap your flares and 'thwack' you in the back (which is why PA stacks use them), but electrostatic panels can't. The reason Martin Logans are hybrids, then, is to give the best of both worlds – the physicality of moving coil bass drivers allied to the delicacy and intricacy and subtlety of an electrostatic.

For sure, this is a great idea in principle, but in practice it's easier said than done. Given that moving coil drivers and electrostatics have such different physical properties, whenever the twain shall meet, they sound like, erm... two different types of drivers in a sort of 'sonic marriage of convenience'.

Let me give you an example – Andy Rourke's bass solo on the (aforementioned) Smiths' live standard, 'Barbarism Begins at Home'. At the top of the bass guitar fretboard, an electrostatic will be fast, lithe, snappy, rhythmically tight and tonally dry. Then, as Rourke goes down the fretboard, and the hybrid starts feeding in its moving coil bass unit(s), things get boomy, plummy and ponderous. Essentially, it can be like listening to two speakers in one. This is the bane of hybrids, and just what you don't want. The test of the MartinLogans, then, is whether those bass drivers integrate seamlessly with their very lovely electrostatic mid and treble panels...

## SOUND QUALITY

My first impressions of the Summits weren't good. It's true to say that they take lots of running in, and have to be powered up all the time. From new, they're thin sounding and rhythmically ponderous, with an overblown and semi-detached bass. Indeed, I spent an inordinate amount of time getting these right, and it took lots of experimentation with cables and positioning. I have

say though, in the end, they came on song with aplomb...

In my room, which is middle-to-large by UK standards, the biggest problem was indeed that bass. It's active, and there are two of the blighters in each speaker; one forward firing 10" cone and one downward firing 10" cone. In my room, it was totally overpowering. I couldn't move the speakers out into the room too far, because of the way my room is shaped, so I had to settle with 20cm from the rear walls, toed in at around 12 degrees. In this position, the treble/mid panels sounded sublime, but I couldn't say the same for the bass units.

I took the bass down as much as I could, using the rear mounted level and crossover frequency controls, but still I had the feeling that the bass was just too dominant, and boomy too. Now, I can appreciate that in other, larger, US-style listening rooms, the speakers a good 80cm (or more)

that a truly high end speaker such as this should require 'physical intervention'... There is obviously an issue here with over prominent bass.

Tweaks done, plus about three weeks of constant use, allowed the Summits to blossom. By the end of the review period, this loudspeaker was consistently turning in heart-stopping performances, and I was no longer missing my reference Quad 989s (now unceremoniously standing in the hall, like two large radiation shields from the outside world).

The key to the Summits is their midband clarity, subtlety and finesse. There is a delicacy from these speakers that not even the Quads possess; it's genuinely pulse-raising stuff. But the trouble is that they're, ahem, rather revealing of their source material. Put some Nick Drake (on CD) on, and they tell you that here's a mediocre remaster of what was once a sublime sounding analogue recording. They're two

"these loudspeakers take you disarmingly close to the recording..."

out from the rear walls, it would integrate far better. Still, I had to work with what I had, and so a bit of serious tuning was required.

First, the bass units got their own runs of Supra Sword loudspeaker cables; this is very upfront, crisp and engaging, and so much more suited to the bass units than the Townshend Isolda DCT I'd been using. This, by the way, went to drive the electrostatic panels, and the combination of the two worked a treat. The Townshend, I think, is super smooth and tonally a little warm (at least, on the warm side of neutral), and it really matched the high frequencies, letting the tight, spry Supra to grapple with the bass drivers.

Second, and rather dramatically, I ended up putting something under the downward firing bass drivers! This may sound a little odd, but it damped the bass in my room better than any amount of level control knob twiddling or speaker repositioning could. A single large wool motorcycle sock (but not the matching Derri boot!) took the level down a tad, and the result was that the active drivers no longer excited my room's resonant mode(s). This may seem 'Heath Robinson', but it was necessary in this case, and actually worked very well. In large rooms, drastic action such as this shouldn't be necessary, but still I have to say that I think it's unfortunate

dimensional, thin, anaemic. Put Kate Bush's 'Moving' on, from 'The Kick Inside', on an original first generation Japanese vinyl pressing, and they're massively expansive and immediate,



like a ten foot Kate is singing right between your eyes.

Put Kraftwerk's 'Minimum Maximum' DVD (16bit, 48kHz PCM audio stream) on, and you're lamenting the mastering, thinking this is weedy and thin; switch to the original 1981 vinyl pressing of 'Computerwelt' and it's massive, heart stopping, breathtaking and

towering before you. Across most of the audio spectrum, the Summits are truly neutral, and – despite an ever so slight treble roll off (to my ears, at least), they're smooth and even and virtually flawless from the high treble to the upper bass.

I'm happy to say that my bass 'tweaks' proved remarkably effective, with the lows integrating with the rest of the frequency spectrum surprisingly well. There's always the sense that, ever so slightly, there's moving coil bass coupled to electrostatic mid, but after all those hours of fettling, it really was so subtle that I simply didn't dwell on it. The other side of this is that there's serious

Patrick Cleasby was spinning LPs *chez moi* (a rare sight, with his digital predilections) and suddenly there was a ring at the door. The neighbours had come complain about the volume; this was simply not physically possible with the Quads, and so never happened. At genuinely high listening levels, the MLs 'perked up' a bit, and became a tad less smooth, but at the same levels the Quads would be 'silent running', their panels' protection circuits having called 'time' early on the proceedings...



### THE DESIGN

The 34kg Summit is a powered electrostatic with active bass drive. The company says that its 'PoweredForce' bass technology results in usable bass extension down to 24Hz [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE] from an enclosure not much larger than a case of wine. A 2x200W (into 4 ohms, claimed) amplifier drives two 10" (254mm) cast basket, high excursion, aluminium coned drivers per speaker. Above this, a rigid, billet and extruded aluminium (1500x320x520mm) 'AirFrame' houses the electrostatic mid and treble panels. MartinLogan claims that its 'XStat transducer' gives unparalleled performance from extremely compact panels which boast a playable area equal to that of a traditional electrostatic transducer nearly twice its size. Each Summit crossover uses precision point-to-point wiring, audiophile-grade polypropylene capacitors and massive air-core coils. The speaker comes in a variety of standard hand rubbed wood and aluminium finishes, and so can be customised to match any décor.

power and punch; this makes the 989s look positively limp-wristed. The beautiful bass playing on 'The Kick Inside', for example, came over in an utterly convincing way; poignant, well articulated, emotionally engaging and absolutely 'all of a piece' with the rest of the recorded acoustic.

Thanks to that wonderful subtlety, the Summits are fantastic with micro dynamics. Few designs at any price come close to the way they convey tiny nuances of playing, minute elements of complex mixes, or simply the power of musical understatement. Piano playing in particular is a joy. They have natural tonality as you'd expect from any fine electrostatic, with sparkling harmonics and fantastic timbral reproduction, yet this takes a back seat to the sheer dynamic expressivity. Hearing crashing piano cadences is something else through these speakers...

Better still, I was able to get massive volumes out of my reference World Audio K5881 valve power amp. Where it would be wheezing and sneezing and straining with the Quads (with all those reluctant electrostatic bass panels to marshal into action), the MartinLogans make high levels a stroll in the park for my poor twenty watt tubular belle. One evening, our very own

Here then, we have an extremely detailed and delicate sounding pair of monitor loudspeakers, with a vast soundstage (given the right source and/or software), wonderful air and space and real hair raising level capability. Perfect, then? Well, no. I still like the sheer scale and physicality of the Quads (they really are big, in the simplest sense; they fill rooms with utter ease, whereas the MLs, with the wrong source, can sound smaller in scale). I also like the Quads' bass; it's tighter and tauter than the MLs (as you'd expect), better integrated with the midband (i.e. almost perfectly so) and tighter and tauter too, at least at sub-100Hz frequencies. By comparison, the MLs sound just a little bit lighter, brighter and less well integrated.

Treble quality from the MLs is better than the Quads; it's smooth, silky and sounds very classy. Still, there's just a smidgen of air and space missing – like that last

'nth' degree of atmosphere has been sucked out. Switch to, say, the Yamaha NS1000M's Beryllium dome and you realise how both ML and Quad electrostatic treble panels don't quite get it completely right.

### CONCLUSION

I've yet to hear the perfect loudspeaker (sure I never will), but MartinLogan's Summit is a brilliantly accomplished product. It certainly isn't flawless (what is!), yet it takes you disarmingly close to the recording with all the electricity and excitement it entails. Bass matching problems aside, it goes truly loud and delivers 'knock out' performances, day in day out. I loved it, and I think it's one of the world's truly great loudspeakers, just make sure you match it properly.

### VERDICT

Outstandingly powerful, detailed and musical performers, but bass makes room matching critical.

### MARTIN LOGAN

SUMMIT £8,498

Absolute Sounds

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### MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The electrostatic panel of the Summit works from 270Hz upward; below this frequency an active woofer / subwoofer combination operates, the woofer facing forward, the subwoofer downward. There was peaking at the crossover frequency, due to forward summing, so integration needs to be improved. The LF assembly provides +6dB or so more output than the electrostatic panel and there's no gain adjustment, so this bass bias - which is excessive - cannot be lessened. Otherwise, the electrostatic panel runs smoothly enough up to 20kHz, in the best tradition of a good electrostatic. The subwoofer gets the speaker flat down to 20Hz, so it too works well.

Impedance of the electrostatic panel plummets above 2kHz, to below 1ohm above 10kHz our analysis shows. This could well draw substantial current on some programme, so a sturdy amplifier is best. Impedance measured 3.8ohms with pink noise. Sensitivity was set by the powered subwoofer, measuring a massive 93dB.

The components of the

Summit work well in themselves, but integration needs to be improved. A potentiometer in front of the subwoofer to reduce output would help. Then the Summit would answer many people's dreams I suspect. NK

