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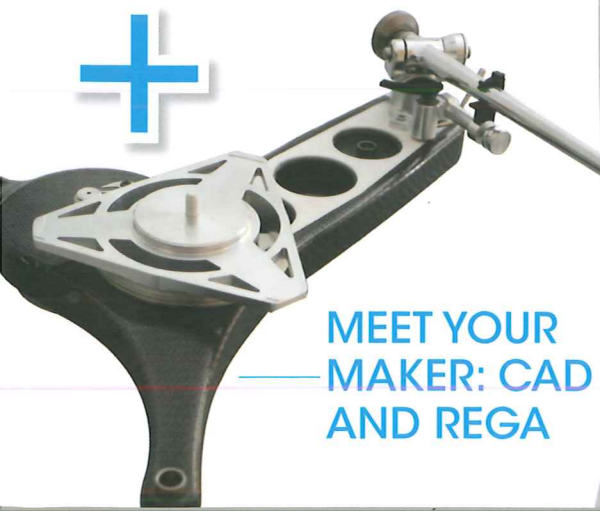
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MartinLogan Mikros 70 Earphones

By Chris Martens

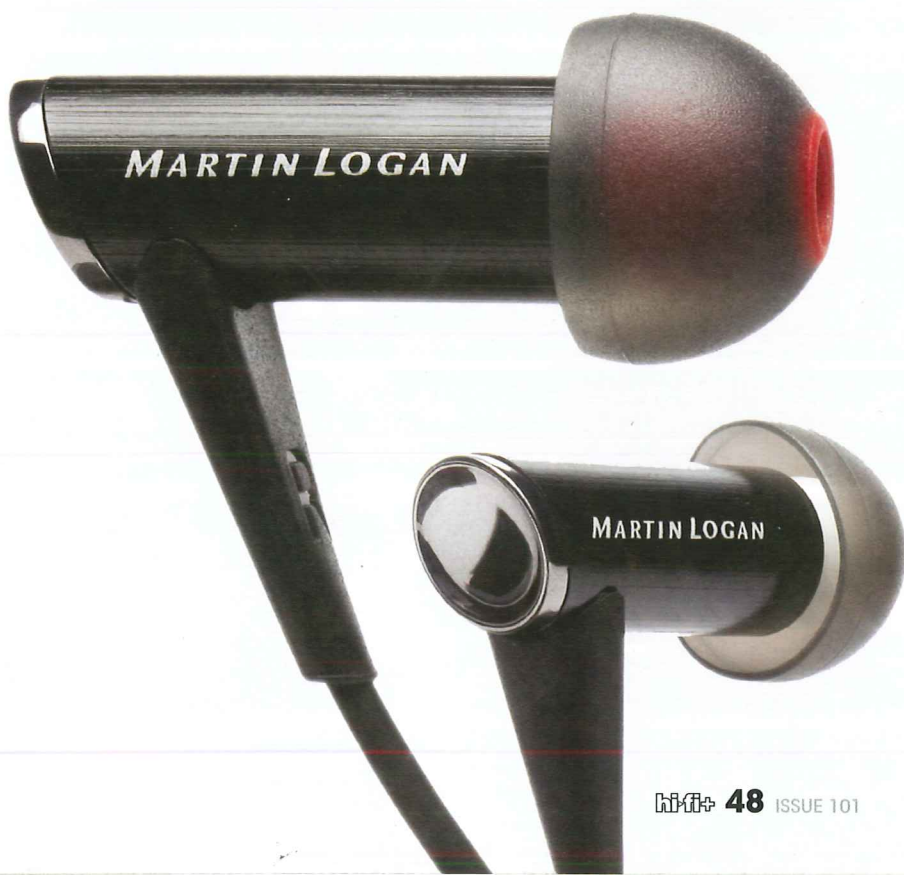
With the Mikros 70 earphone, MartinLogan has joined the growing group of loudspeaker manufacturers now offering products targeted toward headphone enthusiasts. Given MartinLogan's hard-won reputation as one of the world's premier makers of hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers, let me try to anticipate two key questions knowledgeable audiophiles are apt to ask. First, no, the Mikros 70 does not use electrostatic driver technology in any way, shape, or form; it's a perfectly straightforward, dynamic driver-equipped earphone conceptually similar to many others on the market. Second, yes, MartinLogan claims that the Mikros 70 is "inspired by the sonic clarity and detail of our legendary speakers" and aims to deliver, "the realism, richness, and purity of sound that MartinLogan's discerning customers have come to expect." Does the sound of the Mikros 70 back up these ambitious claims? Let's take a closer look at the earphone to find answers.

The Mikros 70 is an elegantly simple design featuring tube-shaped earpieces made of solid, black-anodized aluminium. The external ends of the tubes are fitted with polished metallic end caps and angled signal cable-relief fittings, while the in-ear ends of the tubes sport mesh-covered

sound outlets. Unlike the squat, bullet-shaped earpieces used in many earphones, the Mikros 70's tube-shaped earpieces are slender and relatively long – roughly 28.5mm from front to back with ear tips fitted. You might think this design detail would make the earphones uncomfortable or unwieldy to use, but I found the exact opposite to be true. In practice, you simply insert the Mikros 70s for an initial trial fit and then use the easy-to-grasp bodies of the earpieces as joysticks to "steer" the earphones into a final, comfortable wearing position.

Like a number of higher-end earphones we have seen of late, the Mikros 70s follow a trend toward use of relatively small-diameter dynamic drivers – in this instance, 6.6mm drivers. Some prospective earphone buyers have been conditioned to believe that "bigger is better" when it comes to earphone drivers, but if you stop to think about things for a moment you'll see this isn't necessarily the case. After all, smaller drivers can, in theory, be lighter, stiffer, more agile, and easier to control, perhaps demonstrating the truth of the old adage that, "good things come in small packages."

The 'phones are fitted with black rubberized signal cords said to "dampen and isolate noise that can be transmitted through contact and movement..." As a convenience for smartphone users, the Mikros 70 comes fitted with an inline, Apple-approved, three-button mic/remote control module that is sleek and easy to use. The he 'phones come ▶



▶ with a neat little leatherette semi-hard-shell travel case that protects the Mikros 70s when carried in your pocket or handbag.

To complete the comfort picture, the 'phones come with five sets of rubber eartips (three bulb-type single-flange tips and two dual-flange tips). A clever detail touch is that MartinLogan color-codes the sound outlet tubes of their ear tips, using red to denote the right channel and white to denote the left channel, making it easy to tell which channel is which at a glance. All things considered, I regard the Mikros 70 as an ergonomic delight. Contrary to popular belief, earphone fit is deceptively difficult to get right so I think MartinLogan deserves great credit for having come up with a winner on its very first try.

MartinLogan advises that the Mikros 70s require "15-30 hours of break in at moderate listening levels before critical listening" – a tip I found important to follow. Straight from the box, the Mikros 70s sounded a bit dark, thick, and compressed, but over time their sound opened up significantly, with improved transparency and better overall tonal balance.

How does the Mikros 70 sound overall? The easiest way I can answer this question is to offer three 'snapshots' of the earphones' sonic character. Through the midrange, which in my view is the frequency band where the MartinLogan's are at their best, the sound of the Mikros 70 is well balanced, nuanced, and appropriately rich in tonal colours. In the treble region, the Mikros 70 is pleasing smooth, but also somewhat rolled off and reticent sounding, so that high frequency harmonics and other treble details sound pulled back in the mix, thus causing the earphones to sound less open and transparent than they otherwise might. Then, in the bass region, the Mikros 70 sounds overly forward and thus slight exaggerated, so that on wide bandwidth musical material – orchestral recording, for example – low frequency instruments tend to dominate more than they should.



The sonic characteristics I've just described are ones commonly encountered in earphones in this price class and the Mikros 70s offer such soulful and evocative midrange performance that you might be inclined to count them amongst your favourites in the class. Even so, though, I must admit I felt a bit of disappointment. Historically, MartinLogan's loudspeakers have been known for their terrific openness, transparency, and detail – especially in the treble region – and I suppose I had hoped the Mikros 70s would closely mimic MartinLogan's traditional 'house sound'. But the fact is that they do not. Though pleasant enough in their own right, the Mikros 70's sound considerably darker, warmer, and – in the treble region – more subdued and withdrawn than would be the norm for MartinLogan loudspeakers.

Let me provide a handful of musical examples to show how these sonic qualities play out with real-world music. One revealing piece I tried was violinist Hilary Hahn's performance of Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending* [Colin Davis, London Symphony Orchestra, Deutsche Grammophon]. On this piece, the middle voices of the orchestra sounded lovely and evocative, while string tones – often a sore point with mid-priced earphones – were golden and buttery smooth. The only discontinuity I noted was that, when the string basses held forth, they were pushed well forward in the mix, almost as if the bass section were positioned a good 20 feet or so in front of the rest of the orchestra (which, of course, would not be the case). However, as Ms. Hahn's solo violin lines soared upward in pitch – representing, of course, the lark ascending – I noted that the upper register of the violin seemed to lose energy and vitality, and that the high frequency harmonics and bowing sounds I know ▶

▶ to be present in the recording were significantly recessed. Taken as a whole, the presentation from the Mikros 70s was not unpleasant and had its strong points (again, the lovely middle voices of the orchestra), yet it seemed at times to give the impression that the recording had, figuratively speaking, developed a “head cold”, meaning that it came up lacking in clarity and transparency.

Another instructive track was ‘Wasting Time’ from Jack Johnson’s *On and On* [UMVD Labels]. Instrumentation is simple, consisting of a beautifully recorded drum kit, bass, and electric guitar accompanying Johnson’s lilting, island-inflected vocals. Johnson’s vocals sounded terrific, largely because they fell right in the middle of the Mikros 70s broad, midrange ‘sweet spot’, as did most of the guitar part. The electric bass lines, which should have a powerful, loping Caribbean cadence, sounded quite good but slightly too prominent and thick – in the process losing some of the lithe and agile “bounce they might normally have had. The drum kit, per se, sounded quite solid, but the cymbals, which play a key role in this track, were notably lacking in shimmer, sustain, and sparkle. Under normal circumstances, one of the prettiest sections of ‘Wasting Time’ is a beautiful passage near the middle of the song where one briefly hears the ride cymbal in isolation, ringing, shimmering, and fairly glowing in all its treble glory. With the Mikros 70 in play however, the top end transient and textural details were to a degree suppressed, so that the effect was more like hearing a cymbal playing from an adjacent room rather than from just a few feet away. Let me emphasize, then, that the Mikros 70’s sound is by no means jarring or unpleasant. It’s just that it lacks the low-frequency balance and treble extension that might help it sound more vital and realistic.

The MartinLogan Mikros 70 is a good earphone and one that, depending on your sonic tastes, could potentially be considered a leading contender in its price class. Let me also reiterate that the Mikros 70 is an ergonomic delight. But with these favourable points duly noted, let me add that the Mikros 70 does not fully live up to the sonic promise that the MartinLogan name traditionally implies. MartinLogan speakers are known for their clarity, balance, transient speed, and almost uncanny transparency. I, for one, would hope and expect to see the firm work to develop a range of earphones that deliver those same qualities in ample measure. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Single-driver, universal-fit earphone

Driver complement: one 6.6mm

dynamic driver per earpiece

Accessories: Earphones, signal cable

with built-in on-cord mic and remote

controls, protective leatherette semi-

hard shell case, three pairs of bulb-type

single-flange rubber ear tips (sizes S, M,

and L), two pairs of dual-flange rubber

ear tips (sizes S and M), and manual.

Apple device compatibility:

- Remote and Mic are supported only by iPod nano (4th, 5th, and 6th generation), iPod classic, iPod touch (2nd, 3rd, and 4th generation), iPhone 4S, iPhone 4, iPhone 3GS, iPod (3rd generation), iPad 2, and iPad.

- Remote supported by iPod shuffle (3rd and 4th generation).

- Audio supported by all iPod models.

Frequency response: 8 Hz – 19kHz

Sensitivity: 98dB (at 1kHz with 1 mW input)

Impedance: 22 Ohms

Noise isolation: -33 dB (at 1kHz with 1 mW input, 30cm)

Weight: 13.4 grams

Warranty: 1 year, parts and labor

Price: £149

Manufactured by: MartinLogan

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