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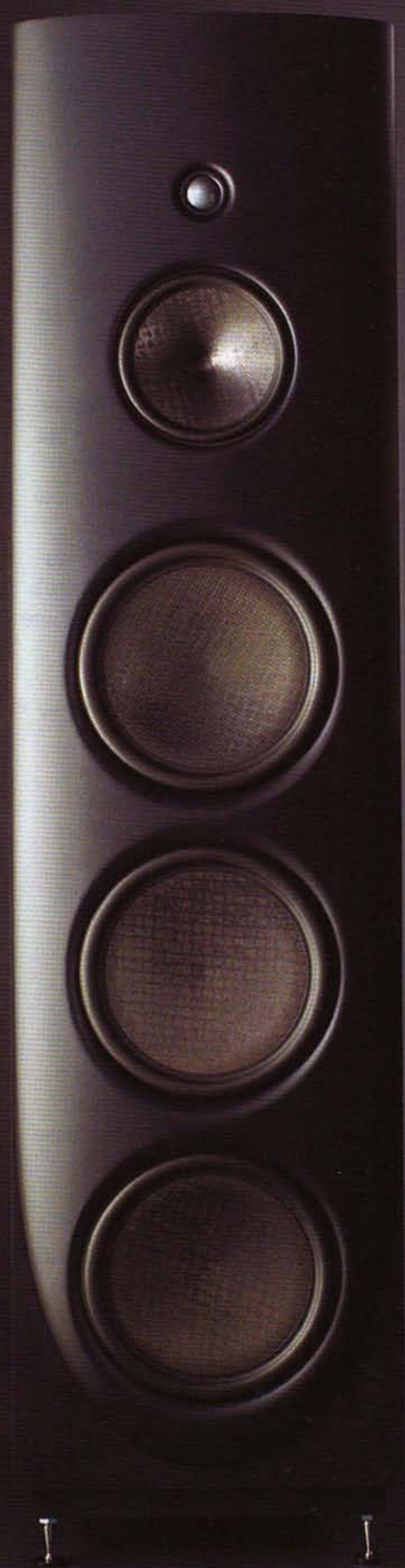
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Magico Q5 loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

**T**he world of high-end loudspeakers is not without its drama and controversy. And Magico seems to engender both in great measure. A young and precocious company, fronted by the outspoken Alon Wolf, in some respects it's hard to imagine Magico not courting more than its share of controversy. It's worth remembering that the current captains of the high-end industry were once young, precocious and outspoken too, so sometimes controversy is a good thing.

Especially when it's backed up by products like the Q5.

Part of the controversy surrounds Magico's recent past. Only a few years ago, the company launched its M5 flagship loudspeaker. That product is still in production, but the difficulty is the Q5 is every bit as good – often markedly better – than the M5 flagship at a fraction of the price. Far from being received as a company simultaneously pushing the performance envelope, while saving prospective Magico owners money in the process, the chattering classes took umbrage on behalf of M5 owners, who they felt were left with a lesser product at a greater price. As ever with these things, people who actually owned Magico M5s were absent from this online grumbling session, as they were too busy enjoying their speakers to notice.

The Q5 is a five-driver, four-way design, featuring a custom 25mm MBe-1 Scan-Speak derived beryllium-dome tweeter, a 150mm NanoTec midrange driver, a 230mm NanoTec mid-bass driver and a pair of 230mm NanoTec bass units. Calling this tweeter 'Scan-Speak derived' is one of those journalistic short-cuts, because the reality is there's more Magico in there than there is Illuminator tweeter, and that also exposes the limitations of the 'beryllium=bright' idea. NanoTec (Magico's proprietary mix of Rohacell coated with carbon nano-tubes) gives the drive units all the benefits of Rohacell (almost unburstable, very dynamic) with none of the downsides (distinctive sound, especially in the midrange). As ever with Magico, the speaker drivers are bolted to the back of the baffle; this not only gives clean lines, but allows for the sort of tensioning that would tear many speakers apart. The tensioning bolts on the back of the M series models are hidden from view, but they are there. There are a series of little holes at the rear panel, but they are there for heat dissipation. The

two bass units are slightly offset, which helps to cancel break-up modes, and is known as Bass Mechanical Resonance Cancellation.

Nothing is left to chance, and that costs. So, the hand-made resistors in the crossover are a natural inclusion for the Q5, even though most sane designers would hesitate to use a custom-designed bulk metal film resistor that costs more than most loudspeakers inside their loudspeaker (in fact, many of the components inside the Q5 cost as much as a pair of loudspeakers, which perhaps explains why surprisingly few people start coughing when they hear that price tag, especially if they hear the speaker first). That

*“Most sane designers would hesitate to use a custom-designed bulk metal film resistor that costs more than most loudspeakers.”*

dedication to fine detail is common to all many loudspeakers brands and all loudspeakers in the Magico range, but its effect is an order of magnitude stronger here. And it's backed by good, solid engineering.

Why audiophile reviewers get heated about Magico simply comes down to respect for the 'no quarter given' approach to loudspeaker building. It makes for great copy. Take the drive units for example; most companies fall into one of three categories – buy them off the shelf, make your own, or get the OEM supplier to build to your own specifications. Not Magico. Instead it takes the component parts from the best OEM manufacturer it could find, sends them across the world to the best place for key proprietary treatment, and then back across the world to the people who are better at assembling complex structures than anyone else on the planet.

Take off one of those thick aluminium side panels and you are met with an aluminium spaceframe. It's worth learning ▶

- ▶ how to remove these panels if you have any friends who spent too long playing with Meccano or Erector sets; take off a side-plate (no easy feat – it's held on with 100 fasteners) and watch their reaction. They'll notice the 400 or so parts that go into holding the thing together, even if they aren't 'into' spotting the extreme components that pepper the Q5. It's a bit like leaving a bibliophile alone with a copy of the Gutenberg Bible for a few minutes... they are reduced to dumbstruck awe.



This aluminium skeleton is relatively light, but incredibly rigid and placed under great tension to help it stay that way. The drivers (with their vast magnets), the crossover and the half-inch-thick aircraft-grade aluminium panels add mass. And they add a lot of it; you'll begin to wonder whether the Q5 is only black because light cannot escape its clutches. The combination of satin black baffle, shiny black drive units and matt black anodised aluminium cabinet – bereft of any Magico markings, logos or even a speaker grille – makes this a loudspeaker of brutal charm. The anodised cabinet can be finished in almost any colour (but not, of course, wood veneers), but the black on black is appealing. It's like having a pair of scaled-down versions of the monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey* in your living room. Strangely, this works better than you might expect in unlikely rooms, but it is very 'man cave'; if you share your listening space with someone who has memorised the Laura Ashley catalogue, the 'none more black' approach might meet some resistance.

Installation is easy... just get someone else to do it! No, really – the speakers weigh enough that moving them to get good positioning isn't really an option, so it's better to get a team of experts to move and install the speakers. While it's probably somewhat impolitic to mention this, the best way of installing these speakers is 'vowelling in', a method of installation developed by Wilson Audio (it's also known as 'voicing the room' or simply WASP: Wilson Audio Set-up Procedure). This works by speaking to the rear and side walls at the point where the speaker would likely end up. At first, your voice sounds artificially chesty and thick due to boundary interaction. Mark where that point begins, and keep walking until your voice begins to sound thin and hollow. Do the same with the side wall and do the same to for the other speaker. Make an half-inch grid within these parameters and adjust the speakers for the best possible bass in the room, from the listening position. This gets less easy to do when you have a loudspeaker weighing in at close to 180kg per speaker (that's almost 400lb, or nearly 28st), so call in expert help.

The Magico needs that millimetre-tight installation precision – and necessitates good quality audio equipment feeding it – because it can give so much. The amplifiers need to be as quick as they are powerful when it comes to driving this. This is why successful partnerships are to be found in products from the Spectral and especially the DarTZeel range, but it was also more than comfy with the excellent Devialet D-Premier category-busting integrated power DAC. Of course, bolted on the end of night on £150,000 worth of DarTZeel monos, you'd expect something special. What you get a sound so dynamically unfettered that you expect to catch a cone or two as they go whizzing past your ears. This comes with a warning... do not play chicken with an amp that can go from zero to 1.5kW in an eyeblink and a speaker that can handle that sort of wallop; eventually something will give, but it's more likely to be you than the amp or speaker. I have heard a drive unit get fried this way, but only trying to recreate the sound and sound pressure of rock concerts that gave half the audience tinnitus. Otherwise, these speakers are fundamentally unburstable. I know... I tried and it hurts.

It's easy to lose the message in the medium when it comes to hi-fi and high-end in particular. We've become so used to having sounds with a distinct tonal balance, that when you hear something that's inherently flat, it can sound 'flat'. We struggle to get past remarkable flatness of frequency response, because it's not something we are used to outside of live events with unamplified instruments. So, at first flush the Q5 will sound laid back to some, edgy to others. The reality is, those first impressions actually don't count for a great deal, because they are tempered by our preconceptions and the albums played there.

A sure sign of that Q standing for 'Quality' comes in the Q5's shape-shifting qualities. It's as good as your discs, and no better. That sounds like damning it with faint praise, but is the key to quality, through the medium of unvarnished fidelity to the source sound. Swap from The Fall to Charles Mingus and there should be a huge change in recording quality; different production values, studios, engineers, musicians and mastering. That disc-to-disc differentiation stands out with uncanny clarity here.

*“If you are looking for the most accurate frequency response, the lowest distortion and the widest dynamics, this is your speaker.”*

▶ The other side to this is plain; don't go expecting the Q5 to make a silk purse out of a Lady Gaga album. If it sounds congested, constricted, forward or laid back in the recording, the Q5 will make that apparent. This will mean some of your hitherto 'wonder' recordings will sound less 'wonderful' than you originally thought. And yet, curiously, this honesty doesn't get in the way of the musical content. That's the joy of really, honest loudspeakers; you get to listen through the recording chain. It sounds like nothing is acting as impediment. Of course, when you get the really, good recordings that happen to be musically significant too... then you start to see why music is such a vital aspect of so many people's lives.

Here's a perfect example. Among the line-up of recordings played, I pulled out the MoFi version of *Dixie Chicken* by Little Feat. I've heard this recording hundreds of times over the years; it's one of those albums – like Dylan's *Desire* and Traffic's *Shoot Out at the Fantasy Factory* – that keep cropping up in my life. It's rare to have that album to have the same affect it had when I first heard it almost 30 years ago round at the parents of a very cool hippy chick artsy girl, who I was sort of dating at the time. A combination of teenage-grade hormones and copious amounts of claret made that a monumental event, despite my complete failure to get anywhere monumental with said hippy chick artsy girl. No subsequent replay of that album can match the weighting of that first listen, but the Q5 gets as close enough to conjure up the heady mix of white musk and patchouli oil.

It's not just the time machine element that makes this such a significant loudspeaker. It's the absence of malice it presents to a recording. That last line is really playing to those who listen seriously to this loudspeaker; everyone who does will know exactly what this means. It does something to the midrange that is impossible to find elsewhere; a lack of 'sag'. This is strange, as I didn't know midranges could 'sag' and that almost all of them do until I heard what the Q5 is doing, but after spending some time with it, most other midranges 'sag'. By this, I mean there's a mild compression to the midrange that makes woodwinds almost blur into the viola and cellos. Trouble is, we're so used to this, it's hard to describe because that sound is so much a function of loudspeaker design to this time. Perhaps the best way of describing it is its one aspect of the difference between the sound in an auditorium and the sound of the recording of that auditorium. Granted, compression and amplifier rectification in the recording chain might undermine this slightly, but what's surprising is this is yet another hidden gem in recordings past and present.

The hardest thing here is to write, because you are pulled into the music. Gregorian Chant will root you to your chair just as much as The XX will. This upends some of the absurdities that can surround high-end; “some speakers are better for classical or rock”. Some speakers are not so well designed as to make their limitations better suited for a rock or classical or jazz presentation. Not here. You could jump from heavy opera to easy listening to harpsichord to folk via death metal and back out through Beck's *Sea Change* album.

I've already said much about the Q5 on the AVGuide website, including, “this is the best speaker in the world” and “there's no magic in Magico”. I still stand by both these statements, and they don't counteract one another. There *is* no magic here, just loudspeaker engineering by the book... except where the book says “compromise”.

The ‘best speaker in the world’ call is a tougher one to argue, because some might counter with more sensitive, less demanding speakers, or designs that make music sound better than itself in some way. My contention is that if you are looking for the most accurate frequency response, the lowest distortion and the widest dynamics, this is your loudspeaker. Under such conditions other considerations are secondary, assuming the speaker isn't so demanding that it spends its years in search of better audio components. And under such conditions, this has to be the best speaker in the world. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Magico Q5 loudspeaker

Four-way sealed-box design

Driver Complement

1 x 25mm MBe-1 Tweeter

1 x 150mm Nano-Tec Midrange

1 x 230mm Nano-Tec Midbass

2 x 230mm Nano-Tec Bass

Single wired multi-way binding posts

Sensitivity: 88dB

Impedance: 4 Ohms

Frequency Response: 26Hz-50kHz

Recommended Power: 50-500 Watts

Dimensions (HxWxD): 119x53x30cm

Weight: 176kg each

Price: £65,000 per pair

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