

Magico Q1 Loudspeakers



Written by Peter Roth
Friday, 15 June 2012

When any audio component comes in for review, it's usually several weeks before its true nature begins to fully reveal itself. Familiar recordings of different musical styles, placing different demands on a playback system, are selected to tease out the character and capabilities of the device under test. But every once in a while, the initial impact made by a component is so clear that it stands out in stark relief from the rest. In those rare circumstances, the hundreds of tracks played in the following weeks serve only to confirm that initial impression, rather than blaze a circuitous trail to its real character, hitherto unrevealed.

One such rarity is the Magico Q1, a sealed-box, two-way, stand-mounted loudspeaker (\$26,500 USD per pair, including stands). Immediately after setting up the well-traveled review samples and connecting them to my small reference system, I was gobsmacked. Here was a product that demanded I immediately pick up the phone to invite friends and colleagues to sit in the sweet spot with a teasing "You've got to hear this for yourself!" I finally and fully understood what the Magico buzz is all about - an understanding that had somewhat evaded me at audio shows. Every day thereafter, the Q1 left me shaking my head, and the mouths of my compatriots agape. It is very nearly a full-range speaker crammed into a package measuring just 14.2"H x 9"W x 4.2"D. But I get ahead of myself...



One serious box

Because I review audio equipment, a steady procession of equipment boxes, cartons, and crates flows back and forth among manufacturers, their distributors, and me. And while I can't judge a book by its cover, I can generally ascertain how committed a company is to its equipment by the lengths it goes to ensure that equipment's safe arrival. It's hard to find more serious efforts than those made by Magico: a coffin-sized crate containing, side by side, two supine, fully encapsulated Q1s, their integral stands already attached. The shipping weight of the crated pair is about 280 pounds; each speaker itself weighs 60 pounds, and each stand the same, for a total net weight per side of 120 pounds. Magico's almost over-the-top effort to ensure that their machines reach their destinations intact is no doubt appreciated by its customers, but it does beg one question: Where to store the crate?



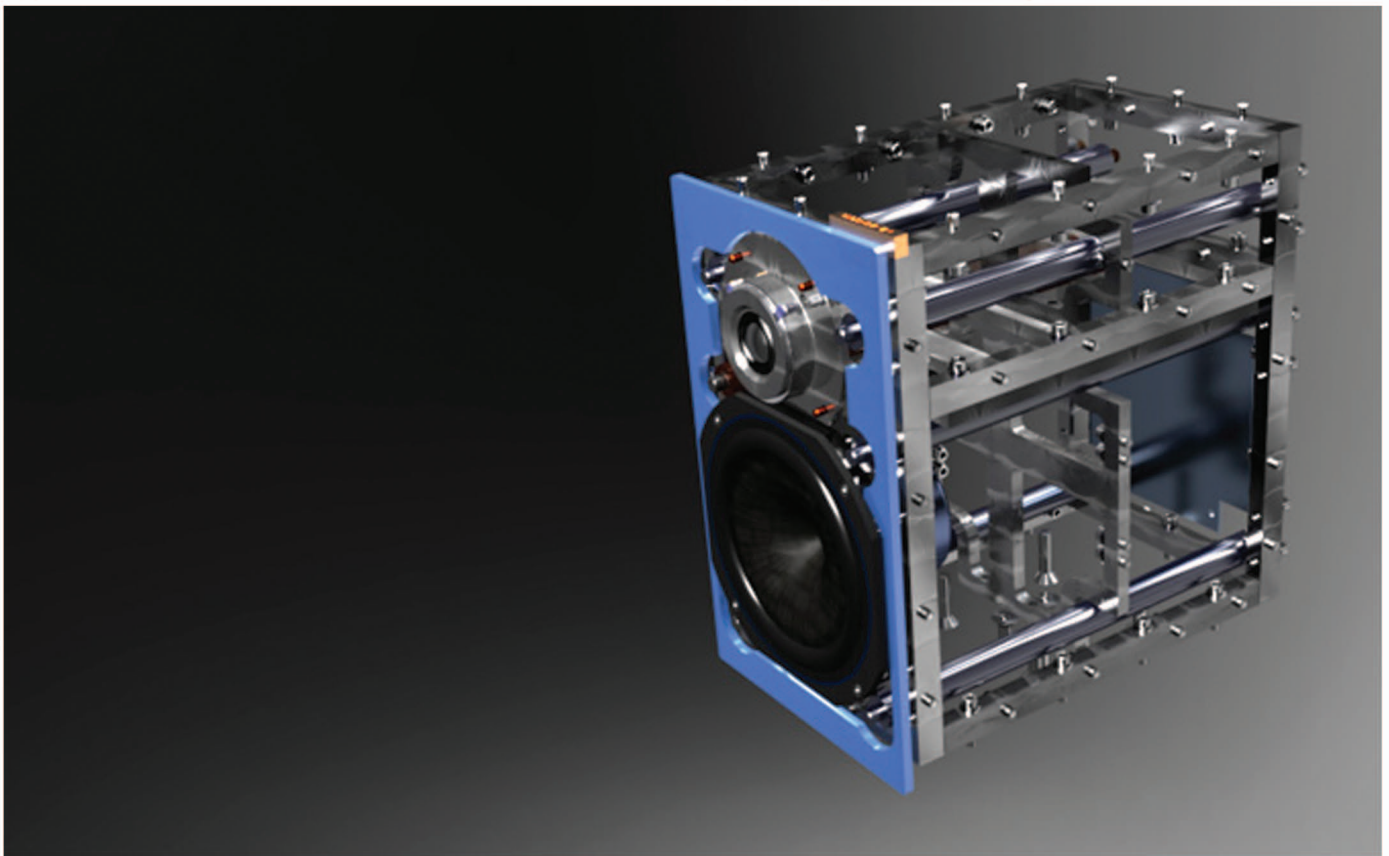


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Removing each speaker-and-stand combo from its resting place (a two-man job) grants access to a briefcase nestled in the base of the crate, in which is stored a complete set of cones and "spike shoes." Also included is a pair of white gloves, to prevent the fingerprinting of the Q1s' satin-like finish, and a microfiber cloth to remove any evidence of such smudges. The speakers themselves are draped in a form-fitting velvet sheath, under which awaits the final layer of protection. Given the delicacy of the dome tweeter's beryllium diaphragm, a secured protective ring must be decoupled from the baffle, and a complement of thick masking material removed; for shipping purposes, this material adheres to each surface of the speaker that could possibly come in contact with the shipping supports of closed-cell foam.

A chip off the new Q

Anyone familiar with Magico's Q series of aluminum - constructed speakers will recognize the Q1's similarities to them. Like its larger brethren, the Q1 strikes a dense, purposeful pose, and is elegant in its monolithic solidity. In fact, with the visual design interplay of stand and monitor, the Q1 is arguably more interesting to look at than all but the mighty Q7, which tops the line. The bead-blasted, hard-anodized finish is unsurpassed in my experience, and should survive a lifetime or two. The metalwork embodies an attention to detail and a satisfying luxuriousness seen only in top-of-the-line electronics from the likes of Jeff Rowland Design Group, Zandèn, and Ayre Acoustics' R series.



The Q1 is more austere than its spiritual predecessor, the Magico Mini, which, with its combination of stacked-birch ply and aluminum, first turned heads and ears toward Magico, and almost singlehandedly launched the category of super-premium, stand-mounted speaker. The Mini and Mini II were considerably larger, at 16"H x 12"W x 17"D and 80 pounds each (plus 120 pounds of stand). While it's a bit of a stretch to call the Minis "minimonitors," they certainly displayed visual character. With the Q series in general and the Q1 specifically, I'm sure designers Alon Wolf and Yair Tammam would say they'd traded out some character for enhanced purposefulness -- a necessary step in their quest to design and build "Extreme Fidelity Speakers." Let's see what has changed. The Q1 more closely resembles a two-way, stand-mounted version of the venerable Q3 than a successor to the Mini and Mini II.

The Q story can be distilled into three elements: Magico's development of an advanced set of custom drivers, the acquisition of its own machine shop in San Jose, California, and the release of the Q-series cabinet platform.



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Advanced Finite Element Analysis, made possible by a suite of development tools (COMSOL Multiphysics, ReSHAPE, etc.), was used to determine an optimal application of the enclosure and resonance management of the Q platform. In the Q1, such dynamic, multi-environmental modeling resulted in a sealed enclosure of smaller exterior dimensions and larger interior volume than either Mini, and bass response that went 7Hz deeper than the Mini II (which itself extended the bass performance of the original Mini). A knuckle-rap test of the Q1's inert enclosure resulted in nothing but bruises, as would be expected by even a brief examination of the Q1's skeleton. The precision machined chassis is not only formidable, but the number and location of each of the many bolts has been critically established to raise the resulting resonant frequency while narrowing the quality factor (Q) of that frequency, and greatly simplifying the capture and elimination of resonances by proven damping agents. The front baffle consists of a constrained-layer-damped sandwich: two aluminum elements separated by a viscous damping material. The remaining panels are affixed to the underlying structure in such a way that the only clues that the Q1 is not cut from a single billet of aluminum are found on the back and bottom.

Magico also uses Finite Element Analysis in its march along the road to ever better drivers. Accordingly, instead of the 1" ring-radiator tweeter and 7" woofer used in the Mini II, the Q1 has essentially the same custom, 1" beryllium-dome tweeter found in the Q3, as well as a thoroughly engineered, 7" Nano-Tech woofer exclusive to Magico. Wolf is especially proud of the drivers he and Tammam have developed for the entire Q line, a project that culminated in the new drivers for the awe-inspiring Q7. Here is where the computational horsepower of Finite Element Analysis and simulation were concentrated, to simultaneously correlate acoustical, electromagnetic, mechanical, and thermal behaviors. One focus of the engineering team in this regard was to attain high levels of piston operation, to minimize distortions through the selected bandpass. As expected in this super-premium category, and with the Q1's aspirations, Magico asserts that the crossover between the two drivers applies an evolution of the Elliptical design of the Q5, and uses nothing but premium parts.



Shazam!

As mentioned in the introduction, the Q1 made on me an immediate positive impression -- one that summoned up the feelings I'd had at the 2007 Consumer Electronics Show, where I first experienced the Magico Mini (driven by electronics from Balanced Audio Technology). But unlike in 2007, I could now judge the speakers' contributions in the context of my small reference system. For the first several days I devoured my music library, thoroughly engaged



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and excited by the sound. Among the selections were a handful that I returned to again and again, as I demonstrated the Q1s to friends who had answered my calls or had merely dropped by.

First on the demo list was the title track of Donald Fagen's *Morph the Cat* (CD, Reprise 49975-2). This Grammy-winning 2006 album is my go-to choice for torturing systems. Through the Q1s, the opening strains of drums, electric bass, and rhythm guitar filled the room. Avoiding any sense of the sloppy flapping that can overwhelm the subsequent entrance of voices through lesser speakers, the Q1's bass (rated at -3dB at 32Hz, in-room) was every bit as tight and controlled as its "locked and loaded," metronomic groove. A perfect complement to Fagen's meticulous arrangements, recording, and production, the Magicos' reproduction of "Morph the Cat" provided exactly the propulsive support needed to establish the vibe that then is carried through the entire album. Furthermore, the composed, top to bottom continuity of the Q1 cut through the strata of the sonic landscape, laying bare the wit and sardonic perspective embedded in song after song.

In their ability to transmit intact the myriad spatial cues that are rife throughout good live recordings, the Q1s proved transportive. Perfect examples abound, such as the recent Miles Davis release *Live in Europe 1967: The Bootleg Series Vol. 1* (CD, Columbia / Legacy 94053), which saw frequent replay during the Q1's tenure. Perhaps most insightful was Mike Garson's "Trio Blues," from Reference Recordings' *HRx Sampler 2011* (24/176.4 WAV, Reference HR-2011), a previously unreleased outtake from Garson's *Serendipity* (Reference RR20, analog master). While an early flub by Garson effects a midstream restart of this outtake, nothing diminishes the attention to detail and master-file nature of this Prof. Keith O. Johnson recording, nor the artistic command of Garson and his players. In fact, the open window on the studio shuffling and chit-chat as the ensemble resets is voyeuristic. The Q1 reproduced all of this with aplomb, displaying the deft ability to track all of these sonic masterpieces of recorded sound.

In many ways, the Magico Q1 was like a perfected electrostatic speaker. It displayed the qualities of detail, resolution, and transparency that electrostats are known for, yet avoided their practical limitations in terms of output levels, large-scale dynamics, and, but for the last half-octave or so of bass, bandwidth. The Q1 also had very well-controlled directivity in my room. In my experience, the only other compact speaker that can match the Q1 in these regards is the TAD Compact Reference, a stand-mounted three-way notable for its high-technology beryllium concentric drivers, a significantly larger displacement, and an even higher price (\$37,000/pair).

One thing evident about the Q1 from the start was its ability to relay everything occurring upstream. I suspect that attributes often glibly ascribed to Magico speakers are rather the attributes of their associated equipment. From this perspective, the Q1 proved an exceptional monitoring device. For my last week with the speakers, I relocated my review pair of Audio Research Reference 250 monoblock amplifiers from my big system to the small. Not only did the Q1s help cement my impression of the mighty 250s; the extra smidgen of humanity on offer from the ARCs' KT-120 tubes made it clear that there was nothing inherently antiseptic about the Magicos' sound.

Returning to acoustic piano -- specifically, Ola Gjeilo's "North Country II," from the excellent *2L-TWBAS 2012 Sampler* (24/176.4 FLAC, 2L/SoundStageRecordings.com) -- was sheer delight. As I've mentioned in past reviews, this track is a favorite of mine. As with the Garson track, the Q1s reproduced all of the resolution, tonality, microdetail, and timbre captured on the recording. Most important, the emotional impact of the music was fully conveyed. What both my ARC and Ayre MX-R monoblocks made clear, however, was that the Q1s liked to have gobs of high-quality power.

The LeBron James of minimonitors

A natural comparison point for the Q1 was the Crystal Cable Arabesque Mini, which I reviewed just over a month ago and which retails in the US for \$25,000/pair, including stands. Both speakers have aluminum enclosures designed using COMSOL and similarly advanced design tools. Both have beryllium-dome tweeters and advanced woofers. Both are highly refined, reference-level products. In many respects, however, they could not be more different. Whereas the Magico surprised in the way its performance defied my expectations, the Arabesque Mini more closely conforms to what's expected from a small speaker, yet does so with a refinement and a grace that reflect the philosophies of its creators.

The Q1's sound was much more visceral; the Arabesque Mini's concentrates on nuance. For example, the extra bandwidth offered by the Q1 made a palpable difference in experiencing the bass thrust of Fagen's "Morph the Cat." In this respect, the Q1 reminded me of NBA star LeBron James, whose raw athleticism leaves fans shaking their heads in awe: "How does he do that? That move can't be real, can it?" With the Arabesque Mini I am reminded of ballet,



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and talents such as Mikhail Baryshnikov. While, again, world-class athleticism is on display, it is grace and nuance that separate the masters from the merely exceptional -- and grace and nuance are what the Dutch speaker is all about. As to which is the better value at nearly the same price, that will depend on what the customer seeks. In the States, my choice would be the Magico. Yet if I were in Europe, where the realities of international distribution result in the Q1 costing almost twice as much as the Arabesque Mini, I might go the other way. Ultimately, I think the question of value is answered less by cost and more by character. Each speaker has its own distinct character, and offers different choices. To quote Lady Gaga, "It's good to live expensive!"

Conclusions

The Magico Q1 is a more than worthy successor to its category-defining predecessors, the Magico Mini and Mini II. Despite its smaller exterior dimensions (yet larger interior volume), the Q1 goes noticeably lower in the bass. With its superior drivers and advanced aluminum enclosure, it leaves the Minis behind in Magico's ongoing quest for utter neutrality. In reducing Magico's Q series to its essence in a two-way stand-mount, the Q1 performs its own magic trick, unfolding what in lesser monitors remains miasma. Almost shocking in its ability to exceed expectations, it left agape the mouths of a string of visitors to my listening room. The visceral results ranged from tormenting to thrashing to unexpected, beckoning depths, but were most notable when the Q1s reproduced bass passages, from orchestral crescendos to hard-rock drum kits.

My time with the Magico Q1s is over, but they are not forgotten. They have left on my ears an indelible mark.

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Associated Equipment

- Speakers -- Crystal Cable Arabesque Mini, Vandersteen VCC-5 (pair)
- Digital sources -- Wavelength Crimson HS Balanced USB DAC, AudioQuest Diamond USB cable, Apple Mac Mini
- Amplifiers -- Ayre Acoustics MX-R, Audio Research Reference 250 (all monoblocks)
- Preamplifier -- Ayre Acoustics KX-R
- Interconnects -- Cardas Clear Balanced
- Speaker cables -- Cardas Clear Beyond
- Power conditioner -- Ayre Acoustics L-5xe
- Supports -- Harmonic Resolution Systems SXR rack with M3X shelves

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Price: \$26,500 USD per pair, including stands.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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