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MartinLogan Vista Speaker

The Audiophile Voice

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John-Alex Mason **"Don't Never Get No Blues Like This No Mo'"**

Robbie Dupree - Time & Tide
A Little Computer Music, Please



MartinLogan Vista XStat Loudspeaker

Ron Nagle



HOOKED ON AIR, the kind that surrounds me in sound. It is the “something” that makes music appear on a gossamer fabric of film that energizes the air around.

I have owned Quad ESL 63 electrostatic speakers for many years. I love the way they make music that flows effortlessly and naturally in continuous wavelets free from mechanical artifact. I am determined to find this same musical transparency wherever it may be.

And so I looked to MartinLogan which is a company well known by audiophiles for their innovative electrostatic speakers. In the late 1970s, Gayle *Martin* Sanders and Ron *Logan* Sutherland met and found that they both shared a strong interest in electrostatic speakers. Thereafter, they joined together in an effort to produce a speaker that could overcome the limitations they found in previous electrostatic designs. They focused on the lack of extended bass, relatively poor sound dispersion, and on improving the electrostatic driver’s reliability. Employing recent advances made in materials technology, they were able to introduce their first speaker called the Monolith at the 1983 Consumer Electronics Show. Today, they are well known for their hybrid speakers that combine the older cone or dynamic bass drivers along with curved electrostatic panels.

Over the years, MartinLogan has gradually improved or revamped their whole line of speakers, and many of their current systems are now well-adapted for inclusion into home theater systems, though they maintain a firm footing in two-channel audio. They have also made several advances in panel efficiency so that their current systems achieve more sound output with smaller screens than was possible with some of their older and larger hybrid electrostatic speakers. Finally, they now manufacture sub-woofers and on-wall and center-channel speakers, as well as in-wall and in-ceiling units. I have to think that an additional benefit is that they are now better able to offer lower prices on some of their products.

MartinLogan has divided their products into two major groups: the ESL series and the more affordable Design series. My interest is focused on their top of the line, the ESL XStat series, which includes three stereo speaker models. These are the floor-standing Summit, the Vantage and the Vista. Least expensive of these three is the Vista at \$3,995.00; this was my choice simply because it is the



only MartinLogan speaker that does not have an internal amplifier. Like many traditionalist audiophiles, I like to choose my own style and strength of amplifications. The manufacturer's full designation for this speaker is the Vista CLS XStat. The letters CLS designate this as a "Curvilinear Line Source" speaker. One reason I didn't do an amplified model is that this magazine's mean, ol' editor has a weird sort of logic and dictates to the guys in the review corps, that if we want to evaluate high-end speakers, then we best better not add an amplifier to muck up the testing process. "One thing at a time," he says. I think he believes we can't hear very well.

Product Orientation

First off, I want to tell you about the Vista owner's manual, which is refreshingly first rate; it is an unusually thorough 28-page publication. It has sections on set up and placement and it includes a trouble shooting section and an audio glossary and even a history of electrostatic speaker development.

The Vista speaker itself has two pairs of binding posts, and I consider this a very useful feature. It allows you to bi-amp using a separate amplifier for the woofer and another for the electrostatic panels. Surprising to me is the fact that MartinLogan's top-of-the-line Summit speaker (at 59 inches) and their Vantage (at 57 inches) are close to the height of the Vista. The Vista is 57 inches high by 10.7 inches wide and 16.8 inches deep. It weighs 54 pounds. There is just one crossover point at 450 Hz. The electrostatic line source panel rises 40 inches above the bass-reflex cabinet which houses the

high-excursion 8-inch aluminum cone woofer. Not surprisingly for this type of design, the vertical dispersion specification coincides with the panels' height and it is listed at 40 inches. The curvilinear design of the ES panel increases the horizontal dispersion to an angle of 30 degrees off the center axis. The front facing and backside stator panels are insulated carbon steel micro-perforated with small round holes. Between these panels is a thin metal-coated plastic diaphragm membrane which has the electrostatic charge placed on it. It is this membrane moving in a varying electrostatic field that produces sound.

Optimization

Setting up these speakers turned out to be trickier than I had anticipated. As usual, my primary concern is getting the sound stage and the imaging as good as possible. However, my first task was to integrate the bass in a way that balanced its output with respect to the electrostatic panels output. Problematically I have a bass node in my room around 60 Hz that emphasizes that frequency. The Vista speakers do not have a built in bass amplifier and therefore there are no bass controls. So I had to use very careful room placement to bring the bass into balance. The solution came in four parts. I elevated the speakers off the floor about 3.5 inches using short sections of wood 2 by 4 inches. This lessened the amount of bass reinforcement by interaction with the floor. I then found moving the speakers farther away from the back wall was an additional improvement. And over a period of approximately 60 hours, the

woofer gradually blended into the performance and became more articulate.

Initially, I used my PrimaLuna 2 integrated tube amplifier to power the speakers. Next in the amplifier line-up was my tweaked-out version of a Hafler 500 Mosfet power amp. Both of these amplifiers worked very nicely from the lowest midrange all the way up to dog whistle treble. However, serendipity provided the last and best solution for the bass. I received a loan of Roger Sanders new and improved high-current, high-voltage amplifier designed specifically to drive electrostatic speakers and sports a much better bass-damping (control) factor of 600. This is an amplifier specifically designed to power those tougher speaker loads where the impedance may drop significantly lower at high

frequencies. The specification given for the Vista is a nominal 4 ohms with a minimum of 1.2 ohms at 20 kHz, so the addition of the Sanders amp met any concerns I had on that score.

Finally my set up was advancing to a point where I could concentrate solely on imaging. I knew that these slim electrostatic panels did not radiate a great deal of sound energy to the sides, out beyond the 30 degree angle the firm specs, so left and right positioning became a lot easier. "Aim them at the main listening position, and they will image," seems to be the rule. Dipole means that they radiate as much energy from the rear as they do from the side facing you, so you will probably want to get them away from the rear wall. Even though the MartinLogan Vista speakers have curvilinear electrostatic panels, and thus are not beamy like many other ES or panel speakers, I found that they are still more directional than a cone-based system, and it is this characteristic that necessitates a good amount of care in placement. The Vista owner's manual is to be commended for going to great lengths to address this characteristic. The literature states that the panels can image well up to an included angle of 30 degrees or 15 degrees on either side of their center axis. The manual instructs how you can approximate the correct amount of speaker toe in using a flashlight; this is possible because, unique to MartinLogan speakers, their electrostatic panels are highly reflective. The illustrated instructions show how a light shined in their direction from the listening position should reflect at a point one third of the way from the inside edge of the panels. By small increments, I moved the speakers farther apart, adjusting the toe-in at each step with my small Maglite flashlight until I had a solid and broadly satisfying sound



NOTES

MartinLogan Vista XStat Loudspeakers, \$3,995.00. MartinLogan USA, 2101 Delaware St., Lawrence, KS 66046, phone 785/749-0133, fax, 785/749-5320, web site martinlogan.com, for e-mail see web site.

Associated Equipment

Marantz DV 8400 Universal CD player, ART D/I/O Up sampling D/A and A/D processor, Magnum Dynalab FT 101a tuner, Dynalab Signal Sleuth FM signal amplifier, Audio Research SP-9 MK 3 Preamplifier, Aurum Cantus PL2 integrated amplifier, Outlaw Audio RR 2150 Receiver, Hafler 500 amplifier, Roger Sanders ESL amplifier, Kimber Kable 8tc and Wire World Eclipse-2 speaker cables, Audio Research Litzlink and Chord Silver Siren interconnects, and a Wire World power cord, Richard Gray Power Substation, Islatrol A.C. line conditioner, Alpha Core Balanced Transformer Power Supply, Audio Power PE-1 power enhancer, Triad isolation transformer for power to digital gear, VPI MagicBricks, Room Tunes panels, Argent Roomlens, and Gryphon diffusion wall panels.

stage. Now bear in mind that even when the speaker set up is optimized, if you shift your listening position appreciably side to side or backward and forward, such a move can fairly radically alter the imaging of your sound stage. But I had paid my positioning dues, and so at this point I did not notice any such effect even when I did shift around some.

Bottom Line

The MartinLogan Vista XStat speaker, when given the attention it deserves, provides a wonderful window on a music performance. In every way, it provides the very

(record reviewer), one could use the Vistas as a surgeon uses a scalpel. I think over the years MartinLogan have refined and consequently pushed the envelope of what is possible with ESL technology, and honestly, I can't think of what else they might do to squeeze much of anything more from these Vista Speakers.

I must not fail to mention that the Vista speakers are just plain easy on the eyes. They aren't a particularly small speaker, but I do not think you will be required to pay some Décor Score penalty. They don't seem to occupy a lot of space because the panels really are relatively narrow and mostly transparent. At their base, the

Reproduction with the MartinLogan Vista speakers seems limited ONLY be the quality of the recording.

natural tonal continuity and balance of the live event; these are the qualities that describe electrostatic speakers. The Vista seems limited only by the technology applied and quality of the recording. I say this because every nuance in my system equipment and music selections was clear to my ear.

If I had to pick my best CD, it would more than likely be *The Look Of Love* by Diana Krall, the Verve 589-597-2 SACD release. Ms. Krall appears on this sound stage warm and made of flesh and blood; in the midst of her music, with its subtle pauses and her moist intake of air, she seems as real as life. And if I wasn't happily married and I could just get my ... ; but that's another story.

My long-standing bass reference is the recording of Albinoni's Adagio in G minor by Gary Karr and Harman Lewis. Gary Karr's Amati bass fiddle transitioning the scales from low bass to upper midrange has to be the ultimate test of just about any woofer as well as the crossover in between the woofer and the system's midrange. With the Vista, this test is an especially tough one, because the musical transition goes from a cone bass to the electrostatic midrange and tweeter. If there is any mismatch of the sonic characteristics, e.g. the harmonic structures, of the two speaker drivers, this test will spell disaster. It is not enough to just rattle the low bass and indeed it is quite another thing to get all the wooden warmth and rich sad-sounding harmonic overtones of this instrument correct. Listening to Mr. Karr's performance, I could not detect any transition point between the two drivers. The daunting problems of coupling a dynamic bass driver to an electrostatic panel seemed to be a definite no show in the Vista.

Conclusion

If not for the wonderfully written owner's manual, containing detailed instructions and encouragement to experiment with speaker positioning, I would not recommend the Vista speakers to a rank beginner. But having cautioned such novices about proper set up, there is little else to be said concerning positioning. Do it properly or expect unhappy consequences. Every small change I made over the course of my investigation was clearly audible and in that we have a double-edged sword. As a tool in the hands of a discerning listener

woofer enclosure is a beautiful natural cherry wood veneer that matches the furniture in my room, so my local Wife Acceptance Factor is just under 100 per cent.

MartinLogan most certainly deserves its niche at the top of the home music industry, and Gayle Sanders and the rest of the team at MartinLogan are to be congratulated for seeing (or is it "hearing"?) the potential in electrostatic drivers and making industry standard speakers despite the inherent difficulties that come with this type. Throughout my process of inquiry I have learned many cool things about electrostatics and I have enjoyed the Vista immensely.

Verily I say "Go ye forthwith and be enlightened. Be ye 'electrostaticized!'" The Vistas are a must-hear experience, i.e. they rate a "recommended" on your list.

Unfortunately, our Uncle Sam, the local district attorney, and the mean ol' editor have quite a lot of input in these matters and so unhappily I can't keep these nice speakers. Rats!

S P E C S

Frequency response: 43 - 22,000 Hz +/- 3db.
Sensitivity: 90 dB SPL for 2.83 volts at one meter.
Impedance: Nominal 4 ohms, Minimum 1.2 ohms at 20 kHz. Crossover: 450 Hz. Crossover Components: Custom wound audio toroidal transformer, air core coils, and polypropylene capacitors. Woofer: 8-inch cast basket; high excursion, aluminum cone, extended throw driver assembly in a bass reflex enclosure. Recommended amplifier power: 100 to 200 watts per channel. Weight: 54 lbs. Each. Dimensions: 57 inches high by 10.7 inches wide by 16.8 deep. MartinLogan Speakers come with a basic 90-day warranty; a no-cost, five-year limited warranty may be obtained after sending a completed warranty registration certificate and a copy of the dealer's receipt of purchase within 30 days.