

The MartinLogan Motion 15 Loudspeaker

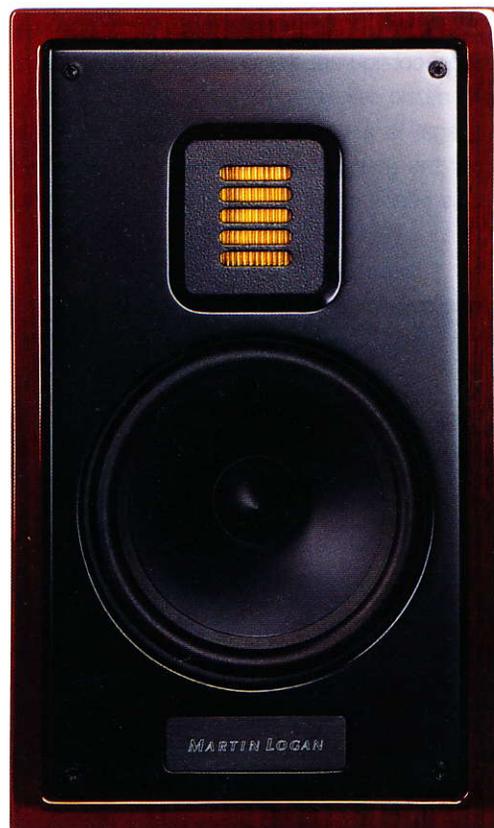
By Roy Gregory

The mini-monitor occupies a very particular and long-standing place in the affections of Anglophone audiophiles. The LS3/5a, the SL6, the AE1, the 805 and a host of other diminutive standmounts demonstrate the enduring appeal of the format. This means that recent entries to the market, like the KEF LS50, can at least depend on a degree of attention, if not guaranteed sales. The other thing they can depend on is some fairly serious competition – and not always from the expected quarter.

Enter then, the MartinLogan Motion 15, another of those little boxes that can. With distinctly pint-sized proportions, a high-gloss cabinet finish, a 'ribbon' tweeter and a price tag that's the right side of four figures, it might be tempting to dismiss this as yet another of those identikit Chinese-built miniatures, but before you do that, consider this: MartinLogan has been building products in China for over a decade, meaning that the company has got a handle on the logistics and QC issues involved. It has also been building hybrids from day one, which amounts to 30 years of experience with this apparently simple yet practically challenging approach. If any company can make the pieces of this particular jigsaw fit, the smart money would be on MartinLogan.

The Motion 15 actually uses a folded motion tweeter, a planar design derived from the legendary Heil AMT. This is paired with a purpose built, aluminium-coned, 110mm bass-mid driver in what amounts to the classic two-way arrangement established by the LS3/5a. The cabinet is 290mm tall, 170 wide and 220 deep, with a sloping top and a rear panel that offers a single pair of binding posts and a large, carefully contoured reflex port. Fit and finish are exemplary and you even get a thoughtfully executed grille. The threaded fixture on the rear panel (to allow for attachment to wall mounts) hints at the intended purpose of the Motion 15, a model that I suspect was conceived as a surround, extension or secondary speaker. But, whether by accident or design, what MartinLogan has ended up with is a stunningly capable compact monitor. I've hooked them up to everything from the Icon Audio Stereo 20PP to the VTL MB450 IIIs and the Siltech SAGA amplifiers and I've been having a ball.

I used the Motion 15s on a pair of Track Audio 24" stands – which immediately raised the first issue. In my large listening room, the stand-height was fine, but used in the smaller lounge area – which is actually more appropriate to the speakers' size and capabilities – the tweeter ended up below the listener's ear. Now, you could just get some taller stands, but just as an experiment I flipped the cabinets, so that now they sat on their sloping tops, the tweeter now lower, but angled up. What a difference. Suddenly integration, mid-band energy and presence all improved significantly. It might have been a happy accident that happened to work under my precise circumstances, but it's free, simple and well worth trying if you think it's going to help. I also found that the speakers worked best slightly closer together than normal



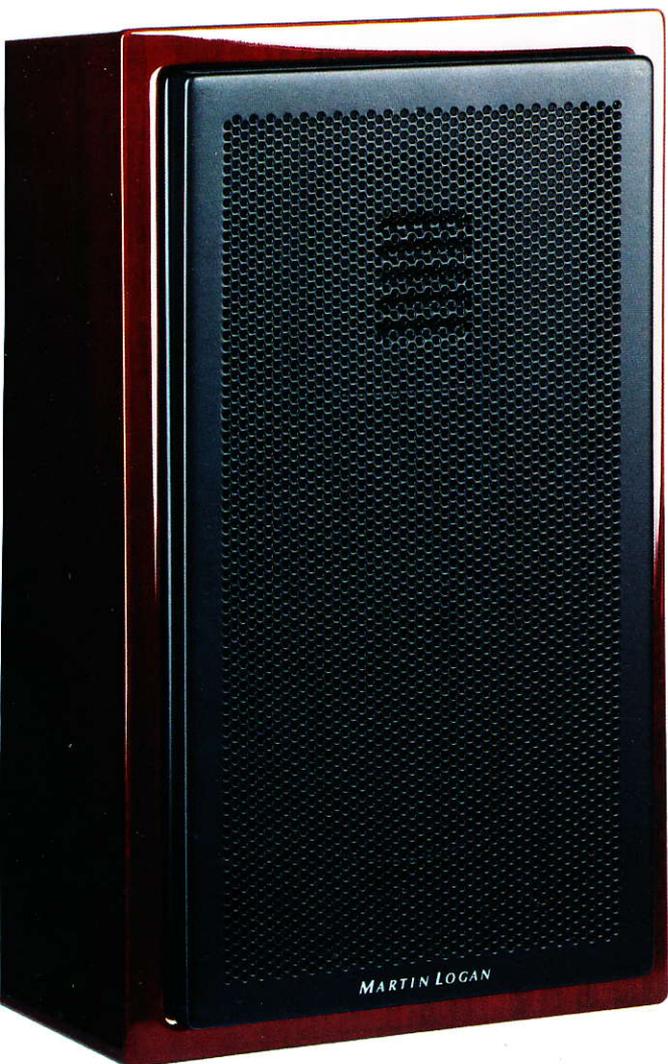
placement and toed in to point just either side of the listening position. With those details attended to, it was time to sit back and be amazed.

The first thing that most people want to know about any little speaker is how much bass they can generate. In the case of the Motion 15 the answer is more than they have any right to. Better still, big bass from small boxes often comes at the expense of quality – but not here. The bottom end goes deep enough to satisfy, not so deep as to get into trouble and the bass notes produced are solid, tuneful and agile. No plodding, turgid ballast to worry about; bass guitars have pitch and drive, and while orchestral bass might lack weight and substance when compared to larger speakers, the speaker still delivers the necessary underpinning the music demands. If, like me you are going to use the speakers in free space, well away from boundary reinforcement, you'll need to play with placement, but I found that in this case, sideways movement proved more critical than front to back. But get it right and the little MartinLogans will reward you with a surprisingly solid and satisfying sense of presence and scale. The deep, undulating opening of Crowded House's 'Fall At Your Feet' was handled with aplomb, the evocative and instantly recognisable pitch

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steps perfectly clear, with no apparent loss of weight, while the upshift in tempo that signals the track's progress was navigated with the sort of assurance that escapes many a far more expensive and more ambitious speaker. The vocals are beautifully focused and natural, and once again, the voice is instantly recognizable.

Hanging a speaker like the Motion 15 on the end of a super amp like the SAGAs might be fun, but it's hardly representative. Much of my listening involved the Icon Audio Stereo 60 integrated amp. With a pair of KT120s per channel delivering a very healthy 80 Watts into 8 Ohms, combined with the little Logans' 92dB efficiency and 5 Ohm rating, there was no shortage of energy, a quality the diminutive speakers made full use of. The claimed -3dB point is 60Hz and listening to the speaker, I can easily believe it – helped no doubt by the large but carefully engineered port which doubtless adds ▶



▶ a judicious degree of heft as things tail off. Helping deliver that substance is the 19mm thick MDF cabinet and machined aluminium front panel, constituting a substantial construction in a cabinet this small.

All the bottom-end in the world would be useless if it didn't integrate properly to the rest of the range. MartinLogan's long experience in combining moving-coil bass drivers with planar mid and treble units is readily apparent in the seamless presentation of the Motion 15. Not only is the crossover hard to pick tonally, you can't catch it out on dispersion either. The extended cello runs that characterize the Elgar concerto reveal no cracks or discontinuities, no changes in energy or tonality as the instrument reaches its upper range, while solo violin is equally contiguous. Even the intensity of Florin Paul's Bach Partitas recording fails to disturb the Motion 15's equanimity, with no discernable steps or breaks in his instrumental range, no discontinuities in his playing or phrasing. This most demanding and exposed of musical tests repeatedly traversed the speakers' crossover point without interruption or intrusion, which suggests that the designer has not only managed to integrate the disparate drivers effectively, he's done it in a musically invisible fashion, which at this price is mightily impressive indeed, as well as testament to the qualities of the FMT tweeter and its ability to project musical energy. Instead of clumsy bowing or stumbling phrases, sudden shifts in energy or presence, what these little speakers deliver is a perfectly focused and stable image, a little smaller than life, but credibly present and solid. The wider acoustic tails off – as you'd expect – but instrumental sources are pinpoint and the soundstage is coherent enough to accurately reflect a player's movement relative to the microphone – again, impressive at the price.

If the Motion 15s have a failing, it lies in a slightly cool balance, a swing that has its compensations on the roundabout of clarity and dimensionality. It makes them a perfect partner for solid and rhythmically coherent amps, the prime example being a push-pull tube integrated, but the various Moons, the Naim Nait or Storm integrated amps would all work well. The real beauty of this little speaker however, is that it is coherent and unflappable enough to make the most of affordable partners, accomplished enough to grow and do justice to some remarkably fine ancillaries. You could hang the Motion 15s on the end of any system and rather than being disappointed you are going to be amazed. When you've wiped the silly grin off your face you can marvel at their sheer poise and the graceful way they handle the most

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, reflex loaded hybrid loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 1x HF Folded Motion Transducer
1x 135mm aluminium cone mid-bass

Bandwidth: 60Hz – 25kHz, ±3dB

Crossover: 2,700Hz

Efficiency: 92dB

Impedance: 5 Ohms nominal

Dimensions (WxHxD): 173x 290 x 242mm

Weight: 5.4Kg ea.

Finishes: High gloss black, white or red cherry

Price: £795 per pair

Manufacturer: MartinLogan Ltd

URL: www.martinlogan.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds Ltd

Tel: +44 (0)208 971 3909

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

complex of signals. Agile, communicative, competent and complete, what's not to like? There's a few exciting new compact monitors appearing at present; MartinLogan's Motion 15 could just be the surprise package that upsets the applecart. Buy, enjoy and even if you upgrade later, keep them for that rainy day; they're guaranteed to put a smile on your face. +

