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MartinLogan Vista Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

I have always wanted to like Martin Logan loudspeakers. Having been an occasional user of Quad ESL 57's over the years, I am well aware of what the electrostatic approach can achieve, even if the shortcomings are blatantly illustrated by the way one tends to ignore Led Zeppelin and/or Little feat in favour of *Lute Music From The Sixteenth Century* when fingering through the record collection. Time was when I used to play around with sub-woofers and crossovers in an effort to enlarge the operating window of the Quads, with fairly unspectacular results (if one ignores electric shocks and fireworks), but I gained enough experience to know that it is no easy task. So any company that is into building real world electrostatics, by which I mean something that will go reasonably loud and has some presentable bass, gets the thumbs up from me. Which is what Martin Logan have been doing since the mid-eighties, and with the sole exception of the CLS, have always opted for a hybrid approach, where the electrostatic element deals with the mid and top and a moving-coil woofer in a cabinet is used to provide bass. In theory at least, this allows for greater power handling as the panel is not called upon to undergo the large diaphragm excursions involved in reproducing low-frequencies and the potential for bass is now governed by more familiar considerations associated with conventional box loudspeakers. In practice, combining the two distinctly different technologies presents a considerable number of difficulties that have to be successfully overcome

to achieve any kind of worthwhile result.

So far so good, and there is no denying that MartinLogan have achieved enviable commercial success with this formula over the years, but if I am honest I must say that none of the considerable number of models I've experienced have done it for me. Most of what I have found unsatisfactory has revolved around the bass performance; it has always sounded overblown, sluggish and with all the liveliness of a dead slug. This might well be explained by 'voicing' for the American market, and I am quite happy to accept that in Kansas (from where the 'Logans originate) they have living rooms the size of football pitches, constructed from timber that soaks up bass, and that they design their speakers accordingly, but on the occasions I have heard them in an average British room I have always been overwhelmed by the enormous, and enormously tuneless, bottom-end. Either way, listening to (and on occasions living with) MartinLogan's has thus far never managed to lift my skirt, so to speak.

Then I got the chance to listen to the Summits, reviewed by RG in Issue 44. (There is also an in-depth interview with Gayle Sanders, the man that started the company, which makes

for interesting reading). This session, I have to admit, was something of a revelation, as suddenly all the reasons that I had for disliking MartinLogan products seemed to vanish. The bass end was taught and fast; even a little

lean for my tastes, (but then

that's how RG likes it and had it adjusted accordingly)

and it integrated seamlessly with the electrostatic panel, to great musical effect. So rather than turn my nose up at the opportunity to try out the entry-level Vista I perhaps a little nervously agreed. Slightly smaller

than the Summit, the Vista looks to be as far as I can tell, a passive version

of the middle of the range Vantage model. So no active bass, but the same well engineered 8-inch unit with an aluminium cone and long excursion, this time working in a vented enclosure. The

MartinLogans have always looked elegant, due in no small part to the distinctive electrostatic panel which is gently curved and semi transparent; I'm sure this goes a

long way to reducing their visual dominance of the room that they occupy. I also feel that the proportions of this latest generation work particularly well. As an aside,



► have the ML's become the most recognisable loudspeaker of the last couple of decades? I had a phone call late one night from an excited girlfriend in America to say that she had just seen a pair of speakers 'just like yours' in an episode of Friends on television. Thanks for that.

Unpacking and setting up the Vista's proved to be interesting, as I had recollections of previous MartinLogans being rather flimsy in their construction and by comparison the Vistas felt reassuringly solid. The electrostatic panel is housed in a rigid aluminium frame that is in turn bolted to the bass cabinet; this is built in an asymmetric fashion so that there is only one pair of parallel surfaces in an effort to reduce internal standing waves. Bi-wiring is provided by proprietary 4mm binding posts, mounted along with the IEC mains input as part of the back panel. This also carries the bass port, which if I am being picky, is a bit flimsy. The general standard of finish is to an excellent standard, and the Vista gives off a general air of refinement and attention to detail. This even extends to the owner's manual, which was well written, informative and provided useful information about setting up and running in; which unfortunately the review pair was not. Internally, the crossover is built using high quality components, and a small separate board takes care of the power supply for the panel. The coupling transformer for the audio is a decent sized torroid. Partnering equipment consisted of the

usual suspects, a Linn LP12 or Densen 400XS front-end, heavily modified Audio research SP10 or Hovland HP100 feeding a variety of power amps, including the Naim NAP300, Densen B350 mono blocks and two pairs of Cyrus Mono-Xs for bi-amplifying.

With a less than average sensitivity and a nominal four-Ohm impedance (which, it should be noted does drop to nearly one Ohm at high frequencies) the Vistas would seem to need plenty of power together with load tolerance - nor are they shy about being driven hard. But it is also about controlling the bottom end, which as the speakers ran in, started to show signs of getting a bit out of control. While their more expensive siblings offer very useful adjustment of the bottom-end parameters via the active bass section, with the Vistas this has to be achieved manually by careful positioning, and in a room which seems to have an adverse reaction to 30-40 litre ported enclosures sitting on the floor, this was a painstaking process. Spikes are mandatory (and supplied)

but I ended up using some fairly chunky cones that elevated the speakers nearly two inches off the floor, which went a long way to removing a degree of thickness at the bottom end.

The Vistas (along with all other ML loudspeakers) do not actually apply polarising voltage to the electrostatic panel until a signal is present, and will switch off after ten minutes or so, a small blue LED on the front panel indicating status.

Once charged, the membrane will have a tendency to attract dust and small particles that over time will lead to deterioration of performance.*

If I am honest this was always a big problem for me with ML's in the past. In a room with a real fire (I'll also confess to the occasional cigarette) and a system with valves and styli ageing, the last thing I needed was a loudspeaker whose performance was dying from day one. Making the units signal activated is a neat way of sidestepping the problem, but in practice the speakers will sound a little 'dull' for a few minutes until the diaphragm is uniformly charged. The review pair suffered from a slight mains hum, audible from the panel when energised, MartinLogan are aware of this and have identified the problem which is easily rectifiable and will not occur with future production.

I always find listening to panel loudspeakers an interesting process after a lengthy period of using conventional (in my case, quite small) boxes, and there is a certain period of readjustment that occurs while ►

* Such is Martin Logan's confidence in their new manufacturing technique for the membrane that they suggest cleaning off the speakers with a brush and a vacuum cleaner to restore the units to full health.



▶ you get used to a very different presentation. The considerable effort I put into taming the bass response was well rewarded as it allowed the panels to perform unhindered and demonstrate just what they could do. Having been used to the precision and focus of small monitors doing the disappearing act, it comes as a bit of a shock when you hear that Vistas produce this big wall of sound that, rather than projecting music at you, seems to engulf you in it. It's a bit like the difference between having two spotlights on stage that highlight a small area with a tight focus, or conversely, illuminating the whole area with bright floodlights. Further small adjustments to the toe in proved beneficial in terms of tightening the image up, and the tilt of the panel makes quite a difference to the tonal balance at the listening position. But I was never able to make the speakers completely disappear in my room, nor increase the apparent depth behind the soundstage. But you know what? It really didn't seem that important. The Vistas were proving to be thoroughly enjoyable, and to use a by now very tired cliché, had me more interested in playing music than further tweaking. Apart from anything else, there was a wonderful novelty in not having to pussyfoot around and avoid music that could prove damaging; an electrostatic that wants to party? Winding it up to antisocial levels and listening to heavy rock or punk proved especially good fun. The character of the Vistas with this sort of music still errs toward the generous at the bottom end, and there is not quite the precision with timing, nor the speed that the Summits (or some other good systems) seemed to be able to achieve. But there was a good sense of integration between the panel and the cabinet that held true for the vast majority of material that I played, and I was rarely reminded

that I was listening to a hybrid design. The midrange performance was articulate and clean, with that lack of smearing and coloration that good electrostatics seem to manage so well, while the top was, in my judgement ever so slightly recessed, and possibly not quite as extended as I have heard from say, the Piega ribbons, sometimes giving the impression of being a little closed in at the frequency extreme.

None of which hindered my enjoyment of the Vista's one bit, which continued to provide a highly addictive 'close your eyes' sort of musical experience. I'm not sure exactly why, maybe it is down to that exceptional



midrange coherence, but the MartinLogan's favoured vinyl over CD more than any other speaker I have used, highlighting the dynamics and fluidity that analogue seems to do so well, and most listening sessions ended up being an indulgent and enjoyable trawl through my record collection.

I was a little worried that after hearing the top of the range Summit,

my experience with the Vista might prove to be a disappointment. I can only say that this was never the case. If anything, it would seem to be even more of an achievement bearing in mind the price tag of just under three grand. Ironically, the Vista could prove to be

more demanding of amplification than the more expensive models, given the part that plays in defining the bass performance. But that aside, I think this is probably the loudspeaker I have been waiting years for

MartinLogan to produce. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid electrostatic loudspeaker
Frequency response:	43 - 22,00 Hz +/- 3dB
Sensitivity:	90dB for 2.83 Volts/Metre
Impedance:	4 Ohms nominal 1.2 Ohms@ 20KHz
Crossover frequency:	450 Hz
Recommended amplifier requirements:	100 - 200 Watts per channel
Dimensions (WxHxD):	273 x 1445 x 427mm
Weight:	24.5 Kg
Price:	£2995

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