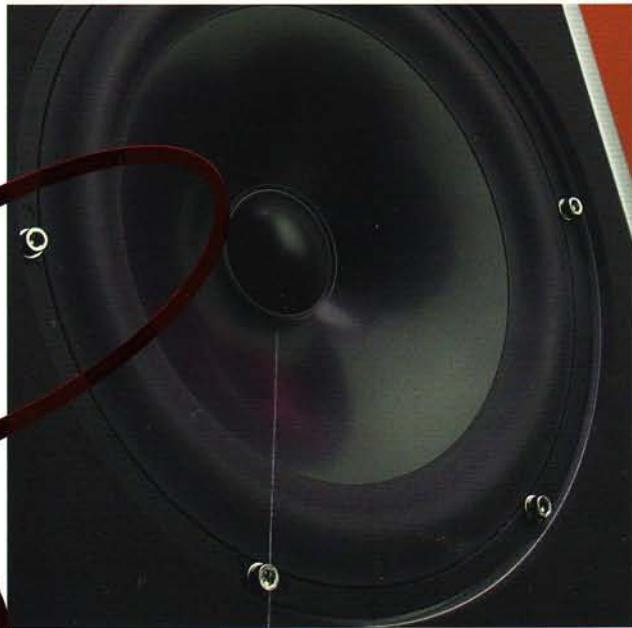


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The Spire marries an electrostatic panel to an active bass section with a metal cone driver

MARTINLOGAN SPIRE

Replacement for the Summit introduces advanced electrostatic technology

PRICE £6,900 CONTACT Absolute Sounds ■ 020 8971 3909 ■ www.martinlogan.com

As good fortune would have it, MartinLogan's Spire, was launched just nanoseconds short of the copy deadline for this year's *Collection*. At first sight, it looks like a dead ringer for the Summit, which was the first of the new generation models, distinguished by the more sharply styled, squared off base section and the thin metal-framed electrostatic panel.

The Spire also represents a simplification of MartinLogan's next magnum opus, the CLX, which is the long awaited replacement for the CLS full-range electrostatic, the speaker that established MartinLogan's reputation.

The Spire is the result of a development programme that draws on the lessons learned from the Summit, but includes a new electrostatic panel which was the result of a development programme from NASA that was not directly audio related. The result is a much superior coating technology. The Mylar panels are now manufactured and bonded to their frames by MartinLogan in-house, eschewing the low-tech Velcro fastening previously used.

The new coatings have a number of significant advantages including greater consistency, longer life, greater electro-acoustic efficiency and freedom from the hotspots that apparently plagued the early panels in long-term use. The new diaphragms are more homogenous – as the coatings are now said to be part of the molecular structure of the panels – and the lighter weight means greater sensitivity.

The panel is also longer throw, which requires wider spacing between the two perforated stators. High frequency output is also apparently easier to generate. The result: higher SPLs and less distortion, a wider, more even response and reduced susceptibility to static.

The result is that the Spire electrostatic panel goes further into the bass, which eases and simplifies the job of the bass section, and facilitates a lower crossover frequency of 320Hz – I believe the old model crossed over at 350Hz. The system as a whole has a rated frequency response of 29Hz to 23kHz +/-3dB. The moving coil bass section is now built around a single bass driver, where the Summit used two. The Spire uses a 250mm aluminium cone unit powered by the internal power amplifier, and the ELS panel is passive in the time-honoured way.

Of course, these changes have also had ramifications for pricing. The manufacturer is adamant that the new model is superior to the Summit, and it is also quite a bit cheaper, so MartinLogan felt that the best course of action would be to discontinue the Summit – although by all accounts it was a notable commercial success. The Spire takes its place at under £7,000 a pair.

If MartinLogan is right, the Spire represents a win-win situation, and the development programme should be seen against the backdrop of a sincere desire of the new management team to play in the mid- to upmarket field rather than clustering their products at the bleeding edge of credibility. In the UK, this aim has been helped by exchange rates.

PERFORMANCE

The familiar trademarks of MartinLogan's better electrostatics have been preserved. This is still a fast, fluid and transparent transducer, but there are differences from the Summit that became more obvious as the system was run in.

First and foremost, it is more transparent. The system sounds faster and more organic, and there is no obvious disparity between the domains of the two drivers, probably because of the reduced crossover frequency. Usually with MartinLogan – and I can remember this as far back as the CLS – there is a sting in the lower treble. It is not always severe, but now I can't hear it at all.

What I can hear is a clearly more extended and open treble than before. The system sounded a little bright at first, although it toned down in time and with some subtle repositioning in the listening room. You will need a clear metre or so behind the

panels for them to work as intended.

Some factors remain unchanged. An obvious example is their lack of interaction with side walls. The sound is

almost as spacious and clear when used hard against a side wall as in clear open air. Equally, the Spire retains the ability to 'throw' sound a long way. It has almost as much presence and immediacy at the far end of a 10-metre listening room as with my nose pressed on the perforated grill, something that cannot be accomplished with the same facility by normal moving coil speakers. The result is a speaker that can address large spaces with ease. This is helped by the Spire's strong, extended bass, which is surprising given the single bass unit design.

So is the Spire superior? To be fair, I have not heard the Summit for about a year, and audio memory is notoriously fallible. But my clear impression is that the new model has an ease and clarity, and a relative freedom from the subtle colorations that afflict all panel speakers, that is uniquely its own. I can also tell you that I have never been so at ease with a panel speakers' ability to work with large-scale orchestral material as here. Which leaves just one minor mystery unanswered. Why did a company with the nous to call their best subwoofer the Descent decide to call this one the Spire? ■

Alvin Gold

"I have never been so at ease with a panel speakers' ability to work with large-scale orchestral material!"

