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MARTINLOGAN

CLX LINEAR

Meet the new boss – a significant improvement on an already seminal loudspeaker

PRICE £19,998 per pair CONTACT Absolute Sounds ■ 020 8971 3909 ■ www.martinlogan.com

Filling the sizable shoes of a MartinLogan legend is a daunting proposition for a young pretender, but this new full-range electrostatic loudspeaker looks more than up to the job. We have high hopes for the CLX, which is set to replace the legendary CLS and is proudly described by the manufacturer as “the culmination of everything we have learned about electrostatic technology” – no idle boast.

Replacing the seminal, but long dead and buried CLS, this loudspeaker is available in two physically similar and acoustically near-identical versions. The Linear featured here, is the mainstream model, if a speaker like this could ever be described as mainstream.

The line of descent from the original speaker is obvious enough, but it has the sturdy proportions of a barn door: it measures 178.6(H) x 65.4(W) x 37.3(D) cm and the panels, transparent as usual, are 145cm long. The large panel and the unusual double diaphragm construction means the bass can be extended substantially, despite the absence of hybrid-style moving coil bass drivers. The result, on-paper, is a satisfying 56Hz reach within +/-3dB, meaning that it qualifies as a full audio band speaker. Treble is rated up to 23kHz within the same limits and sensitivity is a surprisingly civilised 90dB, which is mainstream moving coil territory.

The CLX does not qualify as a single-driver, full-range system. Most of the radiating area is the flat section, which uses the previously mentioned back-to-back double diaphragm to cope with the power and, in combination, handles the bass and midrange up to 360Hz. The rest of the audio band is delivered by the full-height, semi-cylindrical section near the inner baffle edge. The woodwork (aluminium on some variants), is not in fact wood, but a material called EcoSound, which uses wood waste, bamboo and paper, combined to form a rigid, well-damped composite which is also said to be ecologically sustainable. The main baffle is further stiffened by a tall, narrow baffle at right angles to the main panel, blocking some of the rear radiation and early arrival reflections from the side walls of the listening room, which would otherwise cause cancellations of the forward-directed output, an uneven response and loss of clarity.

SOUND QUALITY

Impressively, the CLX does various things much better than its elder brother. First, it has serious bass and image scale. When the orchestral basses kick in, the sound gathers stature and authority – you know it means business. Better still, it can play at volume levels that are seriously loud, even in a big room, not least because the sound

has unusually good forward reach, which is a benefit of the lack of side radiation of any dipole.

Our test listening room is about 11m long, but you'll need serious power to kick butt: don't think about using a weedy valve amp. Partly, this is because you need the extra power to cope with the extra operating headroom, but there is another issue here too – you really need something that is muscular enough and that has enough balls to make the most of its new dynamic capabilities.

The original CLS speaker was famously transparent (physically and sonically), but it also had a rawness, partly due to a dry, uneven upper bass. There was also sting – an audible edginess in the treble, though

this was partially mitigated in later versions. It was also incredibly directional and often gave the impression of listening to giant headphones though when everything was going right, it did have a touch of real magic. But, the CLX is not simply CLS updated.

“A superb loudspeaker and a much more civilised beast than its predecessor”

It goes much louder and deeper, and the bass is much better integrated into the fabric of the midband. Dispersion is also much less

problematic. The makers claim +/-30 degrees, which roughly corresponds with how it sounds. Most of all, the CLX is in many ways comparable with a good box speaker across a broad range of music types, with no need to go too easy on the loud pedal.

Pleasingly, it retains the key features of its predecessor. It is still sonically the most transparent of transducers, especially compared with Quad: it's a great and improving product, but one that has always been hamstrung by the multiple layers of material between the diaphragm and the ears. From this point of view, this is an altogether more purist design.

We agree that it costs serious money, but this is undeniably a superb loudspeaker and a much more civilised beast than its predecessor. It won't cause the same divided opinions as its predecessor and it is much more usable, without being locked into one particular type of music over any other.

That said, we see this as a loudspeaker that is best suited to acoustic music. Although the gap with normal loudspeakers is largely closed, it is still not totally obvious what this speaker would offer above and beyond what is readily available from a good moving coil loudspeaker to the kind of person who has serious cravings for Rock 'n' Roll, or to acolytes

of electronic music. But, the fact remains that the CLX is several steps up the evolutionary ladder from previous MartinLogans. ■

Alvin Gold

