

40 ECM'S LEGENDARY MANFRED EICHER
YEARS OF SONIC EXCELLENCE

NOVEMBER 2010

stereophile

Focal's 30th-Anniversary Speaker

**HIGH-END
PERFORMANCE,
REAL-WORLD
PRICE**

IN REVIEW

NEW
GEAR
FROM:

Goldring
Miyajima
Simaudio
AMR, Gradient
Rega, NuForce
Musical Fidelity

MAGICO'S Q5
NEW REFERENCE LOUDSPEAKER

TAKE
YOUR
LISTENING
ROOM WITH
YOU: **THE
REVOLUTIONARY**

**Smyth
Realiser**

Online Authority: www.stereophile.com

\$6.99 US \$8.99 CAN



A SOURCE INTERLINK MEDIA PUBLICATION

THINK **INSIDE** THE BOX



MAGICOQ.NET

True PDF release: storemag & fantomag

EQUIPMENT REPORT

Magico

Q5

MICHAEL FREMER

LOUDSPEAKER

DESCRIPTION Four-way, sealed-box, floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive-units: 1" (25mm) beryllium-dome tweeter, 6" (152mm) Nano-Tec-cone midrange unit, 9" (228mm) Nano-Tec-cone midbass unit, two 9" Nano-Tec-cone woofers. Frequency response (in-room): 22Hz–50kHz, ± 2 dB. Sensitivity: 87dB/2.83V/m. Nominal impedance: 4 ohms. Recommended power: 50–1200Wpc.

DIMENSIONS 47" (1194mm) H by 11.75" (298mm) W by 21" (533mm) D. Weight: 387 lbs (176kg) each.

FINISH Black-anodized aluminum.

SERIAL NUMBERS OF UNITS

REVIEWED 00009 & 00010.

PRICE \$59,950/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 25.

MANUFACTURER Magico, Inc., 932 Parker Street #2, Berkeley, CA 94710. Tel: (510) 653-8802.

Fax: (510) 649-9700.

Web: www.magico.net.



Magico Q5 loudspeaker

Show a time traveler from the 1920s an iPad and most likely he'd neither know what he was looking at nor what it might do. Show him a loudspeaker, even one as advanced as Magico's new Q5 (\$59,950/pair), and he'd probably know exactly what it was and what it did, even if what it's made of might seem to have come from another planet.

It's been almost 100 years since two General Electric researchers, Rice and Kellogg (no cereal jokes, please), patented the basic design from which sprang all subsequent direct-radiating moving-coil drive-unit designs. While the general electrical, acoustical, and mechanical principles have not changed since, their execution has, as the Magico Q5 clearly demonstrates.

Were Chester Rice and Edward Kellogg still around to have a look at the Q5, or any other cone-driver-in-a-box loudspeaker, they'd be familiar with the design, if not what it's made of. The Rohacell foam and carbon-nanotube material used in Magico's

MAGICO Q5

Nano-Tec are heavily relied on by the aerospace industry for their stiffness and lightness. Rohacell is a product of German research into acrylic materials and was first produced in laboratories in the 1960s. By 1972, it could be produced on an industrial scale. Its use today ranges from high-tech bicycle wheels to Airbus bulkheads. Rohacell has been used in loudspeakers since at least 1985, when the French speaker company Cabasse used membranes of Duocell, processed from Rohacell foam.

But while such materials have been used by some of the larger speaker makers, it's unusual for a small enterprise such as Magico to go to the considerable expense of having proprietary cones made from these materials built to their specifications.

No magic in the Magico approach

Talking to Magico's CEO and codesigner, Alon Wolf, I quickly realized he's not interested in selling hocus-pocus, or the notion that Magico has reinvented the loudspeaker, or that the company is us-

ing new, mysterious materials—even if, like many other speaker designers, he's inclined to assign catchy trademarked names like Nano-Tec™ and BMRC™ to design innovations that are more evolutionary than revolutionary. In a Bose world, who can blame him?

Wolf was far happier explaining the computer modeling and real-time analysis he uses to simulate and measure his design ideas. He gladly divulged the names of the materials of which his drivers and baffles are made, and the construction techniques employed in those processes.

Examining any Magico speaker makes immediately clear that the designers' intent seems to have been to take what's well known and refine it to the outermost limits of current materials and design technology. In the case of the Q5, this begins with the aluminum box housing the high-tech drivers.

The Bay Area company began working with aluminum enclosures from its inception more than a decade ago, but the high costs of machining limited the metal's use in real-world products. For its less expen-

sive products, like the V3 reviewed by John Atkinson in May 2008 (see www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/508mag), Magico builds cabinets of laminated birch plywood fronted by thick baffles of aircraft-grade aluminum, to which, as in all Magico speakers, the drivers are affixed from the rear. Wolf doesn't like to see screws on baffles, or hear the artifacts that he claims are caused by diffraction around them. "Screws come loose and eventually can't be properly tightened, and they don't sound good around tweeters," he insisted to me in his inimitably certain manner.

Magico recently bought a CNC machine shop, which has made it possible for them to bring the costs of working in aluminum in line with the retail prices they want to charge. Wolf says that aluminum provides ideal stiffness and mass, and is relatively easy to effectively damp without storing mechanical energy, and is thus far superior to medium-density fiberboard (MDF). Reducing flex-induced resonances in MDF requires extensive internal bracing—which can store mechanical energy of its own.

MEASUREMENTS

I used DRA Labs' MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone to measure the Magico's impedance and farfield frequency response, and an Earthworks QTC-40 for the nearfield and spatially averaged room responses. The sheer bulk of the Q5—it weighs almost 400 lbs—precluded my being able to place it on my Outline turntable for the acoustic measurements. I therefore performed the quasi-anechoic measurements with the speaker sitting on a dolly in Michael Fremer's driveway (scroll down the page at http://blog.stereophile.com/stephenmejias/lets_get_physical_the_magico_q5). The inevitable reflection of the speaker's output from the ground between it and the microphone will therefore reduce the resolution of the measurements in the midrange;

it was also not possible to do a full set of lateral-dispersion measurements, due to the need to keep to a minimum the time the speaker was left standing in direct sunlight.

The Q5 has a rated sensitivity of 87dB. However, my estimate was lower than this, at an estimated 84dB(B)/2.83V/m, which is also lower than average. The speaker is also fairly difficult to drive, with an impedance that drops below 4 ohms in the high treble, the lower midrange, and the upper bass (fig.1). As well as minimum values of 2.75 ohms at 56Hz, 3 ohms at 200Hz, and 2.8 ohms at 40kHz, there is an amplifier-crushing combination of 3.85 ohms and a -56° capacitive phase angle at 45Hz. This speaker really does need to be used with powerful solid-state amplifiers to sound its best, I feel, such as Michael Fremer's

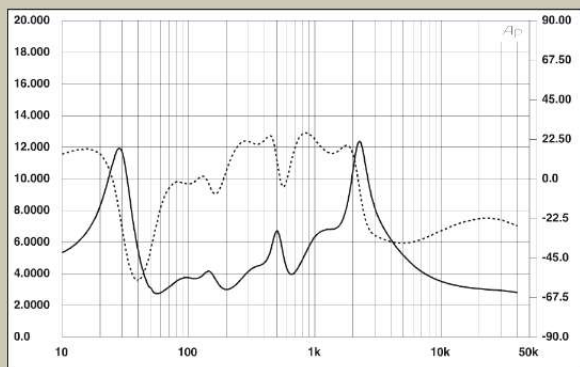


Fig.1 Magico Q5, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed). (2 ohms/vertical div.)

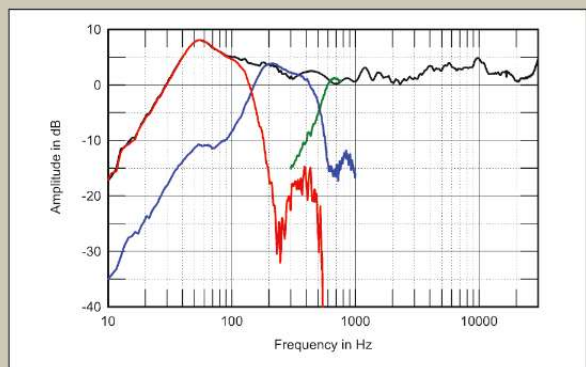


Fig.2 Magico Q5, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50", averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with nearfield responses of midrange unit (green), upper woofer (blue), and lower woofers (red) plotted below 750Hz, 1kHz, and 550Hz, respectively.

Description

Each Q5 weighs 387 lbs. Machined of aluminum and brass, it must be seen from the inside to truly be appreciated. The cutaway version on display at the Consumer Electronics Show in January showed a complex internal structure of multiple, thick-walled chambers and 10 tubular truss rods that tightly secure the front baffle to the rear panel.

Some numbers: The frame system alone is assembled from more than 50 machined parts. One sidewall is perforated by nearly 100 threaded holes. More than 350 fasteners of various types are associated with the cabinet even before the front-baffle assembly is affixed to it. Assembling a pair of Q5s takes more than a week. Alon Wolf told me that, were it not for his acquisition of the CNC machine shop, the Q5 would cost closer to \$120,000/pair. And *without* computer-controlled machining, bringing such a design to market would probably be nearly impossible. The outer, matte skin of anodized aluminum sports a pleasingly soft, muted finish available



The aluminum skeleton of the Q5's aluminum enclosure.

in a nearly infinite range of colors.

Marrying the drivers' surrounds to the smoothly radiused openings machined

into the massive baffle and clamping them to the baffle's back give the Q5's face an unusually clean and elegant look. However, with no grille cover, should Junior, Fido, or the housekeeper (never *you*, of course) poke or slice a driver or its surround, replacing it would be a big job. But according to Wolf, the benefits of having no screws or bolts to inevitably loosen over time far outweigh the hassles of replacing drivers or surrounds, which Magico's dealers are trained to do.

The four-way, sealed-box design includes Magico's new MBe-1 beryllium-dome tweeter, which features a relatively large surround. Beryllium has considerable advantages—a high ratio of stiffness to mass, and breakup modes far beyond the audioband—but it's a difficult metal to work, and very toxic as dust or when vaporized. Wolf wouldn't tell me who actually makes and/or assembles the dome and the tweeter's other parts, but the involvement of Danish driver maker Scan-Speak somewhere along the line wouldn't surprise me, given the look of the surround.

measurements, continued

Musical Fidelity Titan. The traces in fig.1 are free from any wrinkles that would indicate the presence of cabinet vibrational resonances; listening to the cabinet walls with a stethoscope while I swept a sinewave tone up and down in frequency, I could detect only a small degree of liveliness at 418Hz. The cabinet's heroic, all-aluminum construction is obviously effective at minimizing vibrational resonances.

The single impedance peak in the bass in fig.1 indicates a sealed-box alignment for the bottom two woofers (which behave identically) tuned to a low 29Hz. The red trace in fig.2 shows the output of these drivers, measured in the nearfield. It peaks between 30 and 150Hz, crossing over to the third, topmost woofer (blue trace) above that range and rolling off with a steep slope broken only by a well-suppressed peak in the midrange. The top-most woofer

crosses over to the midrange unit (green trace) at 500Hz, meaning that the lower unit is responsible for handling most of the fundamental tones of the male human voice, with the midrange unit reproducing harmonics. The midrange unit's response is flat within its passband, but the black trace in fig.2 implies that the beryllium-dome tweeter is balanced a little high in level. Its output is flat, however, and extends at full level to the upper limit of this graph, at 30kHz.

In the vertical plane (fig.3), the Magico's response doesn't change significantly over a $\pm 5^\circ$ window centered on the tweeter axis, which is 40" from the floor. Though I didn't measure the Q5's lateral dispersion, its use of a fairly wide baffle means that the speaker's top-octave output does drop off to the speaker's sides. This could be seen in the individual measurements taken to produce the

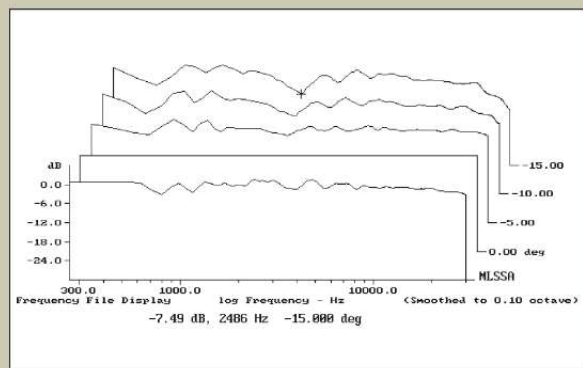


Fig.3 Magico Q5, vertical response family at 50", normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 15–5° above axis, reference response, difference in response 5° below axis.

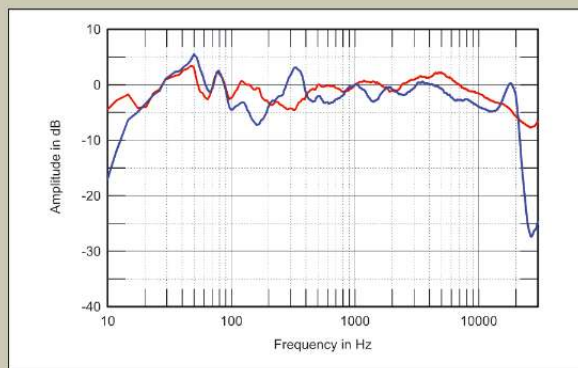


Fig.4 Magico Q5, spatially averaged, 1/6-octave response in MF's listening room (red), and of Wilson MAXX 3 (blue).

MAGICO Q5

Four drivers with Nano-Tec cones, designed by Magico and assembled from parts sourced from around the world, complete the sealed-box Q5: a 6" mid-range, a 9" midbass, and two 9" woofers. None has a dustcap, and all feature sandwiches of Rohacell foam coated with carbon nanotubes to produce unusually stiff yet lightweight cones claimed to behave pistonically within their operating bandwidths. The new midbass driver has a 5" voice-coil with a copper cap to give superlow inductance. The other drivers derive from those used in Magico's M5. Magico uses its Bass Mechanical Resonance Cancellation (BMRC) system to offset the drivers' acoustical centers and angles, though this is not visible from the front baffle. This is claimed to allow the Q5's low-frequency breakup modes to be acoustically canceled.

The German electronics specialist Mundorf supplies crossover-network parts built to Magico's specs. Although Alon Wolf was unwilling to reveal the Q5's crossover frequencies, Magico does provide some specs: a sensitivity of

87dB, a nominal impedance of 4 ohms, and a frequency response of 22Hz–50kHz, ± 2 dB. I suspect that the speaker is not a particularly easy load to drive; for best results, only high-current and high wattage amplifiers should be used. The only amp I used for the review was Musical Fidelity's Titan, which can produce high current drive and more than 1500Wpc into 4 ohms (though I think my wall power is a limiting factor).

Setting up a 387-lb speaker

While the owner's manual includes a setup procedure that is a model of written and procedural clarity and refreshingly free of hocus-pocus, I was happy to let Alon Wolf and an assistant do the job. In the real world, a Magico dealer would do it.

The Q5 is relatively compact, but carrying one is not recommended. In fact, it might not be possible because of the speaker's concentrated weight, its depth, and its somewhat slippery finish—not to mention the unprotected drivers. Wolf & Co. used a hand truck to wheel in the

Q5s, and plopped them down in about the same positions just vacated by my Wilson Audio MAXX 3s.

Wolf had stopped by a few weeks earlier to check out my room and to hear the MAXX 3s, which he said sounded better than he'd ever heard them, despite my room's relatively small size. The last thing Wolf said about the Wilsons was both diplomatic and dramatic: "What you will hear from the Q5s will be very different, I can assure you."

Wolf and his assistant used a combination of measurements and subjective listening to position the speakers, though ultimately they relied less on listening and more on measuring, the latter revealing a smoother low-frequency response and diminished LF peaks when the Q5s were farther out into the room. In fact, Wolf said that these were some of the smoothest in-room measurements he'd seen for the Q5s. When he was satisfied with the Q5's positions—about 6" closer to my listening position than the MAXX 3s, and toed in so that the tweeter axes crossed

Q5's spatially averaged response in MF's listening room (fig.4, red trace). Nevertheless, there is a little too much mid-treble energy apparent in-room, especially when compared with MF's Wilson MAXX 3s (fig.4, blue trace). As Michael noted, the Q5's tweeter was "not shy or polite" and the presence region was slightly forward. While the Magico speakers don't excite the low-frequency modes in Michael's room quite as much as the Wilsons do, they do have a slight lack of energy between 200 and 400Hz, which is where the Wilsons have an excess. Could this explain why the Q5s didn't cause Michael's stomach to churn as much as he was used to with cello recordings?

Turning to the time domain, the Magico's step response on its tweeter axis is shown in fig.5. All five drive-units are connected with positive acoustic polarity, and the

decay of each unit's step blends smoothly into the start of that of the next lower in frequency, suggesting optimal crossover design. To generate the Q5's farfield cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.6), I had to aggressively window the impulse response to eliminate the first reflection of the speaker's output from the ground, which occurred just after the 7.5ms limit of fig.5. That this graph doesn't show as much detail as usual is indicated by its dotted region. But other than a slight amount of low-level hash at the top of the midrange unit's passband, the decay is superbly clean overall, correlating with MF's finding the Q5's treble to sound free from any grain or edge.

Given that its bulk limited the lower-frequency resolution of the measurements, the Magico Q5 measured very well indeed.

—John Atkinson

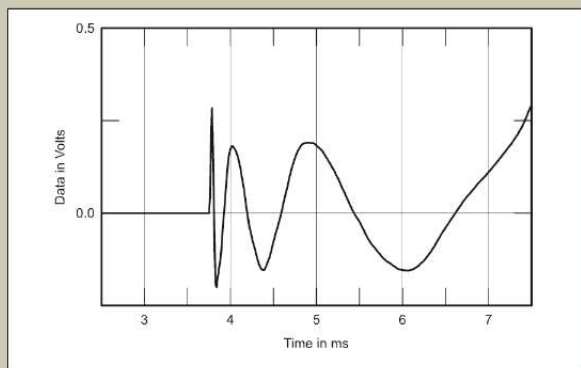


Fig.5 Magico Q5, step response on tweeter axis at 50" (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

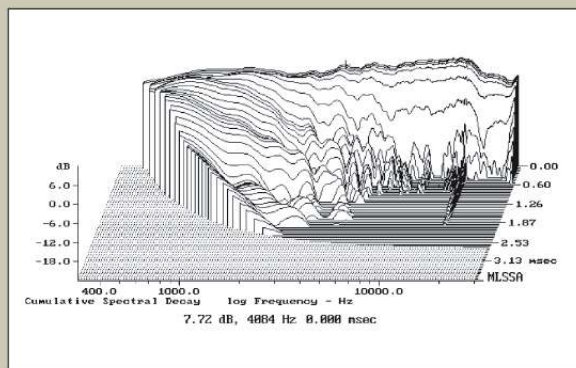


Fig.6 Magico Q5, cumulative spectral-decay plot on tweeter axis at 50" (0.15ms risetime).

MAGICO Q5

well behind my head—he and his assistant carefully tilted and spiked the speakers. The Q5's tweeter is somewhat directional; toe-in determined its overall contribution to the speaker's balance.

Wolf left them there, even though I subjectively preferred them a bit closer to the room's wall behind them, where the LF peaks were slightly higher. Wolf had seen *Stereophile's* in-room measurements of the Wilson MAXX 3s, which showed a boundary-reinforcement bump; and of the Vandersteen Model 7s, whose powered subwoofer had been set to mountaintop levels by Richard Vandersteen, and which I'd turned down to a subjectively smooth level (though it was *still* Rocky Mountain high). In other words, though I obviously like what measures as an excess of bass—even if it doesn't *sound* that way to me or to visiting friends, audiophiles or no—Wolf wanted me to hear the Q5s operating as smoothly as possible into the room, regardless of my preconceived notions or prejudices.

No box

While Magico's efforts to rid the Q5 of cabinet-induced resonances and colorations may seem excessive to some—and expensive to everyone—there was no denying the results. You won't know or understand "complete absence of box" until you experience it, particularly in comparison to cabinets made of MDF, I don't care how well damped they are. The Q5 was *gone*. While it's impossible to know whether it was due to the "absence of box," the driver technology, or both, what immediately stood out was the Q5's superior abilities in the lower ranges of checklist performance parameters, including frequencies, SPLs, and dynamics. Low-frequency performance was indisputably cleaner, more revealing, and more finely rendered than I've heard from any speaker under review. The complete absence of boxy colorations or bass overhang was immediately obvious. The Q5 was the most *consistent*-sounding speaker at all SPLs that I've ever heard in my room, particularly at ultralow levels, where its sound never clouded over, or delivered



less than full musical resolution.

Listening to the Q5s at ultralow SPLs was as involving and satisfying as when I cranked them up to fifth-row-center levels. And the speaker's microdynamic performance was equally transparent and detailed, even at diminished SPLs. Low-level information did not melt into a gray background. The startling blackness of the backgrounds and the manner

est to the highest double-bass notes—even the most forcefully plucked ones, for which many speakers produce a papery transient residue (not to be confused with string slap, though that is often overemphasized as well).

Sometimes, admittedly, these are artifacts of the recording itself—but when I listened through the Q5s to Bill Evans's *Waltz for Debby* (45rpm LPs, Riverside/Analogue Productions 9), I eerily connected with Scott LaFaro's fingertips, traveling with them up and down his bass's neck. When he goes up for the low notes, there was a noticeable absence of bloating of the image size, and I experienced the same clarity and appropriately tight definition I heard with the higher, more easily reproduced notes, thanks to the Q5's subjectively seamless transition from the woofers to the mid-bass driver. The Q5 delivered bass where there was bass and otherwise shut up. There was zero overhang, zero warmth where none should be. Not easy feats for a nearly full-range loudspeaker.

We interrupt this review for a live-music refresher

I've just returned from the Caramoor Jazz Festival, in Katonah, New York. It was produced by my friend Jim Luce,

THE Q5 WAS THE MOST **CONSISTENT-SOUNDING SPEAKER AT ALL SPLs** THAT I HAVE EVER HEARD IN MY ROOM, PARTICULARLY AT ULTRALOW LEVELS.

in which recorded information launched itself from that blackness reminded me of the first time I heard Continuum Audio Labs' Caliburn turntable.

Well-recorded double bass sounded harmonically and texturally more convincing through the Q5 than through any other speaker I've heard here. The sounds of the plucks had appropriately stringy, fleshy components that are usually obscured, either by a soft coating of bass or by an overemphasis of transients. The Q5's transient balance was unerringly correct and *consistent* from the low-

who was kind enough to give me eighth-row-center seats. Pianist Chuchito Valdez (grandson of Bebo, son of Chucho) had dusted off his grandfather's luxurious Afro-Cuban charts from the 1950s, and here led a group that performed them with a muscular elegance that took us back to the casinos of pre-Castro Cuba. He set his piano on fire. Luce recorded the performance in mono with a single vintage Neumann tube mike, for a vinyl release to be cut by Soundsmith's Peter Ledermann for release on Ledermann's label, DirectGrace Records, the profits

MAGICO Q5

to go to charities that rescue children from slave labor.

The festival finale was Chick Corea fronting a group consisting of soprano saxophonist Kenny Garrett, bassist Christian McBride, and 85-year-old drummer Roy Haynes—who was stupendous. This was the final stop on the group's tour, and all celebrated Haynes, who played like a 25-year-old, though toward the end he began hitting the splash cymbals as insistently and fiercely as a devilish 10-year-old. I was sitting close enough to hear the bass and cymbals unamplified, and my iPhone's SPL meter hit peaks of +90dB.

Those splash cymbals *hurt*. They sized and shimmered, but never sounded "crisp" or "sharp"—nor did they ever get confused in a wash of high frequencies. I found myself gritting my teeth but I never covered my ears. Those splashes were somewhat painful, but addicting.

Which brings me to the Q5's tweeter. It was so clean and open, yet free of edge and grain. It was also not shy or polite. The Q5's top end was bold but not overbearing. Its high-frequency attack was appropriately and naturally aggressive without ever sounding edgy or mechanical, and its decay was as effervescently clean and complete as I've ever heard from a tweeter.

Vocal sibilants were reproduced with surgical precision, free of smear and edge. The MBL 101's true omnidirectional tweeter used to be my favorite in this regard. Now it's the Q5's beryllium dome, which combines transient speed and cleanness with a smooth, creamy overall personality that, like listening up close to Roy Haynes' live cymbal work, was positively addictive.

The Vital Middle

The stellar support it got from above and below eased the job of the Q5's midrange driver—it had few or no mid-bass responsibilities. If anything, the upper midrange was pushed forward ever so slightly, in keeping with the tweeter's exuberance. Women's voices were thrillingly present but never disembodied. Experienced listeners heard this slightly forward presence region, but none felt it obtrusive, particularly given the absence of peaky colorations.

After a hard day's picking, putting on a side of J.S. Bach's cantatas from Nikolaus Harnoncourt's complete traversal with Concentus Musicus Wien from the mid-'70s on Telefunken, or an original pressing of Ella Fitzgerald's *Clap Hands*,

Here Comes Charlie! (LP, Verve V-4053), produced musical pleasures that obliterated analytical concerns and reinforced my conclusion that the Q5 might be the smoothest, most revealing, least colored speaker to ever play music in my room.

Currently on the turntable is Itzhak Perlman and Pinchas Zukerman's *Du-*

but also the Magico Q5s for capturing and reproducing cleanly the bodies of the instruments in three-dimensional space and the reverberant field beyond, without confusing the two.

Handel-Halvorsen's Passacaglia and Sarabande for Violin and Viola in g features pizzicato playing that the Q5s

THE LACK OF BOXY COLORATIONS ALLOWED THE MAGICOS TO **CONSISTENTLY PRODUCE DELICATE INSTRUMENTAL IMAGES THAT FLOATED FREELY** IN THREE-DIMENSIONAL SPACE.

ets for Two Violins (LP, EMI ASD 3430), from 1978—admittedly after EMI's golden age, but the recording, produced in London's Temple Church, built in the late 12th century, demonstrated the Q5's exceptional tonal and textural purity, and its ability to reveal without overanalyzing. The Temple Church's warm, reverberant acoustic was allowed to bloom behind and around the violins, which don't sound particularly closely miked. Played at realistically moderate levels, the bodies of the instruments didn't get lost in the reverberant wash—even in the lower notes, which seemed to increase room excitation. Recording two violins (and, in one work, a violin and viola) in a reverberant space can often lead to watery, mushy boredom. Not here. Credit the engineer, of course,

reproduced with the same noticeable correctness of attack that they managed with plucked double bass. The lack of boxy colorations allowed the Magicos to consistently produce delicate instrumental images that floated freely in three-dimensional space.

Piano Music in a Church, Endre Hegedüs's recital of solo-piano works by Chopin and Debussy (CD, Tone-Pearls TPRCD1)—I hope it's still in print—revealed more of this "Almost Analogue Digital" recording's tape hiss than I remember hearing through either the MAXX 3s or the Vandersteen 7s, yet the piano sounded neither hard nor bright, though I distinctly remember the Vandersteens reproducing more of the church's reverberant field than the Q5s did. That was one of the 7s' stand-out abilities in general. However,

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

ANALOG SOURCES Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn turntable, Cobra tonearm, Castellon stand; Graham Engineering Phantom II tonearm; Audiostone Pythagoras turntable, HiFiction Thales AV tonearm; Ortofon A90, Lyra Titan *i*, Miyajima Premium BE (mono) cartridges.

DIGITAL SOURCES Playback Designs MPS-5 SACD/CD player—DAC, Camelot Roundtable Anagram Technologies DAC, Benchmark ADC1 A/D converter, BPT-modified Alesis Masterlink hard-disk recorder, Meridian-Soolos music server.

PREAMPLIFICATION Einstein The Tube Mk.II, darTZeel NHB-18NS preamplifiers; Einstein The Turntable's Choice, Boulder Amplifiers 2008, Esoteric E-03 phono preamplifiers.

POWER AMPLIFIER Musical Fidelity Titan.

LOUDSPEAKERS Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX 3.

CABLES Phono: Hovland/Graham Engineering MG2 Music Groove. Interconnect: TARA Labs Zero, Stealth Sakra, ZenSati. Speaker: TARA Labs Omega Gold, ZenSati. AC: TARA Labs The One Cobalt, Shunyata Research King Cobra Helix CX, Isoclean 1000.

ACCESSORIES Finite Elemente Pagode, HRS SXR stands; Symposium Rollerblocks; Audiophilia Cable Cooker; Shunyata Research V-Ray II Reference, Silver Circle Audio Pure Power One 5.0 power transformer, TARA Labs Power Screen power conditioners; Furutech DeMag & deStat LP treatments; Oyaide AC wall box & receptacles; ASC Tube Traps, RPG BAD & Abffusor panels; VPI HW-17F, Loricraft PRC4 Deluxe record-cleaning machines.

—Michael Fremer

MAGICO Q5

the applause preceding Chopin's Pre-lude in c, Op.28/20, sounded eerily *real* through the Q5s. If you love solo piano, you need to find this disc!

The perfect loudspeaker?

There's no such thing, of course. Although, as I've described above, in some ways the Q5 exceeded the performance of any other speaker I've heard, in one area they did not.

While waiting for a rock concert to start, have you ever watched the drummer sit down at his kit, and give it a run-through to test the instruments' physical positions, functioning, and miking? A good example is at the beginning of Little Feat's *Waiting for Columbus* (LP, Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab MFSL 2-013): after the band shares a joint and warms up by singing backstage, the microphones follow Lowell George and the Feat onstage. The late Richie Hayward sits down at his kit and gives the kick drum a few wallops, sending shock waves through the PA that fill the hall. There's a familiar sound and feel to that—a visceral *punch*—that the Q5s didn't do, and I don't think it was a function of my room. I just don't think it's in the speaker's DNA.

The Q5's bass was texturally and tonally superb. No, it was better than that—in most respects it was the best I've heard, but the tradeoff to get that textural and tonal perfection was a lack of the visceral impact that I believe is contained by many recordings—rock, jazz, and classical—not to mention live music. Some recordings are *intended* to punch you in the stomach. The Q5 can't do that. It's soft and polite. That works well for many recordings, but not all. The ability of other speakers to reproduce that visceral impact is not a hi-fi distortion caused by vented or powered woofers. It's real. In this respect, both the Wilson MAXX 3 and the Vandersteen 7 have it all over the Q5.

If you listen to a lot of rock, you will *not* be disappointed by the Q5's upper-frequency response or, particularly, by the cleanness of its transient reproduction of electric guitars, where it is spectacularly revealing. But the bottom-end weight and drive needed for hard rock is not there. I also felt that this paucity of weight sometimes affected the Q5's ability to capture the growl of the cello's lowest notes. When my stomach should have begun to churn, it did not. But above the churn region, the Q5 was exceptional.

Despite its 11"-wide front baffle, which otherwise might have been expected to produce diffraction artifacts—I couldn't hear any—the Q5s produced a magnificently stable, deep, wide, and appropriately tall soundstage. Even when I sat unusually close to them, the Q5s "disappeared" to leave an open, airy, transparent, uncluttered stage populated by solid, three-dimensional images.

Conclusion

Overall, the Magico Q5 was the smoothest, most detailed, least mechanical-sounding speaker I've heard. It sounded

But elsewhere in the audioband, I never wanted *more* of anything, though a little *less* in the upper octaves might have produced a more accurate balance, if perhaps not as much pleasure.

If you listen exclusively or mostly to acoustic music, you'll find the Magico Q5 sets new standards in many areas of speaker performance—transparency, resolution of low-level detail, and freedom from boxy colorations—the Q5's overall freedom from obvious colorations and mechanical artifacts and its audible lack of "box" put it in a league of its own, in my experience. The Q5 imposed on

THE LONGER I LISTENED, THE MORE I APPRECIATED THE **Q5'S ABILITY TO GET OUT OF THE WAY** AND LET THE RECORDING'S OWN PERSONALITY ASSERT ITSELF.

that way at what I used to think were impossibly low levels, and it sounded that way at uncomfortably loud levels, leading me to believe that a pair of these relatively compact speakers could easily fill a very big room. Its micro- and macrodynamic capabilities were unlimited, with the exception of the bottom octaves, where they lacked visceral punch.

familiar recordings the least amount of its own personality, and overall had the least "sound," of any speaker I've heard. It was chameleon-like in that regard, and its ability to produce pleasing sound with even poor recordings was in no way due to its homogenizing the input signal—in fact, quite the opposite. It revealed more variations in recording quality, yet some-

how, even the poor ones were made more bearable, perhaps because they didn't trigger mechanical artifacts inherent in the speaker—much as the best turntables *seem* to suppress pops, clicks, and other record defects.

As a work of industrial art, the Magico Q5 is beautiful, though to some it might look cold and uninviting. But that's a more personal issue than the sound itself. When you first listen to it, the Q5 may also *sound* uninviting because it has little or no personality of its own. But in a loudspeaker, that's what you *want*. The longer I listened, the more I appreciated the Q5's ability to get out of the way and let the recording's own personality assert itself.

I can't imagine anyone who's in this game for the music and not the gear, and who's okay with the Q5's subtler bottom octaves, who wouldn't want to own a pair of Magico Q5s—particularly if they listen mostly or exclusively to acoustic music. ■

