

Static electricity



Loudspeaker hybrids sometimes give the worst of all worlds, but MartinLogan's new Ethos brings the best, as **Channa Vithana** discovers...

Despite the company's relatively low UK profile – the name MartinLogan doesn't quite roll off the tongue in the same breath as KEF or Tannoy – its customers tend to be devotees, disciples even. Owning a MartinLogan loudspeaker isn't just a happening, it's a passion.

MartinLogans inspire emotions in their owners as an exotic, high end sportscar would. They're more than just functional objects, they're things to covet, obsess over. You need to invest time in them, to get the positioning and set-up just right, and considerable sums of money are necessary to purchase ancillaries capable of driving them to get them to give of their best.

As any Quad electrostatic owner knows, panels are great in some respects. They run rings around conventional moving coil designs in so many ways, from their excellent dispersion characteristics to the superb transients – the super-light film used to move air is so much more responsive than a monster magnet heaving a big, heavy cone back and forth. They give a delicate and subtle sound that classical music fans in particular love. The trouble is that the panels don't have a particularly large excursion; a good moving coil bass unit can shift far higher volumes of air.

This is precisely why MartinLogan has built its business around hybrids, which use electrostatic panel drivers, that cross over to large, conventional units for lower bass duties. This attempts to give the best of both worlds – the physicality of a moving coil bass driver allied to the delicacy and subtlety of an electrostatic panel.

The Ethos is very tall at 1,507x273x463mm, albeit not so heavy at 19kg. The semi-translucent look of its electrostatic treble and midrange driver is visually arresting, the elegantly curved and angled panel is superbly designed from high-quality

aerospace aluminium, enclosing a plasma-bonded diaphragm polymer film. Beneath and behind this sits the 200W actively driven bass driver. A 24-bit Vojtko DSP 'engine' trims the response of the bass driver to the panel, with plus or minus 10dB adjustment to tailor the amount of bass produced from the cabinet to the listener's room. As I later discovered, this is an important facility. The bass cabinet itself sports an aluminium coned active driver, bolstered by a down firing, passive polypropylene coned drive unit.

Each cabinet rear also incorporates an IEC mains input for power, and very nicely designed single-wire

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
MartinLogan Ethos

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: hybrid electrostatic loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
19kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
273x1,507x463mm

FEATURES:
• specified sensitivity: 92dB

• specified impedance: 40hm

• specified frequency response 34-23,000Hz

• high frequency/midrange driver: 1,118 x 234mm XStat CLS electrostatic transducer panel

• 203mm aluminium cone PoweredForce active bass driver with 200W/40hm Class D amplification

• 203mm polypropylene cone passive radiator

DISTRIBUTOR:
Absolute Sounds

TELEPHONE:
020 8971 3909

WEBSITE:
martinlogan.com

binding posts. Its rear section comes in a choice of high quality Black Ash, Dark Cherry or Flamed Teak standard real wood finishes.

Sound quality

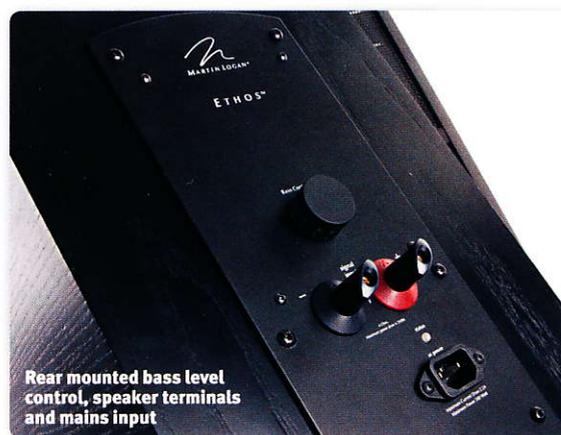
Without doubt, the MartinLogan Ethos is one of the most distinctive and in some ways sublime sounding devices I've heard. It's everything a high-end loudspeaker should be – charismatic in its own unique way, striking sounding and yet seriously subtle too. After careful set-up and a good long warm up, what you first notice is the wonderful dispersion qualities, as it spreads music around the room. In particular, vocals and individual instruments are exactly, yet engagingly reproduced, and it was especially so with Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. I was bowled over by the way these speakers communicated his subtle intonations and distinctive phrasing of lyrics.

With the bass control set correctly, the texture of instruments such as Eddie Van Halen's electric guitar on *Beat It* and the tunefulness and extension to the Louis Johnson bass line to *Billie Jean* were a pleasure. The overall sound of *Thriller* was so compelling, the speakers pulling me right into the mix and holding me transfixed. The Ethos' ability to communicate the effortlessly propulsive musical timing of percussion, brass, synthesiser, bass and vocals on *Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'* was a joy.

Beautifully built and sonically arresting, the Ethos is an excellent music-maker...

I think it's fair to say that the MartinLogans do this sort of music superbly, offering that lovely electrostatic treble and mid with a bass you'd never get from a thin film stretched across a panel. Yet when asked to play classical music, it has a delicacy that shows its strength in depth. With the *Scarlatti Harpsichord Sonatas* by Blandine Verlet, the intricate phrasing of the playing was carried beautifully, all set within an unforced recorded acoustic.

Coalescing large and densely layered ninety-plus piece symphonic orchestration with complex electronica, the *Tron Legacy* original soundtrack by Daft Punk had great scale and power – indeed the spoken-word track by Jeff Bridges within *The Grid* had texture that



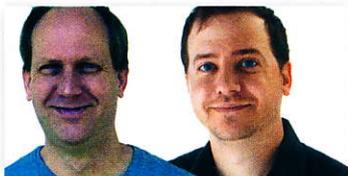
Rear mounted bass level control, speaker terminals and mains input



Hidden below the front-firing active bass unit is a downfiring ABR

Q&A

DAVID PRICE SPEAKS WITH
MARTINLOGAN'S JUSTIN BRIGHT
AND JOE VOJTKO...



DP: What are the advantages and disadvantages of electrostatics?

ML: Because the electrostatic diaphragm is essentially massless, it is capable of responding to each individual sonic event with extraordinary speed. MartinLogan electrostatic speakers output a more focused dispersion pattern, which maximises the direct sound field and minimises the reflected sound fields and room reverberation. The result is that the sound stage is there, the original room acoustics are preserved and you are transported into the performance. One disadvantage is the added circuitry required to drive an electrostatic panel, which includes a bias supply and audio transformer. The large transducer size is also a disadvantage when compared to their moving coil counterparts. MartinLogan has addressed both of these issues by developing lower cost, highly reliable electronics and by making the transducers transparent and very thin.

What frequency does the panel crossover to the bass unit, and why?

Real world sound sources radiate sound so that each frequency reaches the listener at exactly the right moment. MartinLogan electrostatic loudspeakers utilise a single transducer capable of reproducing most of the audio spectrum. This unique property of ESL transducers means that MartinLogan loudspeakers crossover at lower frequencies – typically 250 Hz – thus assuring that each audio event reaches your ear at exactly the right time.

Do your electrostatic panels have superior dispersion?

The single ESL transducer results in a continuous dispersion pattern through most of the midrange and up to the highest frequencies. The cone midrange has wide dispersion, however its dispersion narrows as frequencies increase – until it crosses over to the tweeter. The tweeters typically have very wide dispersion at the crossover frequency. So the midrange-tweeter combination changes the speaker's dispersion pattern over a relatively small frequency range.



HOW IT COMPARES

AT PRICE RANGES just above or below the £6,498 Ethos, there is strong competition. While not quite as good at timing, in comparison the Ethos still outperforms the Bowers and Wilkins 804 Diamond, which can sound somewhat nasal and midrange restricted.

Compared to a well-sorted Quad 2905 electrostatic, the Ethos still cannot completely 'disappear' from being 'heard as a box' due to its bass cabinet, but it sounds better throughout the frequency range with superior low frequency tunefulness and wider, more even spatiality across the listening room.

The Ethos also outperforms the Sonus faber Cremona M floorstander; the beautiful Italian doesn't time as well as the ML with slightly lagging bass in comparison. Yet still the Sonus faber has more affinity with symphonic classical music, and has a better built and finished cabinet – and is even more elegantly designed.

A special thanks to Steve Wilcock of KJ West One, who delivered us the review samples!

IN SIGHT



splendidly conveyed the actor's vocal gravitas. At high volumes though, the Ethos reminded us that it's not immune from the laws of physics; it couldn't quite comfortably convey the symphonic orchestration that creates the grand, sweeping vistas in the score – the film soundtrack sounded a little forced as a result.

Trying Brahms' *Piano Concerto No.2 in B Flat Major*; *OP83* (a 1959 recording) played by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and conducted by Herbert von Karajan, and César Franck's *Symphonie D-Moll in D Minor* (1976) performed by Orchestre De Paris and conducted by Daniel Barenboim, elicited a similar result. I loved the delicacy of the instrumental timbre, these loudspeakers giving a 'hear through' experience to the recorded acoustic in a way that would make the even the excellent conventional coned loudspeakers available at the price sound nasal and congested. It was only on loud orchestral peaks, at high volumes, that they betrayed the limitations of their ability to move air. That said, this was rarely obvious with big, punchy power pop; the Mobile Fidelity pressing of *Kick* by INXS sounded propulsive with textured, tuneful bass lines, crunching guitars and excellent vocals.

Overall, the active bass driver integrates extremely well with the electrostatic panel – something that earlier generations of MartinLogan loudspeakers didn't do quite so well. The result is a big, wideband sound

with oodles of air and space in the treble, an expansive and delicate midband with excellent image placement, and a big-booted bass. Right across the frequency spectrum, this loudspeaker sounds even and open, and is a pleasure to listen to.

Conclusion

Beautifully built, arrestingly styled and sonically special when configured correctly, the new MartinLogan Ethos is an excellent music-maker with its own unique beauty. But as with all high-end loudspeakers, whether or not its own particular blend of talents suits you is something that you can't decide from reading reviews alone. I'd suggest you go for an extended audition, with your favourite music and ideally the amp you'd be driving it with. If you're anything like me, you'll find it an uplifting experience. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Outstanding midband and treble gives air, space and great vocal timbre; tuneful bass

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Lacks scale and power of rival box speakers

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: Gorgeous loudspeakers, brilliantly talented in some respects, and a joy to have in the home

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL

