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IS CONRAD-JOHNSON'S NEW ET7 THE PERFECT PREAMPLIFIER?

MartinLogan Impression ESL 11A hybrid electrostatic loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

Impression ESL 11A is part of the sextet of top-end floorstanding loudspeakers (as well as a duo of centre-channel speakers) that form MartinLogan's Masterpiece Series. This is a series with true scope, ranging from the Classic ESL9 fully passive model, through the trio of models optionally equipped with Anthem Room Correction (including this one) right up to the mighty CLX ART and Neolith flagship designs. These are electrostatic statements of intent, limited only by budgetary and room size concerns.

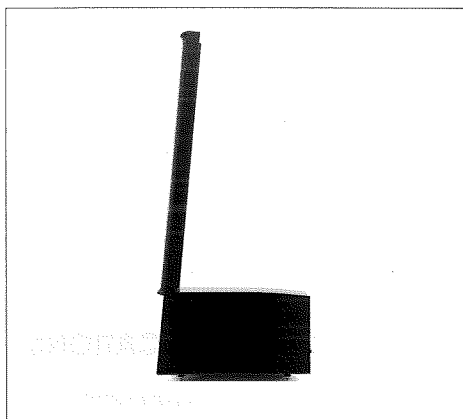
The Impression ESL 11A is perhaps the most interesting of all of these designs for those without Reference Class wallet dynamics, because of where it ultimately takes the electrostatic panel. As the name suggests, the ESL 11A features an 11" (279mm) wide XStat curved electrostatic panel to cover the midrange and treble. It's joined to a dynamic active bass cabinet, sporting twin 203mm drivers and a pair of 275W Class D amplifiers. Its size allows the Impression ESL 11A to be used in the kind of smaller listening rooms that often don't accommodate electrostatic designs because of their footprint, although the normal amounts of breathing space needed behind a stator panel does usually preclude their use in small rooms.

This is where things get interesting. The middle trio of Masterpieces – the Impression ESL 11A, the Expression ESL 13A, and the Renaissance ESL 15A – all include a 24-bit Vojtko DSP engine in place of a crossover, and come with an option to include ARC (Anthem Room Correction). This is a small cardboard box called a PBK (Perfect Bass Kit) and inside are instructions, measuring microphone, a microphone stand, and some long USB cables. By downloading a set of masterfiles from MartinLogan's website, placing the microphones in a number of positions around the listening room, and then applying the results to that Vojtko DSP engine, you can create a better environment for your loudspeakers by matching the low end of the loudspeaker to the room itself. Notionally at least, you could conceivably squeeze a pair of the Renaissance models into a shoebox of a room and equalise it into sounding good, but I'd recommend exercising a modicum of balance, as those stator panels still need room to breathe no matter how well equalised the bass gets. But, it's surprising just how well these speakers can now be accommodated in smaller rooms and that's what makes the Impression ESL 11A so interesting, because its size and response now can lend themselves to placing MartinLogans in rooms that were hitherto off limits. We all benefit from that!

In a way, this hits the target MartinLogan has been kind of aiming for. The company's loudspeaker designs – CLX and Neolith excepted – are not as demanding on an amplifier as many high-end designs, and a smaller and comparatively affordable electrostatic loudspeaker, that is simultaneously ideal for unfussy amplifier partnership, and capable of being used in a very wide range of rooms, is hard to resist. It's like the 'everyman' of high-end loudspeaker design.

Of course, ARC is an optional extra, which means if you decide not to go for it, the Vojtko DSP system acts as a conventional active crossover to integrate panel and subwoofer. This used to be one of the sticking points of MartinLogan – in that many could hear the point where the stator ends and the bass cabinet begins – but careful installation takes this point of inflexion to inaudibility. Familiarity helps here, too; live with a pair of Impression ESL 11A for a week or two (with or without ARC) and even the most rigid of box speaker enthusiasts will struggle to wonder what all the 'integration' fuss was all about. In many cases, you'll just hear a loudspeaker unless you are either really sensitive to that crossover point or have something to prove.

Set-up in any loudspeaker is important, but in an electrostatic design, it's crucial. Fortunately, MartinLogan's manual is extremely comprehensive, discussing both the basics and the fine tuning of installation. In essence, let the speakers run-in for a few



days to loosen up the bass driver, during which time you should only perform a rough installation (this was academic for me, as the review speakers had already long passed this point). Position the speakers between about two-to-three feet from the wall in front of the listener, and two feet from the side walls. Now place the hot seat at least twice the distance between the loudspeakers, at the apex of a symmetrical isosceles triangle. Toeing in is also discussed, including the flashlight trick (if you hold a torch under your chin and point it at the loudspeaker, it should illuminate the inner third of the panel). Once 72 hours or so of playing have passed, apply these same installation techniques with greater precision., paying great attention to the tilt of the loudspeakers to get the optimum tonal balance, imaging, and bass response (when the ARC system is not deployed, you can also adjust midbass and bass level, but these will be overridden when Anthem comes to town).

Spending a lot of time installing the loudspeakers to the best of your ability is not undermined by ARC; in fact, a good installation makes ARC's work slightly easier. ARC only works on low frequencies, and does not make distance compensation for poor placement. The Impression ESL 11A is still going to need to be a good couple of feet from the rear and side walls, and you are going to need to be around twice the distance from the speakers as the speakers are from one another, but it's surprising how much bass influences overall sound. ▶



“If you want deep-tissue analysis of your music, the Impression ESL 11A can do it well, but you get to enjoy a touch of heads-down boogie, too.”

▶ Correctly fettled, this is a truly wonderful loudspeaker. There are prodigious amounts of bass on offer in rooms appropriate to the speaker size and that, coupled to the exceptional level of detail that has long been a MartinLogan signature, make for a loudspeaker that just sings a siren's song to you. Moreover, it's surprising just how much of the top Neolith and CLX performance seems to have trickled down to these coherent and - above all - fun loudspeakers. I've long considered MartinLogans to be all about the imaging, for good reason. But with the Impression ESL 11A, it's all about the music, too. This isn't just a cerebral sounding loudspeaker, made for trying to hear what kind of rosin is used by the principal violinist. If you want deep-tissue analysis of your music, the Impression ESL 11A can do it well, but you get to enjoy a touch of heads-down boogie, too. I ended up listening to the live version of 'I'm Tore Down' from Jeff Healey's final album, *Mess of Blues* [Roughhouse]. This is not a subtle track of filigree detail (although it's extremely dynamic and unprocessed); it's pure guitar blues at its finest, and that finest is reproduced perfectly here. This is not an album that delivers great spiritual insights (except possibly the ones that come in a six-pack), but highlights any dryness or absence of 'mojo' in a system. And trust me, these speakers have got mojo!

The addition of ARC processing is, as you might have imagined, dependent on the room. At its best, it either does almost nothing to the sound or makes the most of a bad room. If its influence is more subtle, it might be best going native without the room correction, but a surprising number of rooms are nowhere near as good as their listeners imagine, and ARC acts well to show just how much more can be had from good speakers. I found that ARC gives the bass more clarity, definition, and depth, at the expense of a touch of refinement and pace. It's not a significant trade-off, however, and the overall benefits often outweigh any minor shortcomings to the performance.

ARC has one limitation, however... it's software is PC only. If you are in a Mac-only household that might mean finding a PC-using friend who is willing to run the program for you. The software is also somewhat dense for casual users, and could do with more of an 'idiot-proof' pathway, because the world keeps finding new ways to make better idiots.

Whether or not you decide to use the optional PBK system, the Impression ESL 11A is one of the hidden secrets in the MartinLogan line-up. Some will miss this on the way to bigger speakers, but they shouldn't. It's a powerful, dynamic, musical fun maker with the usual MartinLogan characteristics of good imagery and great detail, but adds to that a relatively small footprint, and terrific integration between cones and panel. Factor in the benefit of subtle DSP room compensation and this electrostatic hybrid design comes extremely highly recommended! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Hybrid electrostatic/dynamic loudspeaker with optional DSP room correction

Drive units: 112x28cm curved electrostatic panel; 2x 20.3cm cast basket, high excursion, rigid aluminium cone and extended throw drive assembly, non-resonance asymmetrical chamber format PoweredForce Forward bass drivers

Subwoofer power: 2x275 watts per channel (Class D, into four ohms)

Controls: Bass: ±10 dB under 75 Hz, Mid-Bass: -2 dB, 0 dB, +2 dB, ARC Room EQ: On, Off

Inputs: WBT-0703Cu nextgen five-way binding posts, AC Power, RJ45 (for ARC), mini USB (for ARC)

System Frequency Response: 29Hz-23kHz ± 3db

Dispersion Horizontal: 30 Degrees

Sensitivity: 91dB/2.83v/m

Impedance: Nominal 4ohms, Minimum 0.6 ohms at 20kHz

Crossover frequency: 300Hz

Weight: 40.9kg per speaker

Dimensions (HxWxD): 154.3x30.2x69.6cm

Price: £12,998 (black, dark and natural cherry), £13,998 (all other finishes), Anthem PBK option £288

Manufactured by: MartinLogan

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