

Magico Q5

California Dreaming

Jonathan Valin

If it does nothing else (and it does *plenty* else), the Magico Q5—the current top-line, full-range, four-way dynamic loudspeaker from the Berkeley-based company that has, over the last four years, shaken up the *status quo* in the ultra-high end—cuts straight to the core of what we mean when we say something is a “high-fidelity” component.

This is the very issue that led to the foundation of this magazine, and the position that Harry Pearson staked out almost forty years ago has been a beacon and a bone of contention ever since. Should “high fidelity” components, as HP argued, aim to reproduce the sound of acoustic (i.e., unamplified) instruments as they are heard in life in a concert or recital hall? Or, in a significant variant of the absolute sound approach, should they reproduce precisely what was recorded on the disc, whether that sounds like the absolute sound (as it ideally should) or not? Or should they aim at something else again, something far less prescriptive and more personal? Should they simply (or perhaps not so simply) consistently please whoever listens to them?

Although these views aren’t mutually exclusive, over the years they have typically been cast as if they were, as if they represented opposing sides in a never-ending battle between the forces of “realism,” “accuracy,” and “musicality.” All three positions are rife with contradictions, all three share certain patches of common ground, and all three have been “shaped,” like battlefields, to reflect the prejudices of individual reviewers and listeners. The absolute sound school, for example, has trouble dealing with amplified music, such as rock ’n’ roll, which in today’s world makes its proponents seem old-fogeyish. After all, what is the “absolute sound” of a Fender Stratocaster or Telecaster? By the same token, will a speaker that delivers the whomp of a Fender Precision bass guitar as it sounds at a rock concert via a Marshall stack also do justice to the pitches, timbres, and dynamics of an unamplified cello or doublebass? For that matter, will an “accurate” system tend to make both Fender bass and cello sound a bit too cold and analytical, like an unretouched glamour shot?

There is no single answer to these (and a zillion other) questions that will satisfy all music lovers, which is precisely why I try to take the biases of different kinds

of listeners into account whenever I write a review. The way I see it most of us fall into one of three basic groups: what I call the “absolute sound” listeners (who prefer music played by acoustical instruments recorded in a real space, and gear that makes those instruments—no matter how well or poorly they were recorded—sound more like “the real thing”); the “fidelity to mastertapes” listeners (who want their music, acoustical or electronic, to sound exactly as good or as bad, as lifelike or as phony as the recording, engineering, and mastering allow); and the “as you like it” listeners (who care less about the absolute sound of acoustical instruments in a real space or about fidelity to mastertapes and simply want their music to sound some form of “good,” which is to say exciting, beautiful, forgiving, non-fatiguing). Though I think these groupings are valid, I also think that no listener is purely one type or another, i.e., the fidelity to mastertapes listener also wants his music to sound like the real thing, *when the recording allows*; the absolute sound listener wants his music to sound beautiful, *when the music or orchestration allows*; the “as you like it” listener puts excitement and beauty ahead of fidelity to sources, but is not at all unhappy when those sources also sound like the real thing *as he defines it*. What I haven’t been as clear about, perhaps, is where I stand in this triumvirate—and why.

I stated my opinion on this crucial topic about twenty years ago when I wrote a book about RCA recordings, and in spite of occasional forays into other kinds of listening I haven’t really changed my mind. Since *The RCA Bible* has been out of print for a very long time, let me quote what I had to say way back when:

“How much of the ‘absolute sound’ of an orchestra does a microphone really capture? Well, it’s a fact that microphones differ significantly from the response of the human ear. Throughout the fifties and into the sixties Mercury Records, for instance, used German microphones (Telefunken 201’s and Neumann M 50’s) with a rising high end. Are Mercury’s ‘living presence’ recordings [from Watford Town Hall] actual transcriptions of the sound of the LSO with Dorati at the helm, or are they the products of hot mikes—ones that added a little upper-midrange sheen and bite to the LSO strings, winds, and brass—or are they some incalculable blend of both?”



“Well, you’d have to have been at the Watford Town Hall to know for sure. And even then, you’d have to have been sitting where the microphones were placed. And since you don’t hear in three channels mixed down to two and your chair’s not tall enough to put you where the mike heads were located and your ears have a different frequency balance and directional pattern than mikes, you’d be hearing sounds that were different from those which the microphones recorded. How different? The question is unanswerable. On the basis of a recording we can never know what the LSO ‘really’ sounded like on a particular afternoon, on a particular piece of music. All we can know is what the tape heads recorded.”

Twenty years on, I stand by what I wrote. For me high fidelity means fidelity not to the absolute sound and not to some idealized sound but to the sound of the mastertapes, which still seems to me to be the one and only “truth” we’ve got. That this truth is inevitably a compromise that will be further compromised in playback is simply the way the recording/playback process works.

To achieve high fidelity as I define it means that the loudspeakers and everything else in the playback chain need to “disappear” as sound sources. To accomplish this, they must be neutral, transparent, high in resolution, seamless in top-to-bottom coherence, low in distortion, and capable of a high degree of realism rather than romance. As beguiling as such things can sometimes sound, pieces of gear that impose a beautiful or exciting or forgiving sonic template on the presentation—and, thus, *don’t* disappear—are, in spite of any other virtues, finally not for me. This doesn’t mean that they aren’t or shouldn’t be *for you*. I have no argument with friends and colleagues who prefer a less “neutral” component, either because they think a more bespoke presentation makes music more like the real thing (as, for example, those “absolute sound” types who eq their systems to roll off the treble and/or boost the bass—or who prefer equipment that effectively does the same thing because of built-in dips and boosts in frequency response) or because they think a romantic presentation makes recorded music more attractive and, well, “musical.”

What I do have an argument with is calling such presentations “high fidelity.” By my lights anything that makes you more aware of the way sources are being colored and distorted by your system is, *ipso facto*, less of a true high-fidelity component and more of a tone control. I don’t want to hear my equipment automatically adding virtues or subtracting flaws from every record (even from records that benefit by such additions and subtractions); I want to hear what is on the recording, good, bad, or indifferent, because, as I just argued, the recording is the one indisputable truth that stereo systems can be faithful to. The way I see it, if you’re unhappy with the sound of the LPs and CDs you’re playing back, then don’t try to correct the problems with your stereo system. Instead, go out and buy better records.

My position has had certain undeniable consequences when it comes to the kind of playback gear I prefer and how I set it up. While as a reviewer I’ve recommended any number of different kinds of loudspeakers for different kinds of listeners (and was sincere in these recommendations), as a civilian I’ve always owned electrostats, planars, and (occasionally) two-ways. Why? Because they were (and in many respects still are) the lowest-distortion, lowest-coloration, highest-resolution,

most transparent-to-sources, least-present-in-their-own-right transducers—the “highest-fidelity” speakers, if you will, by my standard of high fidelity.

Yes, my preferences have always entailed major sonic trade-offs, particularly in low-end response and dynamic range on *fortissimo* passages. However, because I prefer electrostats, planars, and two-ways does *not* mean I don’t care about bass. What I don’t like isn’t the bottom octaves; it’s what typical dynamic woofers in typical noisy enclosures do to the bottom octaves. In most listening rooms, such drivers sound powerful, all right, but they also almost inevitably sound ill-defined in pitch, grossly distorted in dynamic scale (lumping up in the midbass because of the way those woofers excite themselves, their enclosures, the other drivers, and the room), steeply rolled off in 20-40Hz range, and relatively veiled in the mid and upper octaves because of the group delay and break-up modes of those big cone woofs. It’s all well and good to say that a Fender bass or a Noonan drumkit requires a speaker with “slam” to sound like the “real thing”; it’s quite another to ignore the cost of the dynamic distortion, group delay, and lumpy frequency response that so often accompanies speakers with such “slam.”

It is because the bass response of large, full-range, multiway dynamic loudspeakers is generally so problematical—so far from “high fidelity” as I’ve defined it—that I’ve tended to steer clear of these beasts. Better to live without low bass than with distorted and exaggerated bass. Indeed, outside of the Rockport Hyperion that I reviewed about twelve years ago, I hadn’t come across a big cone speaker that I was tempted to live with until I reviewed the \$90k Magico M5. Here, for once, was a big multiway that seemed to have the transparency, low-distortion, near-seamless octave-to-octave balance, and “disappearing act” of a ’stat or really good two-way, with the added benefit of standard-settingly well-integrated deep bass and dynamic range limited only by the amount of power you could feed it. At the time, I thought the M5 was, overall, the best loudspeaker I’d reviewed.

Not that I thought the M5 was perfect. Other speakers (planars and ’stats) were more detailed, particularly at low levels; other speakers (cones and hybrids) were louder and more “exciting” in the midbass; other speakers (particularly ribbons) had a bit more air and life and transient speed in the midband and treble; and other speakers (particularly ’stats) were lower in grain. Still and all, I found it hard to conceive of another truly full-range speaker that would outdo this one in fidelity to sources or, when those sources were first-rate, in realism. But...I was wrong.

Which, at long last, bring us to the subject at hand, the \$60k Magico Q5.

Unlike the Magico M5s, the Q5s were not a case of love at first listen. Indeed, when I first heard them at CES 2010 I thought they were very detailed in the mids and treble but rather dark in overall balance and lumpy in the bass. Still under the spell of the superb M5s, I wasn’t fully won over until I took a trip to Magico’s offices and factory in Berkeley, California, late in 2010, and heard the Q5s side-by-side with my beloved M5s, playing back the same music via the same amps, preamp, and source. Here the difference between the two speakers was unmistakable and, to my surprise, entirely in favor of the much-less-expensive Qs.

I can sum up this difference rather quickly—the Qs were and are *substantially* lower in distortion and *substantially* higher in

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resolution than the Ms. Explaining the reasons for their shocking superiority, however, will take a little time.

One of those reasons is obvious to anyone with eyes: the Qs' enclosures. The M5s use stacked Baltic birch boxes with two-inch-thick, flat aluminum faceplates (as did the Magico Minis and Mini IIs and other M Series speakers); the Q5s use constrained-layer damped, 6061-T aerospace aluminum enclosures built around elaborate 6061-T aluminum strut frames. While aluminum has always been Magico's enclosure of choice (e.g., its ultra-pricey, limited-edition M6 and Ultimate speakers), such enclosures were too expensive to build and market at a reasonable price until Magico acquired its own CNC-equipped machine shop in San Jose, California.

Magico has long argued that enclosures (and the materials they are made of) are one of the keys to lowering the distortion and increasing the transparency and neutrality of loudspeakers. Indeed, the rationale for building the M5s' birch-ply-and-aluminum box was precisely to reduce the amount of energy the enclosure would store and then release in a peaky, time-smeared fashion. Through artfully balancing the three factors—mass, stiffness, and damping—that go into the construction of any “low-resonance” enclosure, Magico appeared to succeed in this goal with the M5, building a sealed box that didn't seem to be singing along with the drivers. (For more on this topic see the interview with Alon Wolf that accompanies my M5 review in Issue 196.)

I could clearly hear the difference the M5s' enclosure was making in the seamlessness of its presentation, particularly in the bass octaves, which, for the first time in a large multiway, did not stick out like an open drawer at the bottom of a bureau. What I didn't realize until I listened to the Q5s' superior damped-aluminum box was that the M5s' enclosure, heroically constructed though it was, was still adding a slight (but audible) graininess and opacity to the soundfield.

When I wrote my review of the M5s I'd mildly complained about this slight graininess and opacity, which obscured low-level detail at low volume levels in comparison to the finest 'stats and ribbons and which, at the time, I attributed to the relatively greater mass and inertia of the M5s' cone drivers. However, when I heard the aluminum-bodied Q5s, which (save for the tweeters) use the same NanoTec carbon-fiber-sandwich drivers (albeit in a slightly different configuration) as the M5s, I realized that much of the M Series speakers' low-level grain had to be coming from their “noisier” boxes. The side-by-side comparison was and remains the most astonishing demonstration I've ever witnessed of how the superior engineering and construction of an enclosure can markedly affect even the highest-fidelity speakers.

Though I didn't make the cumulative spectral decay measurements at the top of the next column (Magico itself did), I can confirm that the reduction in graininess and opacity between the M5s' enclosures (Illustration 1) and those of the Q5s (Illustration 2) are every bit as audible and dramatic as the graphs suggest. You won't need a golden ear to hear the consequent lower noise, superior transparency-to-sources, higher resolution at lower volume levels, improved transient speed, and better overall definition of the newer speaker, whose enclosures simply “stop” playing more quickly and completely than the M5s' do.

All right, we have a substantially quieter cabinet. What else has changed in the Q5? Once again, another key difference will be

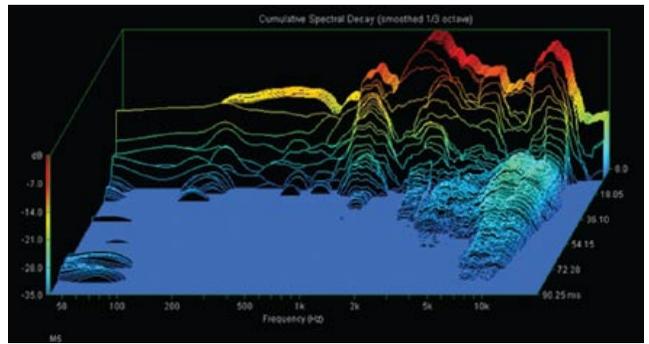


Illustration 1. Cumulative Spectral Decay plot of the M5, showing the energy being stored and released over time by the M5's birchply-and-aluminum enclosure.

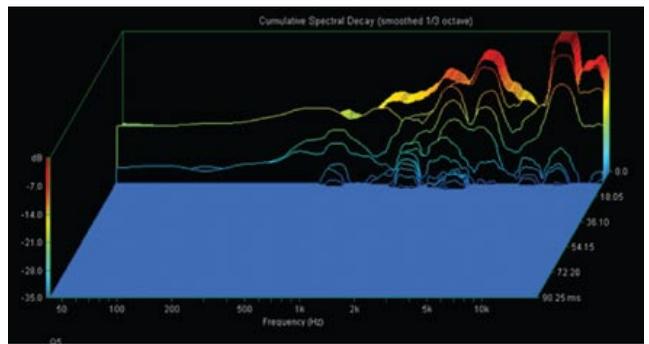


Figure 2. Cumulative spectral decay plot of the Q5, showing the energy being stored and released by the Q5's damped-aluminum enclosure.

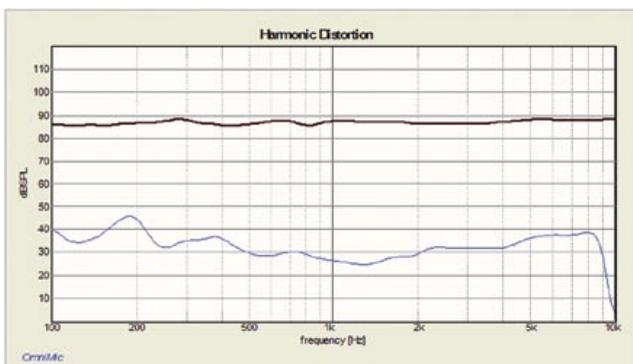
obvious from merely looking at the speaker: the tweeter, which is now the MBe-1 beryllium dome rather than the (superb) MR-1 ring radiator of the M5 and Mini II. Magico claims wider frequency extension, greater power handling, and lower distortion from this beryllium unit, and, once again, I can attest that all of these things are so. The MBe-1 comes closer to the sound of a true ribbon tweeter (and I've just been listening to a great true ribbon tweeter—for which see my comments on the Maggie 3.7s elsewhere in this issue) than any dome tweeter I've heard, with almost exactly the same breathtakingly lifelike speed, resolution, and seemingly limitless bandwidth. However, what Magico is not emphasizing is that—like every beryllium tweeter I've heard (and every true ribbon, for that matter)—the MBe-1 tends to sound more than a little hot when it is listened to directly on axis. Where the M5s' MR-1 ring-radiator virtually disappeared as a sound source until a hard treble transient came along, you will always be vaguely aware of the presence of the MBe-1 unless you toe the speakers out a bit so that you are listening to the tweeter slightly off-axis (i.e., so it is not pointing directly at your ears but a bit to the outside of them). To be fair, Magico explicitly tells you that the tweeter is *designed* to be listened to slightly off-axis and that the slightly-outside-the-ear alignment I just mentioned is the one it recommends. Though you may lose a slight bit of treble-range glamour and immediacy by following Magico's toe-in instructions (just as you do with a true ribbon), the upside in top-octave smoothness, overall blend with the midrange, midbass, and woofers, and sheer realism (on great recordings) is well worth the trade-off.

Another change between the M and the Q that is obvious to the

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eye is the driver configuration. I'm not going to go into Magico's NanoTec technology again—for that I refer you to my M5 review in Issue 196—save to say that the company's pioneering use of nanotube carbon-fiber skins (which are said to have sixty times the tensile strength of high-carbon steel) surrounding a Rohacell foam core have made for highly linear, very wide bandwidth drivers that are not just pistonic throughout their passbands, but also exceptionally well-behaved throughout their startbands and stopbands, reducing (in combination with Magico's steeply sloped elliptical crossovers) the breakup modes that roughen up the linear response of the drivers that the signal is being passed to and from. (Once again, I have heard the difference that reduced out-of-passband breakup modes make in the sound and, like Magico's new quieter damped-aluminum enclosures, it is dramatic.) What's different here is that the Q5 uses a dedicated 6" midrange driver and a dedicated 9" mid/bass driver along with its two 9" woofers, where the M5 used a 6" mid/bass driver with a 6" midrange and two 9" woofers. The move to a larger mid/bass driver is said to improve articulation, as well as lower distortion, and, once again, it is a fact that the Q5 is a faster, more finely detailed, more transparent loudspeaker than the M5—and that this speed and resolution and transparency are audible at very low volume levels, which was not the case with the M.

Indeed, when it comes to low noise, the combination of the Q's revised driver complement and its improved enclosure is impressive. Although I am unable to perform harmonic distortion measurements in an anechoic chamber (which is, of course, the right way to do it), I am now able to make rough THD measurements, thanks to new OmniMic software and hardware designed by my friend Bill Waslo (the author of the Liberty Instruments' Praxis Suite program I use to take frequency response measurements and RTAs). Here is how the Q5s measured in my room, with the understanding that ambient noise was probably raising these THD curves several dB:

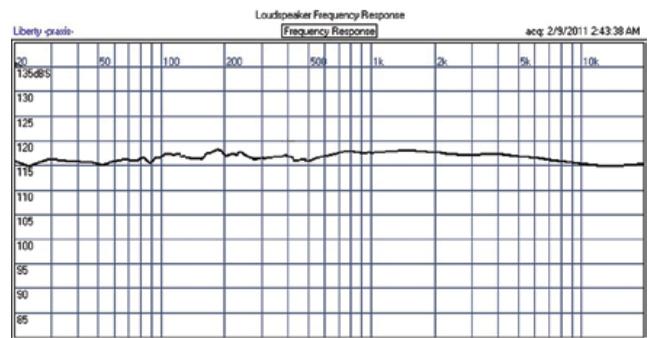


Note that these measurements were taken at very loud levels (almost 90dB SPL), where most speakers do not fare as well as they do at lower volumes, and also note that, in Bill Waslo's own words, they are "extraordinary." Even at its highest (and this was probably skewed by traffic passing on the street outside my house), THD at nearly 90dB SPLs was below 1% and typically on the order of 0.4%! These are loudspeaker measurements, folks. Not a preamp.

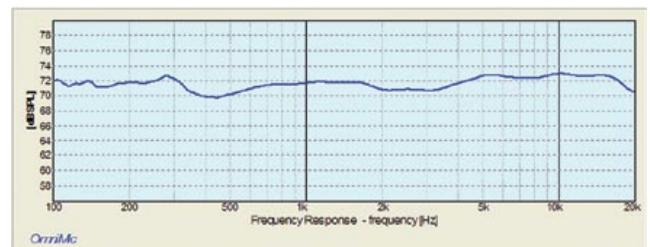
The net result of this lower distortion is greatly improved low-level resolution at low volume levels and, consequently, greatly

improved overall dynamic range. Where the M5 for all its many virtues was not the equal of a 'stat like the MartinLogan CLX at reproducing *pianissimos*, the Q5 very nearly is. And it is vastly superior to the Logans (and to planars) when it come to overall dynamic range—from going from very soft to very loud.

As for frequency response, this is an area where many of the best contemporary loudspeakers do well or, at least, better than they once did. From go, Magico speakers have shown wonderfully, and the Q5 is no exception. Below you will find an RTA I took from my listening position. (Note that the granularity is 5dB per vertical division, with 1/3rd octave smoothing.)



An RTA measures the response of a speaker in your room (which is to say, it includes the effects of the room). As you can see, the Q5 is a wonder in my little space, staying within a couple of dB or so of flat from 20Hz to 20kHz. However, to give you even more of "close-up" view of the Q5s' frequency response, with the room taken out of the equation, here is a gated measurement take from closer-in and a bit more on-axis (a so-called "quasi-anechoic" measurement):



There are several things to note here. First the granularity is 2dB (with 1/3rd octave smoothing). Second, this is, well, very flat response. Taken together with the RTA and the other measurements, it rather makes you understand how several reviewers could've found that the Q5 set new standards of fidelity.

These measurements do raise a critical point, however—one, in fact, that was a large part of the reason that Harry Pearson started an "observational" magazine called *The Absolute Sound*—and that is: How far does measuring the quantities of various parameters of performance go toward an assessment of the quality of the loudspeaker in actual playback of music?

There was a time, not very long ago, when I would've said that measurements such as the ones above were beside the point. I'm not sure I believe that anymore, although I am sure that measurements don't tell the whole story (as some would've have

you believe, including Magico's Alon Wolf and Yair Tammam). The Morel Fat Ladies and MBL X-Tremes, for example, were exceptionally flat-measuring speakers, too, and yet, superb as they were, they did not sound like the Q5s.

I'll tell you a speaker that *does* sound a good deal like the Q5s—and it is an interesting comparison, not just because of what it tells you about the speaker in question but because of what it also tells you about the Magicos. That speaker is the Magneplanar 3.7. I haven't measured the 3.7 and I rather doubt that it would be as exemplary in frequency response as the Q5 is (and it would certainly be more rolled-off in the treble and the bass). But, minus the Q5s' far superior dynamic range, much deeper and more powerful low end, and more extended top end, from the lower midrange to the mid-treble these two speakers have very similar presentations—in resolution, in low distortion, in transparency to sources, in realism.

One conclusion you could reach—and I reach it in my 3.7 comment in this issue—is that the \$5.5k Magneplanar 3.7 is one helluva great buy. But the other conclusion—and it is every bit as interesting—is that here is a multiway cone speaker in a large metal box that sounds incredibly similar to a virtual single-driver ribbon speaker without an enclosure. You may not think this is astonishing, but I do.

For all my adult life as an audiophile, I have been searching for just such a speaker—one that would have the speed, low distortion, high resolution, lack of “boxiness,” transparency to sources, and (when those sources permitted) the extraordinarily high level of realism of a great ribbon or 'stat *without* the inevitable downsides of a ribbon or 'stat—without the membrane-excursion-and-mass limits that reduce dynamic range on the loud side (and, with planars, sometimes on the soft one), without the low-bass limits (also membrane-size, dipole-dispersion, and excursion-related) that keep something like the otherwise great 3.7 from reproducing flat bass below 45Hz (and the Logan CLXes below 55Hz), without the thinness of image that can make many planars and 'stats sound as if instruments are painted on the canvas of their panels, rather than standing freely in space like the three-dimensional objects they are. Here, in the Q5, is that very speaker.

How does it sound? Like whatever is being played through it (and whatever amps and preamps and sources are feeding it). It comes closer to being a true, full-range, “high-fidelity” transducer than any other speaker I've yet heard. But if you want to know what it sounds like on really great recordings, then I can answer more definitively: It sounds so much like the real thing it will take your breath away.

No other speaker I've had in house, including the great M5, can reproduce a piano like, oh, the Bösendorfer on the superb Nova recording of Paul Dessau's First Piano Sonata with such lifelike realism, top to bottom, with such an unstinting combination of ribbon-like speed and delicacy and cone-like authority and solidity that it sounds as if the instrument (albeit naturally somewhat reduced in size) is sitting there in front of you. Every nuance of the pianist's touch, every aspect of the piano's action (from keys to hammers to the little microtonal vibrations of the strings when they are sounded, sustained, or damped), every quality of pitch, timbre, intensity, and duration that you hear in life are reproduced with a clarity and realism

that make many other large multiway dynamic speakers sound downright smeared and opaque.

On better recordings, well-recorded voices like those of Melody Gardot or Madeleine Peyroux or Marc Cohn or David Byrne have that in-the-room-with-you immediacy (born of incredibly fine low-level resolution coupled to lightning transient response and exceptional neutrality of timbre) that I used to associate solely with ribbon, planar-magnetic, and electrostatic loudspeakers. The Qs are very nearly *that* quick and finely detailed and low in distortion. You'd just have to hear it to believe it, and even then it's hard to believe coming from a big cone loudspeaker. Better yet, when voices are accompanied by large ensembles, such as Birgit Nilsson's keen, powerful soprano in the thrilling “Agamemnon” aria from Richard Strauss' *Elektra* [London], you hear...everything. Voice, strings (including individual instruments within the choirs), winds (ditto), brass (ditto), percussion (ditto). No matter how loud they play, all of the performers stay in tight, distinctive, easy-to-make-out focus. Nothing gets lost, and the music, the composition, the orchestration, and the performance gain thereby immensely.

It goes without saying that the Q5s are virtual wizards at separating out the timbres of hard-to-distinguish instruments playing *en masse* at the same pitches and the same dynamics (I mentioned several examples of this “sorting hat” magic in my Issue 213 review of the Technical Brain electronics, which, BTW, are the almost ideal companions for these ultra-transparent loudspeakers). They do the same trick with hard-to-decipher lyrics, the harmonies of backup singers and choirs, overdubs, the splicing in of different takes (several of which I'd never noted before in numbers from *Stop Making Sense*).

Something that *does* need to be said is a word about the Q5's bass. That word is “fantastic.” Indeed, if I were to pick the single most exceptional thing about this thoroughly exceptional loudspeaker it would be its bass response. One of the very first things I noted about the Q5 was its incredible ability to reproduce the pitches of deep-reaching instruments. We are so used to *not* hearing these low pitches—to hearing an overabundance of harmonics instead and “supplying” the missing pitches, like amputees experiencing the sensation of a phantom limb—that it comes as a surprise to hear the actual pitches being sounded on, oh, Tina Weymouth's bass guitar at the start of “Take Me to the River” or Andrei Gavrilov's thunderous piano in Schnittke's “Quasi una sonata” [EMI] and realize that the notes are actually much lower in pitch (and much more powerful in intensity) than what we'd previously thought. Again and again, I had this experience with bass-range instruments and the Q5s. Indeed, pitch definition is so clear and dynamics are so lifelike that it is as if the resolution we automatically expect to hear in the midrange had somehow been transposed several octaves into the bass. Or to put this another way, it's as if the entire gamut from below 20Hz up to, oh 2kHz was being reproduced by a single driver, capable of the same resolution, transient speed, dynamic range, neutrality of timbre, and transparency to sources at every pitch. It's like hearing a super-ribbon or 'stat, some *Transformers* version of a membrane speaker that has the guts of a cone. Although I know no one in his right mind or with a functioning ear on either side of his head would dream of saying this, one would have to be outright daft to call this speaker “low-frequency restricted.” It

is anything but.

However, here's what the Q5 isn't: It isn't inherently peaked up in the mid-to-upper bass and sucked out in the power range of 100–500Hz. It's flat and virtually undistorted everywhere. For some listeners, particularly those who prefer the sound of speakers with such a built-in peak and a power-range suckout that further exaggerates that peak, the Q5s' flat, low-distortion, high-fidelity bass might seem lacking in "oomph," at least on some kinds of music. It's not that the Q5s won't deliver lifelike "slam" on bass guitars or toms or kickdrums (just ask *anyone* who's heard the Qs in my listening room, including half a dozen manufacturers); it's that they won't exaggerate that "slam" (and in the process obscure the pitches, timbres, and durations of notes above and below that mid-to-upper bass peak). Exaggeration just isn't part of their design brief.

I suppose I should say another word about the Q5s disappearing act, although it would be the same word I used about its bass response. These things just aren't there as sound sources, *provided they are properly set up and driven*. Their staging is vast (on recordings with vast staging), their imaging even more precise and lifelike than that of the M5 (thanks to the reduction in enclosure noise and possibly the reshaping of the cabinet), their perspective entirely recording-dependent.

This does bring me, however, to the downsides of the Q5s. Even though they are incredibly demure loudspeakers by multiway standards—a mere 47" high, 11.8" wide, and 19.5" deep—their internal volume is actually greater than that of the physically larger M5s, which means that, like the M5s, these guys are capable of injecting a tremendous amount of energy (particularly bass energy) into the room. As was the case with the M5, unless you live in a palace you will need to carefully and extensively "treat" sidewalls, frontwalls, and backwalls to get the kind of performance out of the Q5s that I am getting in my room. As noted, you will also need to toe these speakers out more than you did with the M5s, so that you're not listening to that "hottish" beryllium tweeter on axis. (If there is one area of this speaker that could stand improvement, IMO, it would be the tweet. I thought the blend of the MR-1 ring-radiator in the M5 was smoother and less audible, although the MR-1 was not as extended or as finely detailed or as dynamic as the MBe-1.) You will also need a *very* powerful amp to drive the Qs. Magico rates the Q5's sensitivity at 86dB, but as is usually the case with Magico speakers this rating is a bit misleading. The Q5 is a 4-ohm speaker, which means it takes 2 watts to reach its rated sensitivity; on top of this it is a 4-ohm speaker with a minimum impedance of 2.75 ohms at 56Hz. To sum this up in plain English, this is an 83dB-sensitivity loudspeaker that is also a fairly difficult load. You're going to need a very powerful, very high-quality solid-state amp or a humongous tube amp (like the ARC 610T, which is a great combination, by the bye) to drive these things to lifelike levels, even in a relatively small room. At \$30k less than the M5 the Q5 qualifies as an exceptional "bargain" by ultra-high-end standards, but a lot of that savings (and then some) may get eaten up by what you end up paying for a suitable amp and preamp.

As I said at the start of this review, I am fundamentally a "fidelity to mastertapes" type of listener. For me, high fidelity means fidelity to sources. Since I was in my twenties I've dreamt of a speaker like the Q5 but, since there was nothing like it until

now, I've settled for the "compromises" of 'stats, planars, and two-ways (some compromises!). Now that I've found a speaker that *does* do the things I love about 'stats, planars, and two-ways without their trade-offs, I'm a bit at a loss for words, save for "I want it." (Be careful of what you wish for, my friends.) I'm not going to call the Q5 "the best" speaker out there—there are far too many other worthy options, some of which will soon be coming my way, and too many other kinds of listeners for whom the Qs will probably be too colorless, too characterless, too "analytical," too lacking in "slam." What I will say is that they are, as of this writing, the "best for me." A dream come true. Now, if I can talk Wolf and Tammam into some sort of once-in-a-lifetime "deal" (which would be a first for the folks at Magico) I will do the unthinkable: I will put my money where my heart is and buy the damn things. **tbs**

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Four-way, five-driver, sealed-enclosure, floorstanding loudspeaker

Driver complement: Two 9" woofers, one 9" mid/bass, one 6" midrange, one 1" tweeter

Sensitivity: 86dB

Impedance: 4 ohms, 2.75 ohms min.

Frequency response: 18Hz-50kHz +/-3dB

Minimum amplifier power: 50W

Dimensions: 11.8" x 47" x 12.5"

Weight (net): 420 lbs. each

Price: \$60,000/pair

MAGICO

Berkeley, CA
(510) 649-9700
magico.net

JV'S REFERENCE SYSTEM

Loudspeakers: Magico Q5, TAD CR-1, MartinLogan CLX, Magnepan 1.7, Magnepan 3.7

Linestage preamps: Technical Brain TBC-Zero EX, Audio Research Reference 40

Phonostage preamps: Technical Brain TEQ-Zero EX and TMC-Zero step-up, Audio Research Reference 2

Power amplifiers: Technical Brain TBP-Zero EX, Audio Research Reference 610T,

Lamm ML2.2

Analog source: Walker Audio Proscenium Black Diamond Mk II record player, Da Vinci AAS Gabriel Mk II turntable with DaVinci Grand Reference Grandezza tonearm

Phono cartridges: Ortofon MC A90, Benz LP S-MR, H+S Ice Blue

Digital source: To be determined

Cable and interconnect: Synergistic Research Galileo Power Cords: Synergistic Research Tesla, Shunyata King Cobra, MIT

Accessories: Synergistic ART system, Shakti Hallographs (6), A/V Room Services Metu panels and traps, ASC Tube Traps, Critical Mass MAXXUM equipment and amp stands, Symposium Isis and Ultra equipment platforms, Symposium Rollerblocks and Fat Padz, Walker Prologue Reference equipment and amp stands, Synergistic Research Tesla power conditioner, Walker Valid Points and Resonance Control discs, Clearaudio Double Matrix SE record cleaner, HiFi-Tuning silver/gold fuses