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MartinLogan Summit Loudspeaker

Pushing the limits of electrostatic-hybrid speaker technology.

Barry Willis

MartinLogan's Summit was among the most promising prototypes heard at the 2005 Consumer Electronics Show. The culmination of engineering and design refinements developed over the manufacturer's more than twenty years of building electrostatic/hybrid loudspeakers, it suffered several months' delay in delivery, due to problems with suppliers. By early autumn, the Summit began shipping, replacing the Prodigy in ML's lineup.

Just under five feet tall, just over one foot wide, and less than two feet deep, the Summit is sleek and elegant, an understated contemporized version of the many oversized loudspeakers MartinLogan has made over the years—a product evolution not unlike that of the Mercedes Benz CLK 320, a downsized car that combines sports-car styling and high-tech performance with big-car comforts. Although the Summit has a family resemblance to its predecessors, including a powered subwoofer in the base, almost everything about it is new, including the sub's high-efficiency 200-watt modular digital amplifiers and the "Xstat" panel's construction—in particular its "microperforated" carbon-steel stators, ultra-lightweight plasma-bonded diaphragms, "ClearSpars" precision spacers, and "ultra-rigid airframes," as explained in the owners' manual and on MartinLogan's Web site.

Much of the technology developed for the company's flagship Statement

loudspeaker has been adopted in the \$10,000 Summit, and in its half-price sibling, the Vantage. Despite the Summit 'stat panel's relatively small size, it actually has a radiating area larger than the Prodigy's, thanks to the stators' "microperf" design that exposes more of the diaphragm, a compact base that doesn't partially block the speaker's back wave, and frame construction that permits diaphragm movement right to the edges of the panel, according to ML assistant marketing manager Devin Zell.

Refinements also include dual "PowerForce" 10" woofers, one front-firing, one down-firing, in sealed asymmetrical chambers in the base. Separate bass contour controls provide ± 10 dB of adjustment around 10Hz bands centered at 50Hz and 25Hz, points that were chosen "because that's where most rooms have problems," according to ML rep Pete Soderberg. In my room, with these controls in their neutral positions, bass was wooly, incoherent, and overwhelming. Trimming the 50Hz level by 5dB and boosting the 25Hz control by 2dB worked wonders. Although ML warns against bi-amping, the rear panel comes with separate inputs for the 'stat panel and the woofers. There's also a three-color status indicator LED, a dimmer for a cool blue light in the top of the base, and a standard IEC 15A receptacle for powering the internal



electronics. (I used the stock power cords that came with the speakers and didn't experiment with aftermarket models.) The screw-in feet are adjustable for a stable stance on uneven floors—unscrew them all the way and you'll find spikes if you care to use them. The feet are smoothly finished, so you can scoot the Summit across a hardwood floor without causing scratches. At 75 pounds each, the Summits are easy to move but shouldn't be lifted by their frames.

The maple-and-aluminum Summits that grace this month's cover arrived partially broken-in, with about 75 hours playing time on them. According to Soderberg, the speakers begin to come into their own at about 100 hours, so I gave them a couple of days of continuous play at moderate-to-loud levels before taking them for a serious test drive. Their arresting looks got plenty of comments from several visiting friends and relatives during the Thanksgiving holiday. None had ever seen an electrostatic speaker, and all sat patiently through my short "Electrostatics for Dummies" presentation. Look and sound earned them high spousal approval ratings, too.

For the first few days, the Summits were hooked up to my Marantz/Integra/Parasound Halo C2/A51 combo, the heart of a combined music and home-theater system. A typical comment from visitors was "they sound bright," a reference to the Summit's energetic presentation, compelling midrange, and open, effortless treble.

My standard reply is that live music is bright. Strike a cymbal with a drumstick—it has a sharp metallic ring, with fast attack and slow decay. Stand anywhere near a performing violinist, trumpeter, or sax player and then listen to how those instruments sound played back over most loudspeakers. The spine-tingling shrillness and bite are almost always absent. There is serious loss of energy between the original acoustic event and the reproduced recording. Cymbals as reproduced by fabric-dome tweeters don't usually sound sharp and metallic. They don't ring; they splash.

Loudspeaker designers often make conscious decisions to create polite, inoffensive products that can offer some plausible verisimilitude with an almost infinite variety of recordings. Others use metal-dome tweeters that induce edginess in recordings where edginess shouldn't be. In either case an attempt has been made to balance sonic realism with marketable euphony.

The result is that few loudspeakers sound realistic in the upper registers. In my experience, only one has ever made a struck cymbal sound like the real thing—the MBL 101 E (reviewed by Jonathan Valin in Issue 154). The MBL

**MartinLogan
has taken
classical
electrostatic
midrange
magic to
entirely new
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this speaker.**

also sounds pretty damn realistic throughout the rest of the frequency spectrum, too—and with the right recordings and proper electronics can cast a scarily three-dimensional soundstage perceptible from anywhere in the room. But the MBL is too exotic, too big, and, with its required associated electronics, too expensive for most music lovers. At \$10,000 in standard finishes, the MartinLogan Summit offers a satisfying blend of realism, musical seductiveness, high performance, and accessible, contemporary styling to a wider swath of the market.

As with most loudspeakers, positioning is critical. I started with the

Summits in the same spots where the Montana EPS2s had stood, a tad under eight feet apart at the inside edges and with the back of the bases a few inches from the front wall. From 13 feet away, there was a hole in the middle that toe-in couldn't cure. With the aid of Soderberg and MartinLogan dealer and custom installer Carlos Shelton, I found the optimum position was about 28" out from the front wall, with the speakers six-and-a-half feet apart at the inside edges and with almost no toe-in, in a room that is lively but not reverberant and that does not support standing waves.

With three very experienced guys, determining the optimum setup took a couple of hours. The Summits sound better closer together than most dynamic designs of similar height, and in some rooms might perform better with a bit of toe-out. The screw-in feet enable some back/front tilt that could be helpful with nonstandard seating heights. As shipped, the speakers are optimized for normal seating, where ear level is approximately the upper third of the panels. Imaging and focus don't lock in from elsewhere, although the Summits sound fine off-axis.

With electronics from Lexicon and Balanced Audio Technology, the Summits sounded softer than they did with the Halo gear, with a soundstage that was deeper than it was wide, probably attributable to the mellifluous effects of the VK-31SE's tubes. I was delighted to discover that the Summits can infuse cymbals with a realistic metallic ring without adding that quality to vocals: Adam Nussbaum's drumming near the end of Patricia Barber's "Summer Samba" [*Nightclub*, Premonition Records] proved a fine demonstration of this. Michael Arnpol's virtuoso bass playing in all of Barber's recordings was superbly realistic, from the delicate plucking sounds of fingers on strings to the woody resonance of the instrument's body. Attack and decay in the lower registers were excellent, with little overhang or drone.

With its -3dB low-frequency rolloff at 24Hz, the Summit can go far lower

than most speakers of comparable size, but it can't reach earthshaking, bowels-of-the-earth levels like giant loudspeakers that drop below 20Hz. Still, its woofer section would make a respectable subwoofer if marketed separately. Its fast, tight, articulate low-end output is really quite amazing given the cabinet's relatively small dimensions. I didn't notice any upper bass or lower midrange anomalies despite the 270Hz crossover point. Bass-heavy recordings like Chris

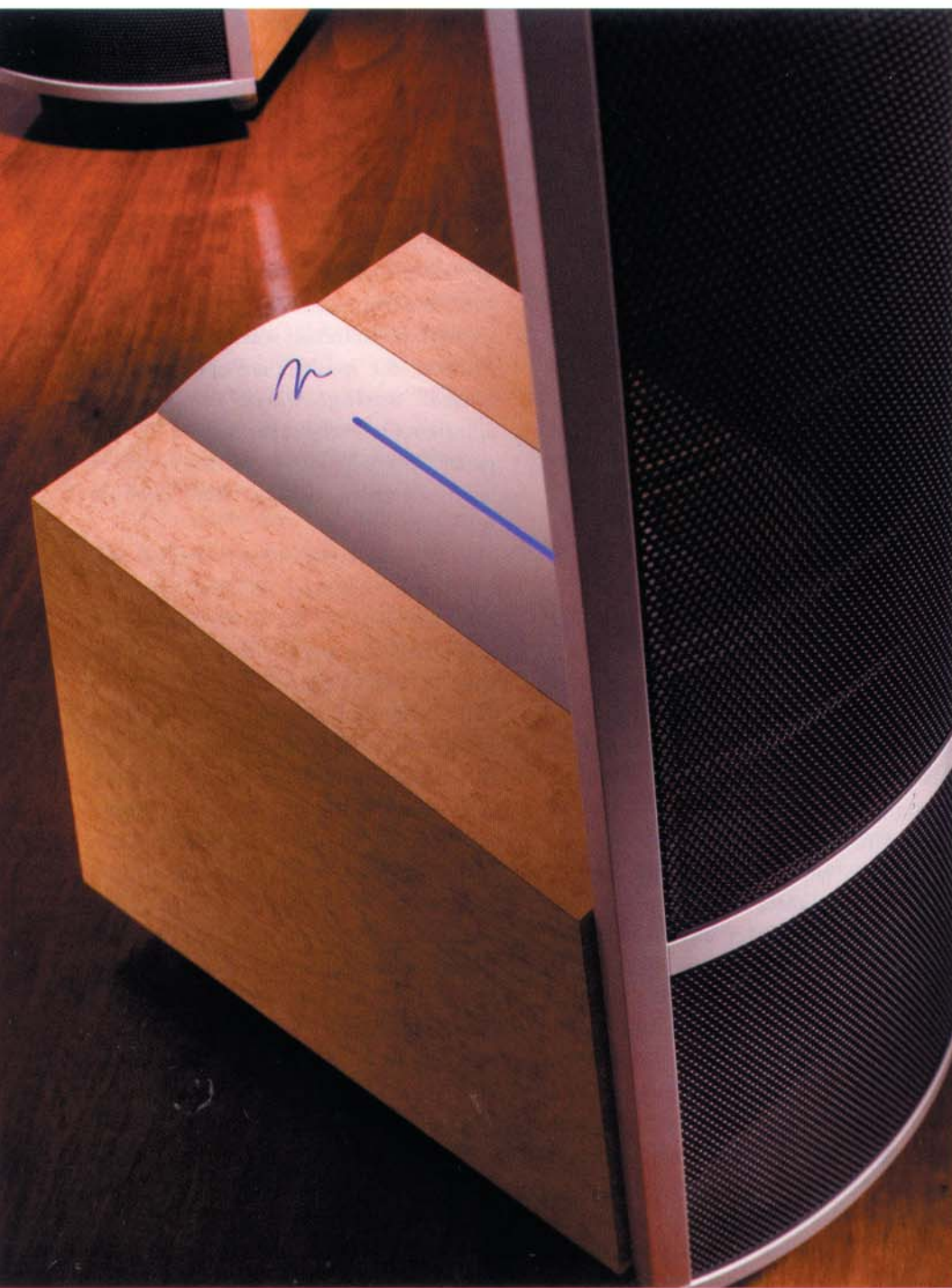
Isaak's *San Francisco Days* [Reprise] were immensely satisfying.

But lots of speakers have great bass and top end. It's the midrange where the Summits excel. MartinLogan has taken classical electrostatic midrange magic to entirely new levels with this speaker. Every recording I threw at them came back at me with irresistible seduction. From roughly recorded rock classics like Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Susie Q" [*Chronicle*, Fantasy] to old-school

soulful jazz like Ike Quebec's "The Man I Love" [*Ballads*, Blue Note] to driving funk like Candy Dulfer's "Lily Was Here" [*Saxuality*, Arista] to passionate readings of classical warhorses like Sarah Chang's interpretation of Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1 [EMI], the Summits pulled at me like heavy magnets. Inner detail with all recordings was superb. The separation of voices on Leonard Cohen's *Ten New Songs* [Columbia] was unearthly, as was the dynamic interplay of guitars and percussion in Strunz & Farah's Latin instrumental "Coracol" [*Americas*, Mesa]. The Summit's speed and dynamic attack were among the best I have ever heard.

The Summits played as loudly as I could reasonably want to push them without exhibiting any of the misbehaviors common to earlier electrostatics—everything from dynamic compression at loud levels to severe distortion to arcing and sparking (an old, old pair of Quads pushed way past their limits). I didn't try to push the Summits into the red zone or force them to howling-at-the-moon, total-distortion, frat-party levels. Because another review project interfered with the use of my projector screen, I didn't get the chance to try them with demanding movie soundtracks, although I did watch a few films with a 50" Vizio HD plasma display between them, an arrangement that would make a great home-theater system for most folks. (Dialogue and sound effects in Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 *Hamlet* had stunning clarity.) Slender audio and video panels have a natural aesthetic harmony.

The Summit's designers must have examined almost every shortcoming of their own previous designs and of other manufacturers' efforts to take electrostatic hybrids into the high-performance realm. One problem remains: the Summit's limited vertical dispersion. Its horizontal dispersion is good across the entire audio spectrum—none of the head-in-a-vice syndrome I had with my old Sound Lab R1's—but the Summit doesn't deliver much in the vertical plane, particularly in the upper frequencies. (Old Accustats solved this problem



by being almost 8 feet tall.) The result is that the speaker's tonal characteristic changes drastically when you go from standing to sitting. (I'm 5' 10".) While not exactly pillow-over-the-face muffled, the soundfield lacks detail if you listen standing up. As you sink into your seat, it brightens noticeably and the soundstage comes into focus. This shouldn't be a deal-breaker for any potential buyer, but it might be something to consider if you are tall or like to groove to the music while standing.

SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Electrostatic/cone hybrid loudspeaker

Driver complement: 44" electrostatic line source, two 10" aluminum cone woofers

Frequency response: 24–23kHz \pm 3db

Sensitivity: 92dB

Impedance: 4 ohms

Recommended amplifier power: 100–300 watts

Dimensions: 12.5" x 59" x 20.5"

Weight: 75 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Lexicon RT-20 universal disc player; Marantz CC-65SE disc changer, Integra DPC-8.5 universal disc changer; Perpetual Technologies P-1A/P-3A, Margules Audio Magenta ADE-24, and Musical Fidelity 10XD signal processors; Parasound Halo C2 pre-amp/processor and Halo A51 power amp; BAT VK-31SE preamp and VK-250 power amp; Kimber Hero and Nordost Quattro-fil and SPM interconnects; Nordost SPM speaker cables; Kimber Palladian power cords (digital gear only); American Power Conversions S 15 and AudioPrism Foundation III power conditioners

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

MARTINLOGAN

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martinlogan.com
Price: \$10,000

That is my only criticism. During the review period, I got to hear Summits from the same production run in two very different environments—in the first, driven by Halo gear like mine in a large space with slate floors, glass doors, and high ceilings; in the other, driven by Halo JC1's with a Fosgate tube surround processor in the loop, in a large room in an older wood-and-plaster home. In both cases the Summits revealed both previously unnoticed details in familiar recordings and the character of the electronics driving them. While they harmonize well with tube gear like the BAT VK-31SE, they were more to my liking with good solid-state like the Halo products. (The synergy is no accident. At trade shows, MartinLogan has long demo'd its products with Parasound electronics.) With the Halo gear, inserting a Musical Fidelity 10XD tube buffer in the signal path rendered the best of both worlds—tube warmth and harmonics with solid-state speed and detail.

The line between work and play can get very murky for audio reviewers who work at home. While the Summits were here, I couldn't just cue up some tunes and go sit down at my computer. They compelled, *commanded* me to sit down and really listen, so much so that the choice became one of music or no music—either listen or don't, but don't pretend there's any in-between. That's as it should be. Music is inarguably the highest art form. It bypasses the rational mind and connects directly to emotions and the imagination. It deserves undivided attention. The Summits make you sit and listen. They connect you to the heart and soul of the music in a way that few other loudspeakers can.

The MartinLogan Summit is a fantastically beautiful and seductive product. For music lovers shopping in its price range, it should be at the top of a very short list. The long-term happiness potential is excellent. 