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Reliable Source

MartinLogan's Source is its most affordable hybrid electrostatic to date

PRODUCT MartinLogan Source

TYPE Floorstanding hybrid electrostatic loudspeaker

PRICE £1,599 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 24x130x37cm

● Weight: 21.4kg ● Rear vented two-way hybrid electrostatic/moving coil speaker ● Impedance: 5 ohm (nominal) ● Frequency response 42Hz - 22kHz +/-3dB

CONTACT ☎ 020 8971 3909 # www.martinlogan.com



Electrostatic speakers are generally costly, bulky and need lots of space. They are also known to have expensive tastes in partnering equipment and the MartinLogan's reviewed here are no exception. Fortunately, MartinLogan has been driving down the cost of its speakers for some time (including the entry-level models), which makes the Source the most affordable yet by a significant margin. And like any good electrostatic there is a certain magic – a transparency and sophistication, a cohesiveness that's in a class of its own. In fact, if you've never heard a properly set-up pair of electrostatic speakers, then you're missing out on something very special indeed.

The Source electrostatics have, to a large extent, been made possible by the development of hybrid technology, which in the early days was deservedly criticised for lack of integration between the moving coil bass driver(s) and the ELS panel, which took over in the lower midrange. Over the years, MartinLogan has spent a great deal of time and effort on the arcane art of marrying these two apparently irreconcilable technologies. Matters regarding integration can't be taken for granted and, for that reason alone, MartinLogan speakers are effectively seamless across the audio band.

And the reasons for the low entry-level price? Well for starters, the absence of voicing controls on the back panel, and the displacement of the power supply (necessary to energise the electrostatic panel – a requirement for any true electrostatic) which has been removed from inside the speaker, and now lives in a small box on the end of trailing leads. The bass unit – the hybrid part of the deal – has also been simplified, with a pulp cone instead of aluminium alloy, which means it costs less to build and is less demanding of partnering amplification. But, don't assume that a pulp cone will necessarily sound worse. As it happens, the unit in the Source is very well integrated into the fabric of the sound as a whole and is a very sensible choice.



The Source looks familiar enough and follows the pattern of other floorstanding MartinLogan speakers. It has clear visual and technical references back to the Summit electrostatic: the angular bass driver enclosure and the slimmed-down surround on the panel, which was introduced a few years ago and consequently set the pattern for most of the speakers that have followed.

One major difference from its immediate predecessor, the entry-level Clarity, (which actually cost considerably more than this model) is the removal of the bypassable moving coil tweeter. This supplemented the electrostatic panel with the aim of widening the vertical listening window. It was useful when listening to the speaker while standing (or partying!) or, when your ear level was too high-up to detect a properly balanced account of the music. Given the Source's £1,599 price tag, it was probably considered too expensive, although other measures may have been substituted to improve vertical dispersion. It doesn't, however, prevent a loss of presence in the upper mid and treble, particularly if you're walking around the room while they're playing. They are definitely directional on both the vertical axis and, to some extent, on the horizontal.

SOUND QUALITY

The Source may not be what it says on the tin, but by any of the usual measures, it is a 'proper' MartinLogan. It's a real thoroughbred: very neat and tidy with considerable refinement and polish and there are no gimmicks: not even in the supplementary moving coil tweeter mentioned above. Even by MartinLogan standards, the Source doesn't put too much of a sheen on proceedings. It is not a lush sounding speaker by any means, but anyone who has acquired a taste for the kind of qualities that MartinLogans bring to the



“MartinLogan has been driving down the cost of its speakers, which makes the Source the most affordable yet.”

table will feel immediately at home here. It's a speaker with the unmistakable feel of a thoroughbred electrostatic.

It does, however, require careful running-in, which requires time and patience and low SPLs in the early days, until its find its feet. This is crucial, because at first, we found that the speakers paint the sonic picture in uneven lines, and at first, you too might find it too analytical for comfort.

But, once carefully run-in, the Source is pure MartinLogan quality. You will need to fine-tune the spacing to the back wall to find a comfortable volume level, though, (see Set-up, left). We tried the Source with a number of new amplifiers that were available to us. With the (digital) T+A Power Plant (see p56), the results were always on the wooden, hard-edged side of where we wanted to be. But with a more high-end solution, in the form of Denon's PMA-SA1 integrated amplifier, the

Source was better equipped to come on song.

While we have no proof, we have a strong feeling that the Source is not really an easy loudspeaker to drive. The impedance drops precipitously low at high frequencies and although it can't be drawing too much current at these frequencies, we doubt that MartinLogan's designers see their job as making life easy for amplifier designers! The Source needs a very clean sounding amplifier and one that's reasonably at ease with difficult loads. It could also benefit from a touch of valve like warmth, which will help to flesh out the midbass which can sound a little desiccated. MartinLogan's UK distributor, Absolute Sounds, could no doubt advise on suitable partnering amplification – it brings in Prima Luna, Krell and Audio Research amongst others. The Source is a true high-end speaker in everything but price, even if it does require a little molly-coddling as far as partnering ▶

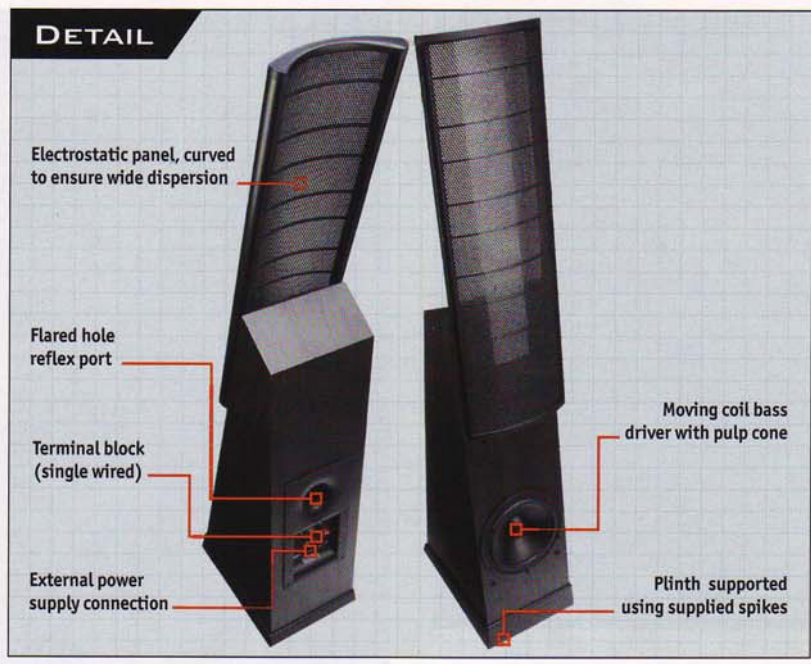


POSITIONING
 As always, you will have to allow for the way the Source talks to the room as a whole. This won't be too much of an issue if your room is long and relatively narrow. We arranged the speakers to fire from our room's narrow end down its length, well out from the back wall. Dipoles like The Source don't interact much with the side walls, so positioning can be close, but they do need space behind. In our room we were able to place them more than a metre and a half from the back wall.

But room integration could be an issue in shorter, squatter rooms, especially if this means they will end up close to the back wall. Be aware, however, that as much sound is radiated from the back of the electrostatic panel as from the front and is subsequently reflected by the wall.

The electrostatic panels, which generate almost all the midband, lean backwards at a fairly sharp angle (though some vertical re-orientation can be accommodated). And while this gives the sound stage some height, it only does so when the speakers are at a fair distance from the listening plane. Three metres is suggested.

SYSTEM MATCHING
 Although the Source is not expensive, it has quite ambitious tastes in partnering equipment. One of its duties was to act as a sounding board for a new amplifier on test at the same time – the T+A Power Plant. Although the T+A had more than enough grunt on tap, it didn't quite cut it (see the review on p56). For reasons that must have something to do with resolving ability, the Source is unusually responsive to the sound of the electronics that are used in its company. For example, they're not especially current hungry, but they need high-quality amplification that is happy driving low impedance, high frequency loads, or they'll just sound ill at ease.



equipment is concerned. But proper running-in, an impeccable source component and some quality cables will help, too. And, if like this reviewer, you have a penchant for classical music, (or other well recorded acoustical material that needs a high-resolution system, and medium replay levels), then the Source is a must-hear loudspeaker. And at this new ground breaking price of £1,600 per pair, MartinLogan ownership is now in reach of almost everyone. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



VERDICT

SOUND >> 93% [Progress bar]	PRO A real full size MartinLogan hybrid electrostatic for the lowest price ever, this newcomer is fully deserving of the best electronics and cabling you can afford
EASE OF DRIVE >> 89% [Progress bar]	CON Although it's affordable, it's not truly universal: you'll need plenty of space and good quality partnering equipment to get the best out of it.
BUILD >> 92% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 90% [Progress bar]	

CONCLUSION
 Brilliant performance in the MartinLogan style, this newcomer offers tremendous resolution at a bargain price, but needs care in setting up and choice of partnering equipment. It also requires room to breathe, but for the money it's cracking value.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 90%