

Sound in Motion

Martin Logan made its name with a range of hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers – but can it repeat that success with a more traditional design? Jon Myles finds out.

It's a Martin Logan – but not as we usually know them.

The American company has built its reputation on exceptionally fine-sounding hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers. But in a move to broaden the customer base there's now a new range of more traditional transducers on offer.

They vary in size and price from the range-topping Motion 40 floorstanders to the Motion 15 on test here. Bookshelf, centre and surround-sound

alternatives are also available for those looking towards an AV package.

The common thread between all the models is the use of a Folded Motion tweeter – a Heil-type folded ribbon design which should, in theory, give a closer sonic match to Martin Logan's more expensive hybrid electrostatic models.

This is mated to a 5.25-inch aluminium-coned woofer in a sturdily-built rear ported cabinet finished in a classy-looking real cherrywood veneer

(gloss black and white are also available). The top slopes slightly towards the back to help break up standing waves within the cabinet.

A word of praise for the speaker posts – substantial thumbscrew designs which enable a super-tight fit when using speaker cables with spade lugs, but will also accommodate banana connectors.

SOUND QUALITY

There's no doubt these Martin Logans has been engineered for a distinctive



sound – and initial impressions are all positive.

For what is in essence a mini-monitor it has a beguiling top end. The Folded Motion tweeter sounds silky smooth and adds a great sense of air to vocals.

Kairos 4Tet's 'Home To You' was immensely well-projected. There's a tremendous sense of separation between Marc O'Reilly's vocals and the subtle violin backing which imbues the track with all the atmosphere it deserves. In fact, the Motion 15s absolutely shine with all vocals – with only the occasional dip into sibilance on the toughest of tracks.

Barb Jung's 'The Men I Love' highlighted its abilities, the Stockport singer's jazz crooning soaring free from the speakers and hanging in the air in front of me. Subtle intonations of phrasing and changes in pace come to the fore to provide a sumptuous sound.

Try something with a little more weight and depth and the Martin Logan's don't disgrace themselves. There's little bass output below 60Hz but even then the balance is well-judged so the lack of serious deep bass doesn't seem to distract. New Order's 'Age Of Consent' romped along nicely with a good sense of timing. The inherent speed and detail of the folded ribbon tweeter also helps bring out little musical flourishes that can remain hidden on other loudspeakers.

Taking time with set-up and positioning is also crucial here. A good pair of stands is essential and moving the speakers closer to the wall helped augment the bass. Firing straight down the room also gave the best integration between the drivers. Obviously you are never going to get prodigious bass from this size of speaker – and pressed hard it can start to sound a little bloated and thumpy. But the Martin Logan is trading on something different – the strengths of clarity and naturalness.

Listening to some classical music – to be precise the Scottish Chamber Orchestra's 'Beethoven Piano Concerto No 3' – and the atmosphere of the venue and recording acoustic came through vividly. There's masses of fine detail and a resolution and focus to the music that brings the performance to life wonderfully.

Interestingly, the Martin Logans came into my listening room hard on

the heels of the recently reviewed KEF LS50 mini-monitors. Both cost the same per pair – yet have a remarkably different character from each other.

While the KEFs produce a big, bold sound that belies their size the Martin Logans sound smoother and airier up top – electrostatic like. That's because Martin Logan customers asked for small box loudspeakers able to match their big hybrid electrostatics, within a surround-sound system. That explains their use of a Folded Motion tweeter.

CONCLUSION

Martin Logan has produced a fine-sounding loudspeaker with the little Motion 15. Cosmetically, it easily justifies its £800 price-tag. Sonically, it's a brave attempt to bring some of the characteristics of the company's hybrid electrostatics down to a lower price bracket.

The star of the show is undoubtedly the Folded Motion tweeter which dictates the sound of the speaker. It is clean, fast and deliciously airy, giving vocals and acoustic instruments a wonderful

sense of freedom and lack of colouration.

That translates to superb projection of the music with images floating clear of the speakers and setting up an enveloping soundstage.

It's tempting to say the Motion 15 is best with simpler music such as light pop, folk, jazz quartets etc because the tweeter initially pushes you in that direction it's so enjoyable to listen to.

But that would be doing the whole package a disservice. It is just as refined and articulate on denser material – managing to hold its own in the rhythm department without losing any of its sophistication.

If you have ever hankered after a full-size Martin Logan hybrid electrostatic but had neither the space – or the funds – then this 'speaker could be just the ticket.



Cleverly-designed speaker posts make using lugs a breeze

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response measured broadly flat across the audio band, up to 10kHz. Upper midband output from 2kHz to 6kHz is strong, meaning the Motion 15 will project a lot of detail, sound fast and crisp. Above 10kHz high treble rises to a peak of +5dB at 16kHz and this will add a small hiss to treble, when extended high frequency content exists in a recording.

The dip in output around 600Hz is peculiar and may well push vocals back a little; many loudspeaker manufacturers

raise output in this region to push singers forward so the Motion 15s may sound a little recessed or polite.

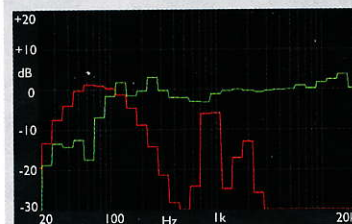
Output rises back up a little at low frequencies but there is little low bass from the small forward firing bass unit. It shuts off hard at 100Hz and the rear port takes over. The port extends output down to 50Hz, so the small cabinet does not go low.

Sensitivity was very high for a small loudspeaker, measuring 89dB from one nominal Watt of input (2.8V), helped by a bass unit with a low 3.8 Ohm d.c. resistance. Overall impedance measured 4.7 Ohms and our impedance analysis shows the port is tuned to 70Hz, but its breadth of operation is quite wide so bass damping will be good.

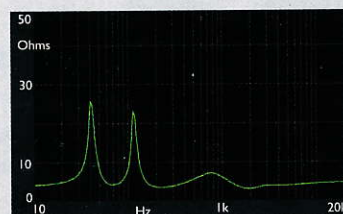
A 200ms decay analysis shows the Motion 15 to be very clean and free of overhangs, except at 100Hz where the box is a little active. The treble unit looks very smooth and refined.

The little Motion 15 will be forward, fast and detailed. It keeps well away from warmth of any sort. The box does not reach low. Little power is needed for high volume levels - unusual for a small loudspeaker. The Motion 15 measures well, but will have a specific presentation. NK

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



IMPEDANCE



MARTIN LOGAN MOTION 15 £800



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

A taste of the Martin Logan sound in a more domestically-acceptable and wallet-friendly package. Definitely worth an audition if you are looking for something a little different from the standard mini-monitor.

FOR

- fast, detailed sound
- superb vocal projection
- classy construction

AGAINST

- lack of low bass
- need careful set-up

Absolute Sounds
+44 (0) 208 971 3909
www.absolutesounds.com