

Best Speaker I've Heard?

First Impressions of the Magico Q5 Loudspeakers in JV's Listening Room + How Q5s Are Made



Posted by: Jonathan Valin at 7:07 pm, November 4th, 2010

On Monday, the Magico Q5s were (finally) delivered, although not quite to my door. Getting them from the street into my house and, thence, up four flights of stairs to the third floor was the work of the three guys pictured below, surrounding an unboxed (but still wrapped in velvet) Q5 sitting on a pallet in front of my stoop.



Those of you familiar with my previous blogs on MBL 101 X-tremes, Magico M5s, Soudation and BAAlabo amps, etc. will know who this trio is—the astounding Elam brothers. By profession the Elams are piano movers (they do all the heavy-lifting for the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and the College Conservatory of Music), but betwixt and between they also find the time to help me out. Without them, I would be on a steady diet of CD players, integrated amps, non-Magico two-ways, and cable surveys.

What follows is a little pictorial summary of the Elams carrying a 370-pound Q5 (strapped to a fifteen-pound furniture dolly, no less) through the front door, into the living room hall, and then up the first of four flights of stairs to my third-floor listening room.





Remember: The Elams had to carry almost 400 pounds of dead weight up three more flights of stairs. And then...they had to do it again. Even in the light of repeated experience, I'm still amazed every time the Boyz manage a feat like this. It's hard to believe that any two human beings have this kind of strength and endurance.

Once the speakers were walked into position in my listening room, we removed their velvet wrap, peeled off the swaths of cardboard-like tape that protects sections of the enclosures (and the beryllium tweeters), attached the spike feet, and fitted them into the dimpled hardwood-floor protectors (both spikes and protectors are supplied with the Q5s). Here is what the Q5s looked like parked in the spots

where the Morel Fat Ladies had been sitting.



It is a fact that Magicos tend to require more care in setup than certain other kinds of speakers. This is a byproduct of their size, the size of my listening room, the sheer amount of energy they generate—particularly in the bass—and their broad, textbook-smooth off-axis power response, all of which, taken together, tends to excite more room nodes than planars or smaller, more directional dynamic speakers. Over the last two days I've been gradually dialing the Q5s in. To the room treatment that I had been using with the Morels and the TAD CR-1s, I've added two pairs of Shakti Halo-graphs, two more Synergistic Research Acoustic ART satellites—the little temple-bell-shaped gizmos sitting on small wooden brackets attached to the back walls (the tall wooden tongue-depressor with a giant temple bell attached to it sitting between the speakers is called a Vibratron and is also part of the Acoustic ART room-treatment system)—and a few more AV RoomService Metu acoustic panels. I've also fiddled repeatedly with speaker placement, settling for the time being on a position that is roughly the same as what you see in the picture—about ten feet from the listening position and five feet from the rear walls and four feet from the sidewalls. The new Magico beryllium tweeter can get a little hot on hot recordings if you listen to it directly on-axis at relatively close distances in a room the size of mine, so instead of aiming the tweets at my ears I've got them aimed just a smidgeon to the side of either ear. I've also fiddled incessantly with the tube traps in either corner behind the speakers, rotating them a little bit at a time until Tina Weymouth's bass-guitar riff at the start of "Take Me to the River" (from Stop Making Sense) and the deep sostenutos on Paul Dessau's First Piano Sonata (on a superbly recorded Nova LP) gave me the goosebumps I'm used to getting on these cuts from other great speakers.

Having heard the Q5s sound absolutely great in Berkeley—in Magico's show room—I know the kind of transparency, fidelity, and realism these speakers are capable of on really well-recorded source material, and it is that goal I am aiming for. I'm not sure I've gotten there yet (there will be more fiddling over the next few days and weeks), but on Wednesday I got close to the same impression I had in Berkeley, while listening to a superb EMI recording of Carl Maria von Weber's Grand Duo concertant for violin and piano, with Gidon Kremer on fiddle and Andrei Gavrilov on Steinway. This charming Biedermeier-style piece may have been originally offered up to a middle-class audience for home performance (imagine a time when such music was considered "home entertainment"), but it is virtuoso enough to be daunting to a pro. Kremer plays the dickens out of it, although I have the sneaking suspicion that the main reason it is included on this disc is to stand in contrast to Alfred Schnittke's witty "Quasi una sonata," which is definitely not "home entertainment" and which, in savagely pitting tonality against atonality, both mocks and yearns for the assuredness of sonata form, the fixedness of tonality, and the fertility of romantic self-expression of Weber's period.

On the Weber LP, what the Q5s sound like, first of all, is the real thing—a real violin and a real grand piano. The Q5s' timbre is utterly lifelike; their presentation more grainless, lower in driver/enclosure/crossover distortion, more top-to-bottom seamless, and more dead-center-neutral than that of any previous Magico speaker (or any other dynamic speaker) I've yet heard in my home; their dynamic range and scale better than any previous Magico speaker I've heard in my home, particularly on piano to pianissimo passages; their transient response better than any previous Magico speaker I've heard in my home, making for extremely fine resolution of low-level timbral, textural, and performance-related detail, as well as for very lifelike imaging in all three dimensions (images are neither miniaturized nor razor-cut); their staging wall-to-wall when the recording permits, as has always been the case with Magicos; their bass phenomenally fast, flat, uncolored by enclosure or driver, well-defined, and very very deep-reaching.

In Berkeley, where the Q5s were being driven by Soudation electronics fed by a Pacific Microsonics DAC and custom server and wired by MIT, this combination of virtues made for a sound very much like that of a Quad 2805 or 2905, albeit with far deeper bass, far more extended treble, far superior dynamic range, and far more dimensionality than any Quad I've heard. Chez Valin, with the Q5s driven by Audio Research electronics (Ref 40 preamp, Ref 2 phono stage, Ref 610T amps) and fed by a Walker Black Diamond Mk II record player (with Ortofon A90 cartridge) and wired with Synergistic Research Galileo cable, interconnect, and power cords, the presentation was almost a dead ringer for that of a MartinLogan CLX—the highest resolution, lowest coloration loudspeaker I'd heard in my home before the Q5—albeit a CLX with astoundingly deep-reaching, fast, flat, articulate bass, astoundingly high-flying, fast, flat, articulate treble, far greater depth of field and image, far greater dynamic range on fortes to fortissimos, and far greater breadth, width, and depth of soundstage.

Everything we've come to expect from dynamic loudspeakers in the way of enclosure, driver, and crossover coloration has been so far reduced here that, like the CLXes, the Q5s just don't seem to be there, physically and acoustically, the way other speakers, even other great cone speakers like the Magico M5s and the Morel Fat Ladies, are. Listening to them is like looking through a window without a pane of glass. There is less of the mediation that in hi-fi systems always makes us aware that music is not just being produced but reproduced. With the Q5, there just isn't as much "in the way."

This level of transparency is simply unparalleled in my past experience of cone and cone-hybrid speakers. Heretofore, only 'stats have owned this hallowed ground. For this achievement alone—for eliminating the enclosure "grain" that kept the great M5 from challenging the CLX in piano-to-pianissimo resolution, overall colorlessness, and transparency-to-sources—the Q5 deserves the accolades that have been heaped upon it.

It is rare for a speaker to be acclaimed as highly as this one has been by different reviewers on different continents with different musical and aesthetic agendas. Consensus is much harder to achieve nowadays because the options are so much better and so much more numerous than they once were; nonetheless, the Q5 is, by consensus, a standard-setting dynamic loudspeaker—at least for the lifelike reproduction of acoustic instruments. And were you to listen to it as it currently sounds in my listening room you would immediately understand why.

You would also immediately understand the “downside” of this level of transparency, low distortion, and colorlessness. With nothing from the speaker (or next to nothing) standing between you and the recording, the miking, engineering, and mastering of LPs and CDs take on an enhanced presence of their own. You hear—just as you do with the CLX—virtually everything. And everything is not something that every listener will want to hear. Good recordings may be a little less (or a bit more) sterling than you once thought they were; poor recordings will be revealed. The Q5 isn't as merciless in this respect as the CLX—no Magico speaker is. But it is less forgiving of flawed sources, because it is more revealing, than the M5s were (which is one reason why some may still prefer the M5s).

The Q5's transparency will also reveal shortcomings in ancillary equipment, even great ancillary equipment. For instance, you will immediately hear that the ARC 610T, as lifelike as it is, doesn't “grip” the bottom octaves the way the Soudation 700s did in Berkeley (though it is, at least, competitive with the superb Swiss amp from the midbass through the treble and, to my ear, more lifelike in the midrange). The 610Ts certainly don't lack for power or resolution in the bottom octave-and-a-half, as the *sostenutos* and *sforzandos* of Gavrilov's grand piano or the tremendous weight and drive of Tina Weymouth's bass guitar at the start (and throughout) “Take Me to the River” show. The 610T with the Q5 is fully capable of revealing the pitch, intensity, duration, and timbre of notes that you previously didn't even know were there, so deeply were they buried beneath the noise floor of the room/speaker interface. Many bass-range passages sound as if more notes are being played than you remember, because you are literally hearing those notes for the first time. Nonetheless, there is a slight slackening of focus on some (not all) bottom-end notes in complex passages (and a little brightening of the upper mids and trailing off in the top treble) that I didn't hear with the Soudation amps and that I don't expect to hear with the Technical Brain EX electronics (which I will soon be getting for review).

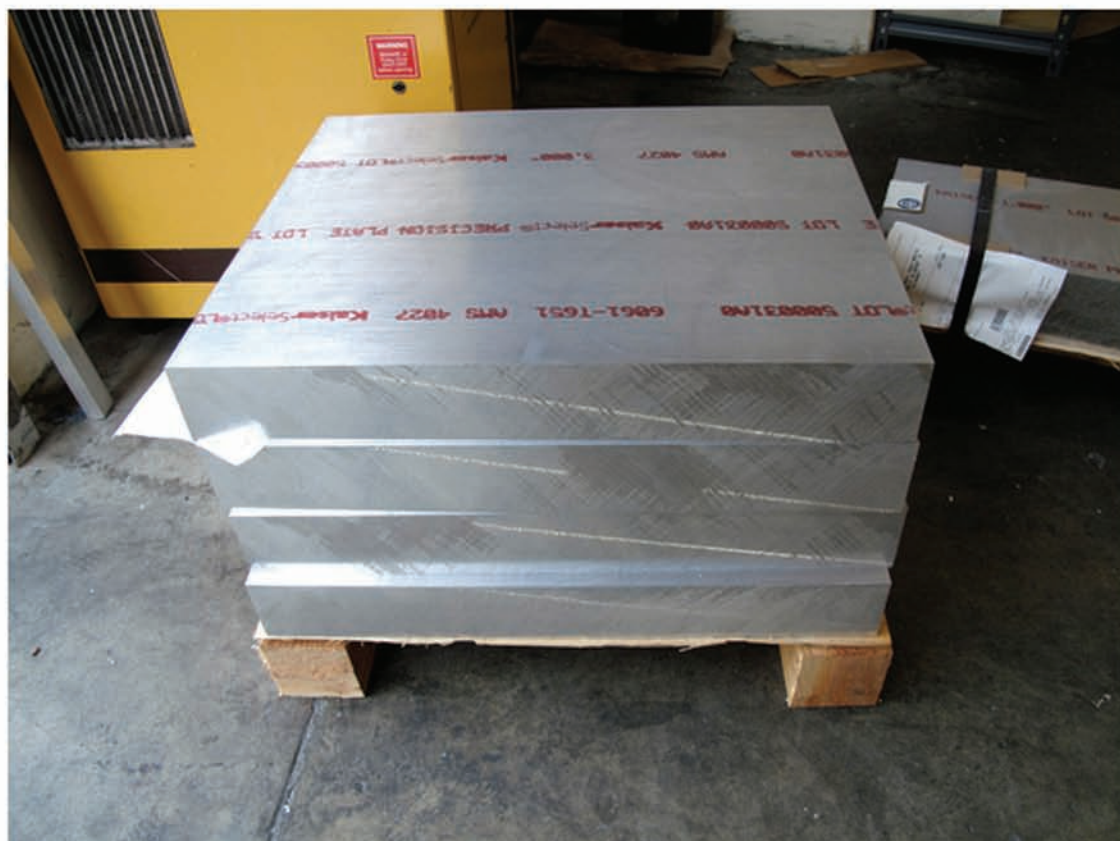


Whether you will want to live with all the Q5 can do—and I'm just beginning to get a handle on it, so don't take these initial impressions as gospel—or whether you'd prefer to live with something that is more consistently forgiving, spectacular, and *gemütlich* is not a question I can answer for you. The Q5 is clearly designed to present recordings with highest fidelity to sources and to the playback chain in front of them. When the discs are good or great and the equipment is as neutral as the speakers themselves are, music and musicians will sound more “there” with less electromechanical mediation than you are accustomed to hearing. When they aren't, they won't. Whether such honesty is the best policy for you, your room, your ancillaries, and the music you like is something you'll have to decide for yourself. As for me, I'm still at the starting gate, slack-jawed at the way this solid aluminum ingot of a loudspeaker already disappears more completely from ear and eye than virtually any other I've had in my listening room.

For fun I thought I would add a little pictorial essay on how Magico Q5s are made, starting with Magico's CNC machine shop in San Jose, CA, where raw aluminum stock is milled (by computerized machines) into individual pieces of the Q5, which are then sanded, smoothed, and polished before being shipped to Magico's assembly facility in Berkeley, CA, where the enclosures are put together and (after the anodizing of the exterior panels) stuffed with damping, drivers, and crossovers.



This is Magico's CNC Machine Shop in San Jose, CA



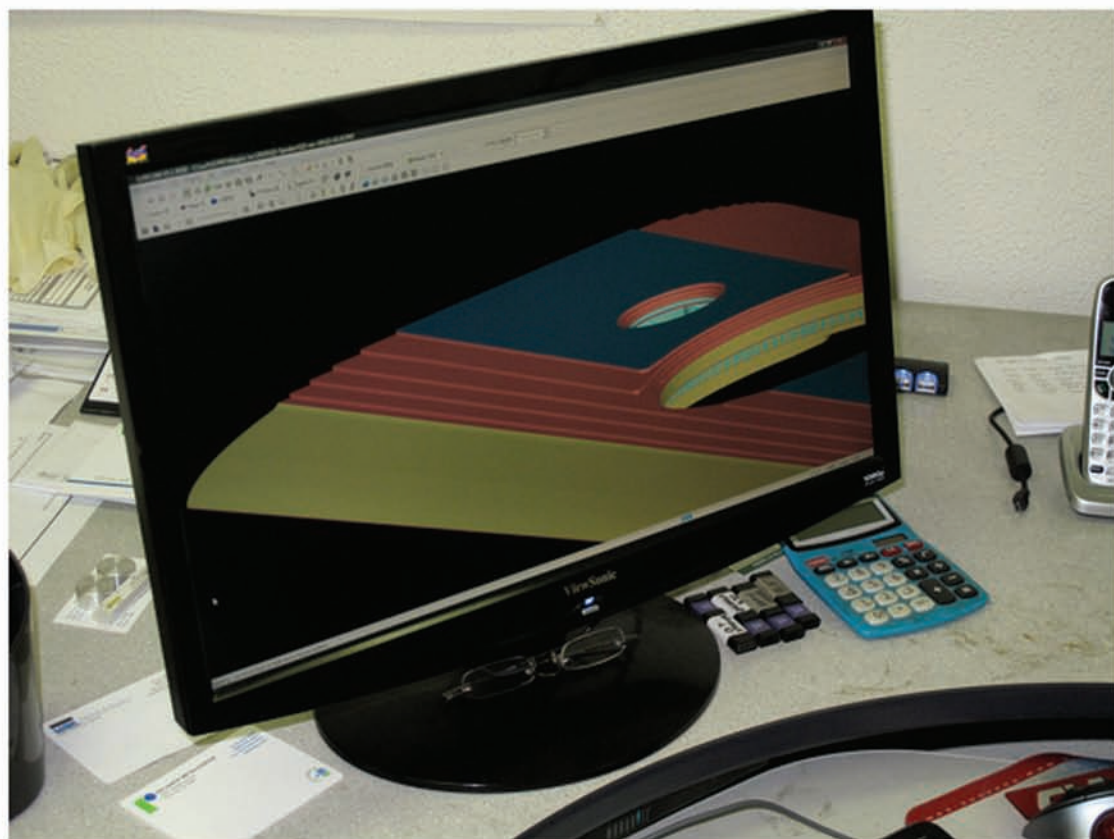
Raw 6061-T Aluminum Stock Awaiting Milling and Machining



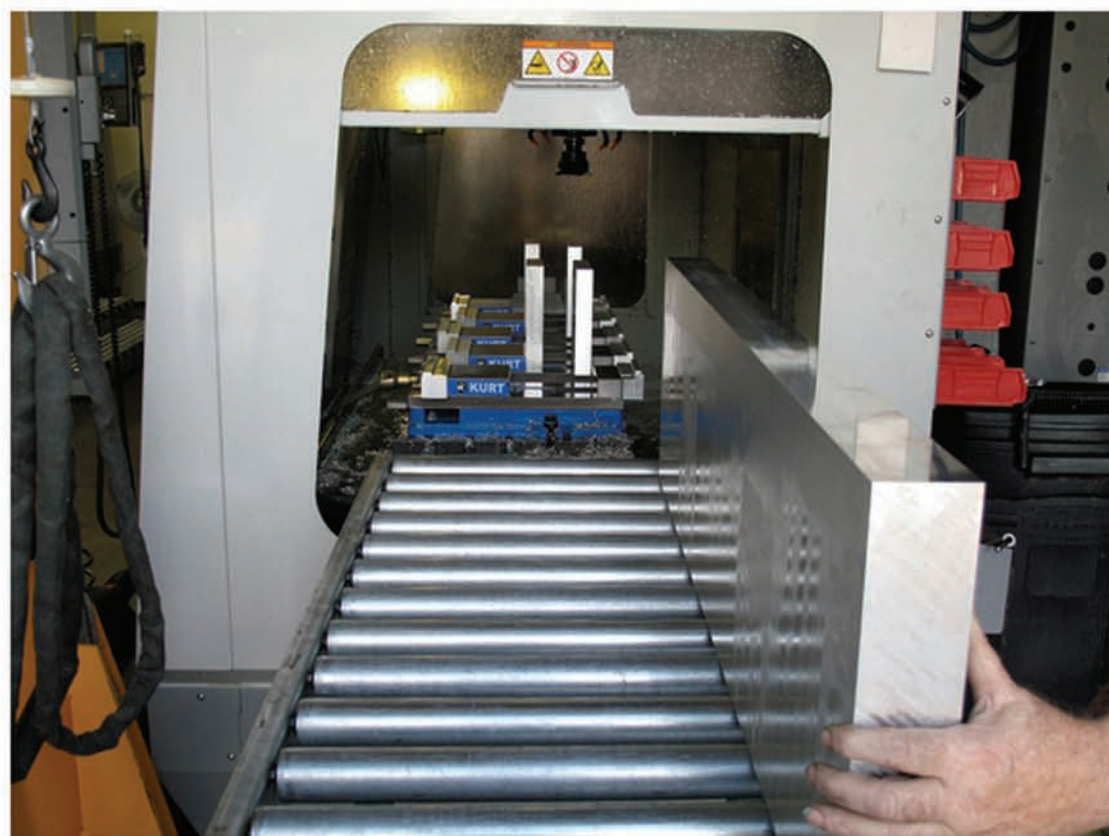
A View of the Interior of the Machine Shop, Showing Several of the CNC Machines



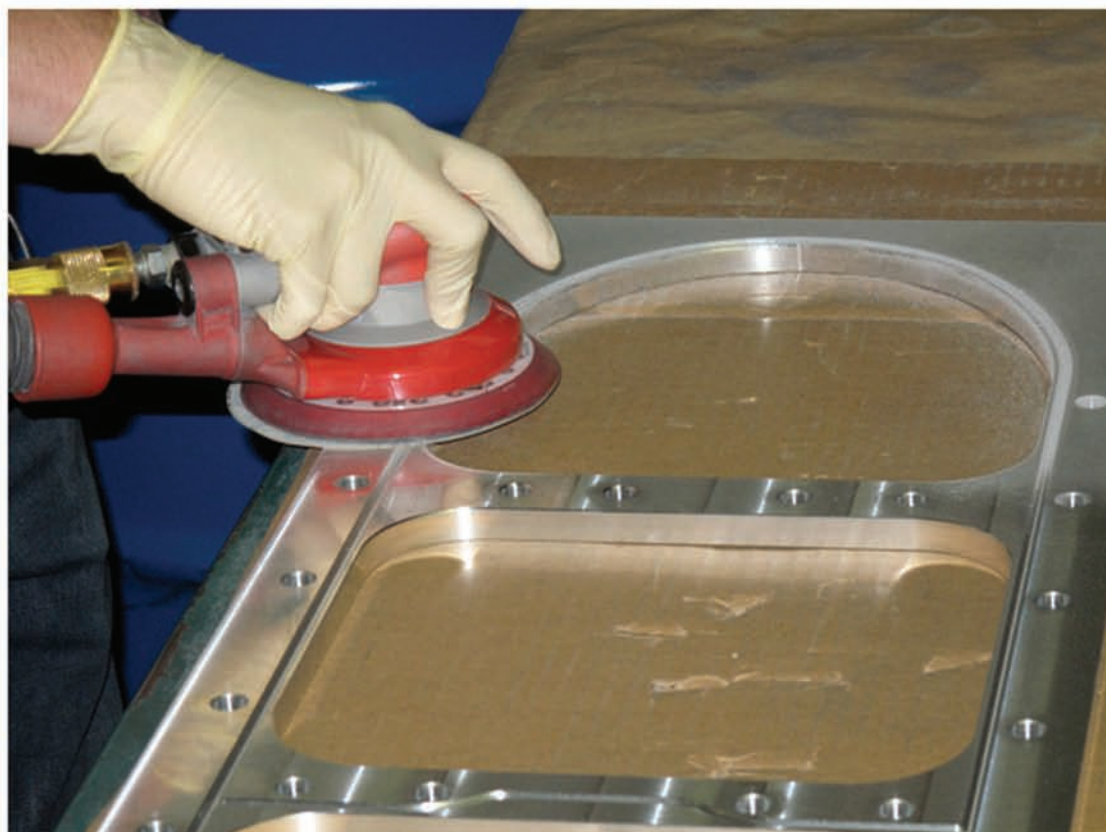
Some of the Bits Used For Milling and Machining



One of the Computers That Control The 3-D Milling Process



An Aluminum Bar Is Rolled Into a CNC Machine for Milling



The Parts Are Then Polished



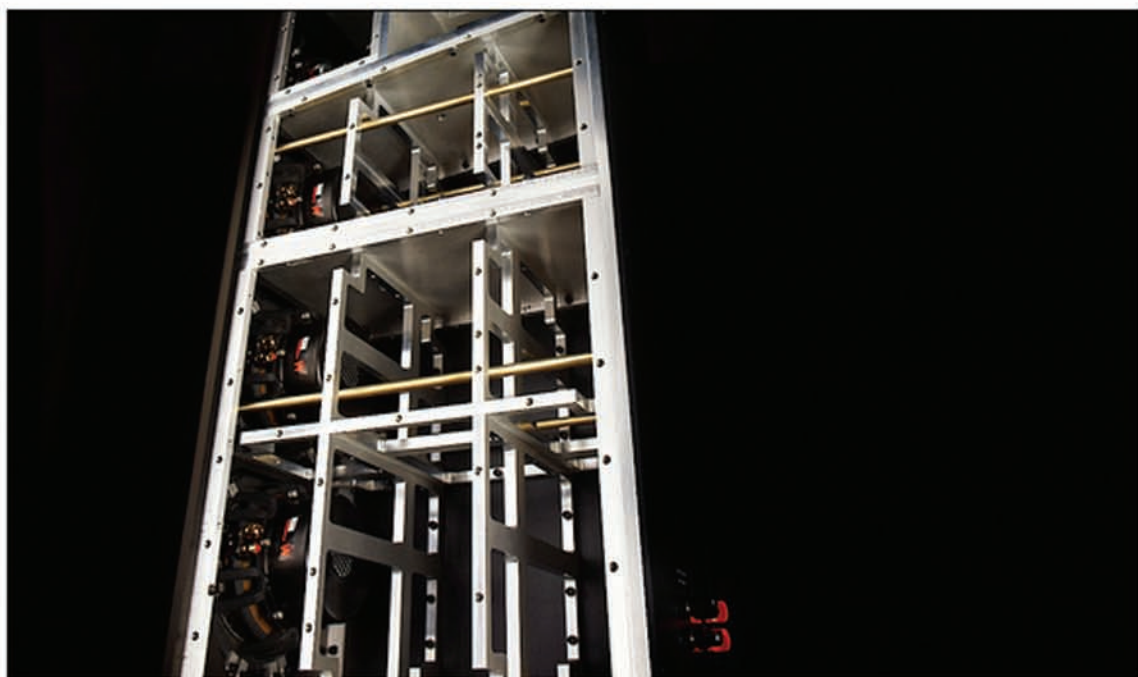
Sanded and Polished Internal Structural Parts Await Shipment to Magico's Berkeley, CA Assembly Facility



Magico's Assembly Facility and Offices In Berkeley, CA.



At Magico's Berkeley Facility the Q5 Subchassis Are Assembled from the Machined Structural Parts



A partially assembled Q5 stuffed with drivers, awaiting side panels



The Last Stop Before Packaging and Shipping--Magico's Listening/Break-In Room in its Berkeley Facility