

MartinLogan Ethos Loudspeakers Review



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Written by Andre Marc

Tuesday, 20 November 2012

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[MartinLogan](#) enjoys a place at the mantle occupied by a relatively small group of state of the art speaker companies enduring the test of time. Nearing its third decade, the Lawrence, Kansas company first impressed critics, audiophiles, and industry professionals at the 1983 Consumer Electronics Show, and now have a devoted following.



Gayle Martin Sanders and Ron Logan Sutherland started MartinLogan (the company name a combination of middle names) with a very specific goal in mind: perfect the electrostatic design loudspeaker (ESL). I admit having a particularly soft spot in my heart for electrostatics as I grew up listening to my father's Quad 57s. The immediacy, and total lack of enclosure colorations have seduced many audiophiles for decades.

MartinLogan has released many groundbreaking products since its inception, and has an impressive legacy of previous models. ShoreView Industries, who also owns Paradigm and Anthem, purchased the company was in 2005. Paradigm is



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another brand I have written about very enthusiastically over the last several years. MartinLogan products are still designed in Kansas, but are mostly manufactured in the same state of the art facility in Canada as the Paradigm products.

I happily received in for review a pair of the [Ethos](#), from their Reserve ESL Series. The Ethos is priced at \$6795 per pair. There are three other speakers above the Ethos in the Reserve, line including the Montis, Summit, and their flagship, the mighty CLX ART. Additionally, MartinLogan offers the more affordable ESL Series, the ElectroMotion™ Series, and several unique solutions for home theater and in wall use. They also developed the Motion™ Series, which consists of hybrid speakers in traditional enclosures.

Allow me a *very* brief history of Electrostatic loudspeakers. Believe it or not, Bell Telephone Laboratories produced the first ESL in the 1920s. Arthur Janzen, a young Naval engineer in the late 1940s, further explored and advanced the technology. And the 1950s, Peter Walker developed the Quad ESL, which for many, set the standard going forward. Through the decades, many companies developed their version of the technology, including KLH, Sound Lab, Acoustat, Stax, and even to this day, we have Sanders Sound Systems, King Sound, and others.

All the gifted designers and engineers involved in the development of ESLs all had one common mission: to overcome the inherent performance issues -- the inability to play at very loud volumes, limited deep bass, and overall reliability. These limitations are due to the way ESLs work. Instead of cones, diaphragms, ribbons, or domes, ESLs produce sound using an electrically charged panel consisting of a diaphragm, stator, and spacers. ESLs are also dipoles, which means they produce sound equally from the front and back. Lastly, ESLs need to be plugged into a power source to maintain a constant charge.



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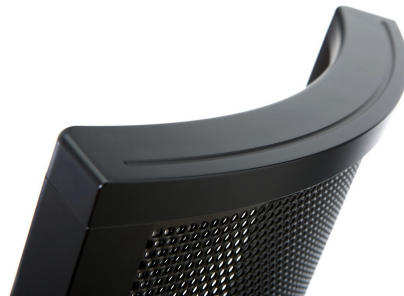
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Many solutions have been developed to prevent ESLs from being damaged from overload, and to allow them to play louder and to exhibit realistic bass performance. Reinforced panels, advanced materials, and overall better construction are the norm today. Many ESLs in the modern era also employ active bass modules. Allowing a passive or powered woofer to handle the majority of low end solves many issues and allows the panel to work stress free, and seems to be the best way to make full range ESLs affordable.

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MartinLogan has a slew of proprietary innovations that make their speakers different than most other ESLs. A basket of technologies make up the actual transducer, which they call XStat™. AirFrame™ Technology employs "ultra rigid extruded aerospace-grade aluminum" to maximize performance of the electrostatic panel. perhaps MartinLogan's crown jewel innovation, uses a curved panel to achieve controlled dispersion without compromising sound quality, but its unique simplicity is also quite ingenious.

Last, but not least, MartinLogan touts PoweredForce™ Bass technology, which is used in the active module at the base of the speaker. They claim distortion free bass down to 34 Hz. They also used sophisticated DSP and a powerful 200-watt onboard amplifier. An 8" passive polypropylene radiator augments the 8" aluminum cone woofer. The woofer modules are finished in attractive wood veneers, and my review sample arrived in a lovely cherry finish.

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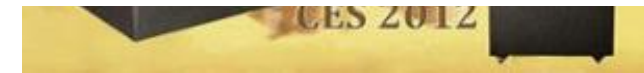
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Set Up:

There are a few things to consider when setting of Electrostatic speakers. Although the Ethos proved to be pretty hassle free, dipoles, which radiate sound front and back, generally like lot of space around them. MartinLoglan claims that, due to the unique dispersion characteristics of their panels, they are much more forgiving and workable in more confined listening areas. They do however suggest that surfaces be neutral -- not too reflective, and not too soft. I was able to manage around three feet around all surfaces of the speaker.

After installing the supplied high quality spikes, the rest of the set up included plugging in both speakers into my Audience power conditioner and connecting the speaker cable. I used a pair of Shunyata Venom power cords, and Transparent MM2 Super speaker cable. I initially started with very little toe in, but over the course of several hours I increased the toe in angle until I felt I had a good center image.



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The Bass Control knob adjusts the under-100Hz level plus or minus 10dB. I initially left the setting 0 dB and made adjustments from there. The Ethos also has an excellent feature, which puts the speaker in standby mode if there is no audio signal for fifteen minutes. An LED light on the back of the speaker indicates status.

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I used two amplifiers with the Ethos. First the Onkyo M-5000R solid state that that is rated 80 wpc into 8 ohms. I also used my Audio Research VS55 tubed amp rated at 50 wpc. Both worked well, but certainly sounded different. With the Onkyo, I ended setting the Bass Control at -2 dB and, with the VS55, I ended up at -4 dB.

Listening:

My first few days with the Ethos were quite interesting. We had a few unusually humid days here in Southern California and it is well noted that humidity levels affect ESLs. In the manual, MartinLogan mentions there should be no performance differences with their current line, but I felt the sound was a bit dark overall. I ran the air conditioning for an hour to rid the house of any moisture, and the difference in sound was astounding.

Thankfully, the humid conditions soon disappeared and we had our normal dry, temperate weather. The sound went from dark overall to exactly what I know superbly engineered ESL panels can do. My first few album demos transported me back to my childhood, listening to my father's Quads as he spun records and cued up reel-to-reel tape. All of the ESL's virtues were here in spades. Transparency, speed, dimensionality, natural dynamics, and *total* freedom from any enclosure colorations. I knew this was going a very pleasurable journey.

The Ethos, however, is not your father's ESL, as they say. It is a retooled, hyper engineered, modern version of a groundbreaking design. Where my father's speakers would easily overload, and lacked any deep bass, the Ethos could easily be played at incredible volumes with no trace of strain, compression, or break up. Bear in mind this in my smallish listening room. Secondly, the bottom end was superb, with the active sub module perfectly integrating with the rest of the frequencies once I dialed in my settings with each amp, as noted above.

The first album I put on effectively spotlighted the many strengths of the Ethos. It was the late Tim Buckley's sublime third album, *Blue Afternoon*. Several tracks feature vibes, acoustic bass, twelve string guitar, and of course Buckley's utterly incomparable voice. On "I Must Have Been Blind" the vibes, bass, and percussion seem to hang in space, totally free of any boundaries, as if appearing out of thin air. Each mallet strike of the vibes was distinct, not only in regards to each note, but in how heavy each strike was. In regards to the stand up bass, I could literally "see" in my mind the strings vibrating when plucked.



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Even more impressive was the ability to hear how close or far Buckley was from the microphone and, startlingly, if he turned his head one side to the other. Remarkable. I must point out once the initial fixation with this three dimensionality and natural rendering of dynamics passed, I was able to enjoy “performances”, not recordings. Performers just seemed to occupy a space approximately eight feet in front of me. This applied to naturally recorded, mostly acoustic music. For more fabricated rock or pop recordings, the effect was as good as the illusion created in the final mix.

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Another album I streamed and know intimately, *The Low Spark Of High Heeled*

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Boys, by Iratic, was also magnificently presented. I have had this record in every conceivable format, including LP and multiple CD versions. The last remaster from Island Universal is excellent, and through the Ethos it was frightening how much was revealed. On the title track, I actually, for the first time, heard faint remnants of previous vocal takes that had bled through the microphones during tracking. On the opening track, "Hidden Treasure", the acoustic guitar, conga drum, and flute seem to float in the air like vapor, and the legendary Steve Windwood's lead vocal hovers in the center of the speakers. This type of rediscovery of familiar music was the heart of what the Ethos was all about.



One of the last albums I listened to was *Trading Snake Oil For Wolfickets*, by the unfortunately overlooked Gary Jules. The second album by this unique San Diego bred singer songwriter is very nicely recorded, and features instantly memorable melodies that draw their inspiration from Paul Simon, and other great artists from the analog era. Through the Ethos, the deceptively complex arrangements are easy to untangle. Ironically, Jules is best known for his cover of Tears For Fears 'Mad World', which was featured in the film, '[Donnie Darko](#)'. His version is utterly mesmerizing, with just piano and voice, with some added ambiance. The Ethos provided a direct connection to the haunting emotion that Jules extracts from this song.

I did not feel confined to any one type of music with the Ethos. It did just as well with amplified, heavy rock. Deep Purple's *In Rock* is one of the legendary British band's early efforts, featuring pummeling tempos, soaring vocals, and dramatic guitar solos by the great Richie Blackmore. I was able to crank this album as loud as I desired, with the full impact of the band in full flight. On the heavy ballad, "Child In Time", all the elements came together, including the late Jon Lord's organ, and vocalist Ian Gillan's throat shredding crescendos.

I can sum up what it was like living with the Ethos with the following. Instead of *listening* to music, it was very much like being *surrounded* by the music, and almost like being in the center of the sound. There seemed to be no typical artificially extreme distinctions between channels, unless the recording had hard



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Conclusion:

With its name firmly established as one of the true elite speaker manufacturers, MartinLogan really has nothing to prove. That being said, they continue to push the envelope and pour significant resources into research and development to improve their products. They have expanded their product line beyond electrostats, and offer products at all price points. But their core business clearly remains their reference level ESLs.

The Ethos, at \$6795, is a truly great speaker, and only a company with the economies of scale of MartinLogan could make a speaker this good at this price. I have heard other speakers offer up more micro detail, but none of those can match the Ethos in purity of the midrange, texture, and insight into the overall performance. The Ethos excelled in providing cues to performer spacing and superb dynamics. Very few other designs can compete with the coherence and transient speed of ESLs.

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However, like all in high-end audio, there are things to consider. First, the Ethos probably won't work with low powered amplification. Secondly, they will sound their best with a decent amount of space around them. Third, since these require a power source, you need to make sure you have a high quality power strip or conditioner, as well as some better than average power cords.

All in all, the MartinLogan Ethos are a lot more user friendly than many typical floorstanders I have lived with. Freedom from driver and cabinet colorations makes any the considerations above hardly worth noting, and they are on my personal shopping wish list. I found them to be the most capable of music makers. I can't recommend an audition highly enough. Be warned, however, you'll have a hard time getting out of your mind the virtues ESLs bring to the table.

The MartinLogan Ethos is a best buy if there ever was one.

