



EQUIPMENT REVIEWS

manufacturer: **MartinLogan**
 model: **Purity Electrostatic Hybrid Loudspeaker**
 category: [Speakers](#)
 review date: **March 2008**
 reviewed by: **Andrew Robinson**
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MartinLogan Purity Electrostatic Hybrid Loudspeaker

Introduction

I could bore you with a brief summary about the whos and whys surrounding the electrostatic loudspeaker manufacturer MartinLogan, but truthfully, if you consider yourself a fan of high-end audio, then the MartinLogan story is among the most well-known in the business. So instead I'll lead with this: I have in my possession the coolest iPod speakers ever dreamed of. There has been a lot of to-do over the mighty MP3 player from Apple, as AV manufacturers clamor to jump aboard the train, manufacturing countless accessories and glorified clock radios in a relentless quest to cash in on the seemingly endless success of the iPod. After a recent visit to my local Apple Store, several high-end companies were displaying products that utilize or feature the iPod, hoping to squeeze an ounce of high fidelity out of the otherwise personal player. Some succeed, but many fail. I have my theories surrounding such failures, but I'm pleased to report that MartinLogan may have cracked it with their latest lifestyle-oriented electrostatic, the Purity. The best part of all is, MartinLogan may not even realize just how important their Purity loudspeaker is to the future of high-end audio.



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I first learned of MartinLogan's latest loudspeaker, the Purity, at last year's CEDIA show in Denver, Colorado, as I toured their booth looking to drum up some inside info on the rumored CLX loudspeakers, a follow-up to MartinLogan's stellar CLSs. While I was unable to pry any such info from the MartinLogan reps, I did stumble upon the Purities, a smallish pair of electrostatics on live display at the show being fed by an Apple PowerBook. I won't comment on their sound at the show, but their elegant appearance and compact size were enough for me to request a review. A few months and several phone calls later, a pair of Purity loudspeakers arrived. The Purities are not unlike the rest of the speakers in MartinLogan's arsenal, as they are a hybrid design mating a traditional woofer to an electrostatic panel. This has been MartinLogan's forte for decades and has served them well, for no one does it better. The Purity is small for an electrostatic, measuring a little over 50 inches tall by nearly eight inches wide and 14-and-a-half inches deep, tipping the scales at 51 pounds. The Purity is little larger than, say, the Scenario from back in the day, but appears far more complete in design and style than the previous designs ever were. It's attractive to say the least and not just for electrostatics. It comes in two finishes, black ash and cherry, and retails for \$2,995 a pair. Unlike past MartinLogan offerings, the Purity is more readily available and can be purchased from stores such as Best Buy through its higher-end moniker Magnolia.

MartinLogan's trademark CLS panel dominates the top half of the Purity, which is now in its second generation, sporting a new ultra-low-mass PET (polyethylene terephthalate) diaphragm sandwiched in the middle of a new MicroPerf Stator design. The same semi-transparent look is there, but this new panel appears tighter, more condensed and ridged than ESLs of yore. The Purity boasts a reported frequency response of 41-23,000Hz, plus or minus 3dB, and has a horizontal dispersion of 30 degrees, due to the slight curve of the CLS panel. Vertical dispersion has always been a bit of an Achilles heel for MartinLogan, and the Purity is no exception, with a vertical dispersion of only 28 inches. However, the designers have employed a few tricks to help remedy this problem, which I'll talk about later. The Purity is also rather efficient for an ESL, with a sensitivity of 93dB at the binding posts and 95dB efficient via its line level inputs.

That's right, the Purity is a fully powered design from the panel to the woofer, eliminating the need for outboard high-powered amplification, a first for MartinLogan and possibly its coolest feature. The Purity's internal power



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Why mess it up

The advertisement is divided into two main sections. The top section features a black iScan VP50 PRO receiver with a blue display screen. Below the receiver are the logos for VRS by Anchor Bay and DVDO by Anchor Bay. The bottom section features a close-up of a grey and white Ultralink SD cable with a gold-plated connector. The background of this section is a grid of blue squares.

comes by way of a 200-watt high-resolution switching amplifier. The Purity can still be powered via a third-party amp connected via traditional means, but I urge you to read on, for the internal switching amp inside is rather impressive. Getting back to the hybrid aspect of the Purity design for a moment, its cabinet houses a pair of six-and-a-half-inch aluminum woofers, ported in the rear and crossed over with the CLS panel via a Vojtko Crossover and adjustable by plus or minus 3dB for better bass integration in a variety of room situations. Obviously, speaker placement is still going to play a large role in overall coherence and integration between the CLS panel and the dual woofers, but the adjustable bass controls do help in less than ideal room conditions.

The Purity also features an adjustable base or metal plate that is screwed onto the bottom of the cabinet that angles the speaker either directly ahead or at a slight 13 degree tilt to aide in vertical sound dispersion. You can add additional rake to the Purity by fine-tuning the MiniETC spikes that screw into the bottom plate, allowing you to further dial in your sound. The Purity still requires a nearby outlet or two, not only to charge the panel, but also to power the internal amplifier.

Set-up

I kicked my time off with the MartinLogan Puritys by placing them in my two-channel reference system, swapping out my reference Paradigm Signature S8 v.2 loudspeakers as the top dog in my room for the time being. Because of the Puritys' fully powered design, I was able to utilize them in a variety of ways. First, I drove them with a pair of Bel Canto Ref1000 mono blocks, with the preamp duties falling to my Hovland HP-100 tube line stage. My source for this set-up was a Denon 3910 universal player, with all cabling and power filtration coming by way of Transparent Cable.

The second set-up I utilized was running the Puritys directly from my Hovland's power amp outputs via a pair of Transparent Cable interconnects. All other components remained the same.

The third set-up I tried was plugging my iPod dock directly to the Puritys via long runs of UltraLink interconnects and using my iPod as the primary source. While some audiophiles out there are sure to cringe at this last set-up, the results were a bit shocking ... in a good way.

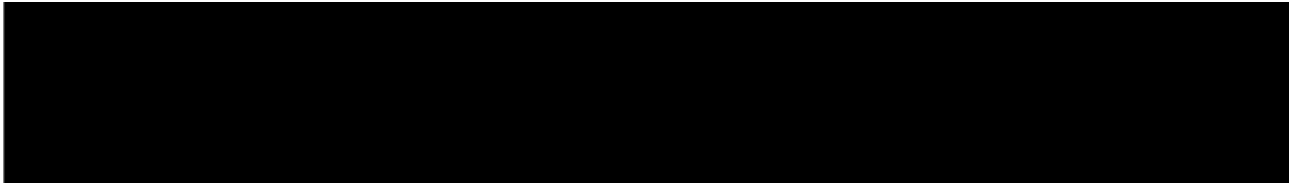
Regardless of the set-up, the Puritys did not fare well sitting in the same spot as my Paradigm Signature speakers. They needed to be pulled out from the front wall a bit more and toe-in was a bit more dramatic for better imaging. I connected the base plate so that the Puritys fired straight ahead at my listening position. To combat vertical dispersion, I used the ETC spikes to add a slight upward



tilt to the speaker without having to adjust the base to the more aggressive 13-degree tilt. Before I move on, if you're a listener for whom music is more or less background entertainment, you're going to want to utilize the 13-degree upward tilt for more uniform sound dispersion when standing and moving about.

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Music

I kicked things off with Coldplay's latest album X&Y (Capitol). I utilized both the CD via my Denon universal player and my iPod with the same track(s) ripped in lossless compression via iTunes. Starting with the track "Swallowed in the Sea" on CD, the Puritys presented a very intimate, precise and airy presentation. Since there is no "box" to speak of to color the midrange and treble, the overall sound through the CLS panel was natural and, ahem, pure. The treble extended wonderfully out into my room and blossomed naturally, without a hint of metallic sizzle that you'd find in traditional tweeters at the Purity's price point. The lower midrange and bass held their own against the speed of the panel. Once I achieved the optimal placement in my room, the Purity's coherence was staggering. I think the old adage surrounding the idea of a hybrid electrostatic being fast in the midrange and treble and tubby in the bass is now completely unfounded, for the Puritys sound more like good, full range electrostatics than a hybrid design. The bass was taut, tuneful and could go rather deep for such a compact design. Keep in mind that, because of the constraints of my room, I had to dial the bass back a bit via the switch on the rear of the unit, and I didn't add a sub to the mix at any time. Again, proper placement is key. You should expect to play with it a bit, but once you get the Puritys dialed in, they are an absolute delight and better than their place in the MartinLogan lineup would have you believe.



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Playing the same track through the Puritys (minus all the audiophile gear) while using a simple iPod, a stereo cable adapter and a pair of two-meter lengths of UltraLink cable

produced results I was not prepared for. It's important to point out that I am going from a system that retails for well over \$15,000 to one that can be had for well under \$3,500, and at the heart of it all are the Puritys. From the bass on up, there was a difference. However, it was not as large as one would expect; at least, not one audiophiles would be comfortable admitting. The sweetness and palpability brought to the party by the tubes in the Hovland were gone, but the speed and naturalness the Bel Canto's brought was still present. The digital amps inside the Puritys are damn good and, while not 1,000-watt monsters like the Bel Canto amps, they drive them perfectly. While there were differences, there weren't major omissions and the essence of the music – the emotion – remained intact. Dynamics were relatively the same, while soundstage width and depth were compressed a bit, but not by much. On their own, the Puritys are rather remarkable; given something as simple as an iPod, they can work wonders almost any consumer could happily live with as a high-end system for years on end. That said, if you're willing to feed the Puritys a bit more, they can and do get a bit better, but don't think you have to go crazy. For instance, I wouldn't run off and get a couple of high-end amplifiers; I'd start with a quality pre-amp or source with a variable output first.

I was so impressed with the Puritys' sound with just an iPod at the helm that I decided to carry out the rest of my listening tests using only that. Enjoy. I cued up Alien Ant Farm and the track "Movies" from their album ANThology (Dreamworks). With the volume pegged at insane, I rocked out. The dynamics were slammin' and the speed of the woofers was quite impressive. The raucous drumming against the electric bass is a challenge for any speaker and the Puritys passed the test with flying colors, keeping each instrument separate yet allowing them to compliment each other. The kick drum was natural and quick, with enough detail and air that I could hear the mallet striking the skin. The subsequent snare hits were a sharp accent to the otherwise bass-heavy song. Vocals were clear, natural and planted firmly in the soundstage, as well as in my listening room, projecting out into my space instead of hiding behind the speakers. The whole presentation simply rocked, sacrificing only that last bit of "audiophileness" that some crave so much. Personally, I just turn the volume up and forget about it all, for the Puritys, while pure to the music and the source, are loads more fun than any so-called audiophile loudspeaker.



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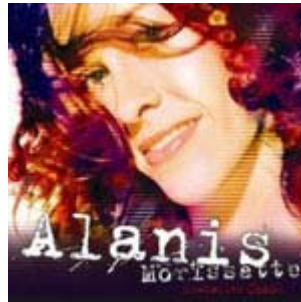
For instance, what audiophile would



serve up Baby Bash's "What Is It" (Arista) in a review? None. Well, since I'm not an audiophile, I did and loved it. Again, the bass prowess of the Puritys was pretty well established. However, it became cemented once listening to the thumping hip-hop

track. This wasn't some trunk-rattling Honda Civic sound; no, it was quite composed and, while completely synthetic in its origins, possessed incredible speed, agility, depth and extension. There was so much output that I honestly don't think most consumers would need to use a subwoofer with the Puritys. I know MartinLogan makes some terrific subs, but unless your room has its own climate, you're not going to need one. The vocals were clear, well-defined and, while not the most beautiful, had a terrific in-room presence. There are some bell-like sounds throughout the track that sparkled beautifully, with great air and decay, showcasing not only the Puritys' high-frequency prowess, but also their ability to balance the entire musical spectrum without sounding like a hybrid mashing of sorts. This is one coherent speaker.

I ended my time with Puritys with something a bit more subdued – dare I say traditional? – Alanis Morissette's "Doth I Protest Too Much" from her album *So-Called Chaos* (Maverick). Female vocals have always been one of MartinLogan's strengths and the same holds true for the Puritys. Alanis' vocals were vividly real and hung in



space with such dimensionality you could almost reach out and touch her. While I've grown fond of Beryllium tweeters and carbon fiber woofers, nothing, and I mean nothing, beats a MartinLogan CLS panel when it comes to reproducing vocals – they're just so spot on. The accompanying guitar was equally impressive and natural. The cymbal crashes shimmered with the appropriate amount of air and decay, while the bass drum added the appropriate weight to the performance without overpowering it. There was a delicacy to the entire performance that showed the Puritys' softer side, which I almost missed out on. But what was even more shocking was that, with a lowly iPod at the helm, there was a softer side, there was subtlety, there was musicality, there was emotion. That's what the Puritys offer: emotion, pure and simple. You don't have to coax them or coddle them, aside from placement; you don't need fancy or expensive electronics; all you need is the music you love and the source you prefer and the Puritys do the rest. While not perfect, they may just be right for today's modern audio enthusiast.

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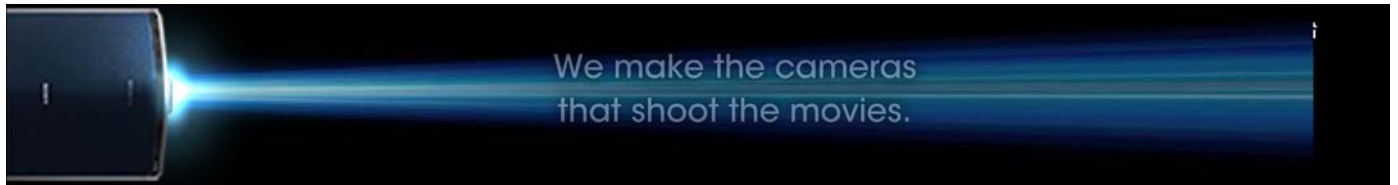
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The Downside

As much as I adore the MartinLogan Purity loudspeakers, there are a few concerns that I must share with you. First, while I love the inclusion of a metal base plate to allow for tilting options, it's not the sort of thing that can be adjusted quickly. While not difficult, resetting the base will require you to unhook the speakers, lay them down and manually undo the base to swap it around. Again, not difficult, but if you're going from critical listening to party mode, plan on setting aside some time to make the adjustment.

Next, the dual woofers are capable of copious amounts of bass output, more so than previous designs from MartinLogan. However, because of the Puritys' rear-ported nature, they can get a bit boomy, even with bass attenuation. Proper room placement remains key in getting the most out of these magnificent mini ESLs.

While I did most of my listening via an iPod, keep in mind that the quality of the rip does matter and will affect the results dramatically, for the Puritys can be rather revealing. While some 256K rips sounded good enough for casual listening, nearly every 128K rip bordered on torture. Do your homework, rip wisely and you'll be fine. I just don't want to give the impression that the Puritys can make a cellular phone ring tone sound like Beethoven's Fifth.

There is a small speaker grille-like inset behind the CLS panel that affixes to the top of the cabinet itself to aid in softening the reflection off the cabinet where it meets the panel. While necessary, it did find ways of coming loose from time to time. I



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would prefer to see a more permanent mounting solution for this small grille than merely the average push pins of old.

Lastly, and I am nitpicking, I would have like to see a few more finish options besides black ash and cherry. I know having a limited palette keeps costs low, but MartinLogan has become the king of customization and, even if it cost a bit more, I'd like the same finishes to be offered on the Puritys as on other models.

Conclusion

It seems musical playback is going the way of servers and computer-aided devices such as the iPod more and more each day. Try as some might to fight this, the MartinLogan Puritys embrace it.

Allow me to paint you a picture: you come home after a hard day at the office, laptop or iPod in hand, dock it in your living room, kitchen or office, and hit play. Whether your Purity loudspeakers are hooked directly to your playback device or simply to a device like Apple's own AirPort, you're treated to all the natural, quality sound you'd expect from a system costing thousands more, only you don't have a large rack of electronics and a half-mile of garden hose-like cables cluttering up the works. You have two beautifully designed speakers, a couple of thin power cords and a pair of interconnects, and your entire music library at your fingertips. This is where the Puritys shine and why I consider them to be one of the most important speaker designs in recent memory, for they cut through the audiophile red tape that has kept so many at bay and get to the heart of the matter, which is the music and our enjoyment of it.

They are not perfect by any means, but for their price and lack of need for expensive associated equipment, their value proposition quickly overshadows their minor shortcomings. The Puritys' sound is equally adept with hip-hop as it is with acoustic and everything in between, which makes them among the best-rounded speakers I've ever encountered. I simply adore these speakers, not only for what they can do, but also for what they represent for the future of this hobby I love so much.

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manufacturer: MartinLogan, Ltd.
address: 2101 Delaware Street
Lawrence, Kansas
66046
tel: 785.749.0133
website: <http://www.martinlogan.com>

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