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MARTINLOGAN VANTAGE

Electrostatic performance close to that of the breathtaking Summit for under half that speaker's price

PRICE £3,998 per stereo pair CONTACT Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0TW ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.martinlogan.com

Electrostatic loudspeakers have many fine qualities. The best-of-breed designs add a touch of magic to sound reproduction that is very hard to achieve through any other means, and their slim-line form factors and sometimes semi-transparent construction mean that they can look as good as they sound. But, for the most part, they are not easy electrical loads – so they tend to give amplifiers a hard time – and they don't always interface readily

with bog-standard listening rooms. They're also expensive: not so much for any intrinsic reason, but because they tend to appeal to a relatively

shorter than the Summit, while the footprint is reduced from the 32x52cm of the Summit to 27.3x41.3cm for the Vantage. More significant

“Moving from an average speaker to the Vantage is like throwing open a window instead of listening through glass”

small audiophile community, which means they are not well placed as products to take advantage of the economies of scale.

The design of electrostatics took a step or three up the greasy ladder when MartinLogan announced its Summit model. MartinLogan has long been by far the most prolific electrostatic loudspeaker producer and, a little over two years ago, the Kansas-based company introduced the Summit to replace the Prodigy, a considerably larger and more expensive animal. The Summit was cheaper because of fundamental simplifications to the design, but these changes also meant better sound quality and much neater packaging. The main change was to the clamping of the electrostatic panel, so that a similar side-radiating area was housed in a very narrow frame and held under tension using pre-stressed, square-section tubing instead of a bulkier, timber-based frame.

The effect on sound quality was little less than startling. The Summit was sharper, leaner and offered better timing and a much more propulsive sound. The reduced size, accompanied by a slightly simplified hybrid bass section, also meant a much lower price. The Vantage is a follow-up to the Summit that looks similar and has broadly the same configuration, although the bass section features a single, slightly smaller, aluminium cone driver. The overall measurements tell much of the story. At 144.7cm, the Vantage stands 5cm

are some of the other figures. Bass, for example, extends to 24Hz (-3dB) in the case of the Summit, but a much less impressive 34Hz for the Vantage and, at the other end of the bass passband, the electrostatic panel works down to 270Hz for the Summit and 400Hz for the Vantage. These harder to interpret differences are more telling in the overall sound quality equation.

The Vantage is not a complete answer to those wanting a Summit on a tighter budget. The two speakers don't sound the same. The Vantage inevitably lacks the lower midband speed and articulation that is so special in the Summit, and the crossover in the Summit is at a much less audible frequency. The difference in bass depth is also significant. The Vantage definitely goes down less far, and it doesn't have the Summit's punch and authority. It's remarkable, however, just how good it is, and how close the balance of the two models turns out to be.

Given it's thoroughly reasonable price point, the Vantage possesses a number of very special sonic attributes that few speakers at a similar level can hope to match. Its imaging, its midrange detail, its stunning transient response; moving from an average conventional speaker to the Vantage is like throwing open a window instead of listening through glass.

The integration of the bass driver with the electrostatic panel has long been a thorn in the side of hybrid speakers such as this, but MartinLogan's latest speakers are remarkably good in this respect. That said, the Vantage is still best served by classical and acoustic music, rather than balls-out dance or rock.

The bottom line is: if you can afford the Summit, it's still the MartinLogan to go for. But the Vantage goes a long way towards delivering what the Summit does at a much lower price. And that makes it something special. ■

Alvin Gold

See the Summer 2006 edition of Hi-Fi Choice for the original review of this product

