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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Magico S1 loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

In just a few years, Magico has gone from being a brand no-one had heard of, to being a brand that helps shape today's high-end audio industry. Although this comes down to many factors, it's easy to overlook that the biggest factor is that Magico makes a fundamentally good loudspeaker.

However, that loudspeaker can be extremely expensive, even by high-end standards. Although a quick investigation of what goes into a Magico loudspeaker goes a long way to explain why these loudspeakers are expensive to build and ship to clients, explanations are as nothing if the product is ultimately more money than you could ever justify or afford to spend on a pair of loudspeakers. The new S1 goes some way to addressing this conundrum; it's not exactly chicken feed at £13,900, but it's a step toward a more 'everyman' Magico.

The S1 is a sealed, two-way floorstander, with a cabinet made of solid aluminium that sits on heavy outriggers and armour-piercing spikes. From a passing acquaintance with Magico, it's clear it's part of the brand's more approachable S-line in that it has curved side panels and can be supplied in a range of colours, including premium M-Coat gloss finishes (the Q-series products have adopted a 'any colour you want, so long as it's matt black' Model T Ford approach to aesthetics). This also means the complex aluminium Meccano set spaceframe that holds every Q in place isn't a feature.

The S series are still built on a thick aluminium skeleton, with the aluminium tube that forms the outer cabinet and the top and bottom plates bolted to this frame. That outer cabinet in the S1 is a fascinating bit of engineering in and of itself. It's a solid aluminium tube, a softly curved triangle in cross-section with the base of the triangle forming the front baffle of the loudspeaker. Yet again, this is the kind of small-batch engineering development that's only possible if you own the means of production. This makes for a seamless loudspeaker (there are holes in the tube for the drive units, one each for the large red and black speaker terminals and a back plate for the logo at the front and the serial number at the back). Protective grills are supplied too.

The tweeter is the MB30 25mm beryllium dome unit found in the Magico S5, while the single mid-bass driver

is a 178mm version of the 165mm M380 mid-range driver also found in the S5. However, where the M380 had a pair of 250mm bass units bringing up the rear, the M390 unit has to reach further down into the bottom end, in a manner not dissimilar to the 178mm Neo-Tech unit found in the Q1 standmount. On paper at least, the performance of the Q1 standmount and S1 floorstander are identical, but although they have commonalities of performance, they are actually very different beasts with very different clientele.

The M-Coat S1s arrive in one large packing crate, containing both loudspeakers (the M-Cast version comes in two separate boxes). Both are sturdy and mean the speakers are very likely to arrive in one piece no matter how determined the haulage company (haulage companies please note – that wasn't a test or a challenge, I know that if you put your mind to it, you can destroy even the most well put-together package in seconds). The downside is they are so well packed the loudspeaker is almost impossible to extract without the manual and an assistant with socket set in hand.

The speakers are relatively position independent, although the usual equidistant to side and rear walls, slight toe-in rules apply. This is not a loudspeaker that demands micrometer precision installation, but the more you put into installation, ultimately the better you get out of the speaker.

The same applies to partnering electronics. It's not a malign load (relatively low 86dB sensitivity and a four ohm load that appears to dip a bit in the upper midrange), but it's a powerful temptation to declare this solid-state only. In fairness, I used it with a Devialet D-Premier (awaiting its board updates) for most of the time and felt absolutely no need to change things except for the purposes of experiment, and I kept coming back to the French daclifier as a fine, load intolerant default.

There's a theory some audiophiles hold that every recording has its own 'goldilocks' point on the volume dial, where everything is just right. Truth is, I've never really given that much thought before, but it seems to hold with the S1. While you can play a piece of music louder or quieter than its happy place, the ideal volume level for any given album will snap that album into sharp focus. ▶

▶ The Magico way is one of absolute honesty and in a smaller loudspeaker that can be something not normally encountered. The loudspeaker has a legitimate lower-frequency cut off point of around 32Hz. This is realistic and real-world sounding; so there's none of the boom and bloom associated with most loudspeakers: no 80Hz flub designed to make a loudspeaker sound bigger than it really is; no ports to chuff along with the music, no cabinet resonance. Nada.

This has an interesting effect on some music – when you play dubstep (James Blake – 'Limit to your Love') or dub reggae (Steel Pulse – *Handsworth Revolution*) there is an expectation by the engineer that the speaker sings along at the bottom end. When it doesn't you get to hear the bass in all its naturalness, rather than all its glory. Bass lines that should dominate are precise and free from overhang. It's not to the endstops of the drivers, because these loudspeakers can both take and deliver a fine wallop. It's that if the music relies on the loudspeaker's weaknesses (as dubstep seems to do) the precision of the S1's bass will not allow such things.

Don't mistake this for some kind of 'it can't do rock' swipe,

because that's not the case at all. What you discover – and discover quickly – is that you want bass lines to underpin the music, not overawe it. You want to listen to every note without blur or flab or overhang – and in a small room that should mean the last couple of frets on a bass guitar are gently rolled off, because that's infinitely better than the room and the speaker joining in. But that isn't what's happening here; the bass is powerful and free from overhang; put on the Who and listen to John Entwistle playing bass on something really well known like 'Baba O'Reilly' and you get both the force and the skill of his playing. You don't have to trade off a little bit of the former to get a lot more of the latter. You could say the same across the board with any instrument with a deep bass component. OK, those who only have E Powers Biggs records in their collection are going to want something that can scoot down still lower, but at this point (not being a big organ fan) I'm prepared to trade those last few notes for subtlety and accuracy. And I think it is a trade-off at this point; loudspeakers that can do that last octave and keep the rest of the sound as accurate as the S1 are a good deal more expensive than this.

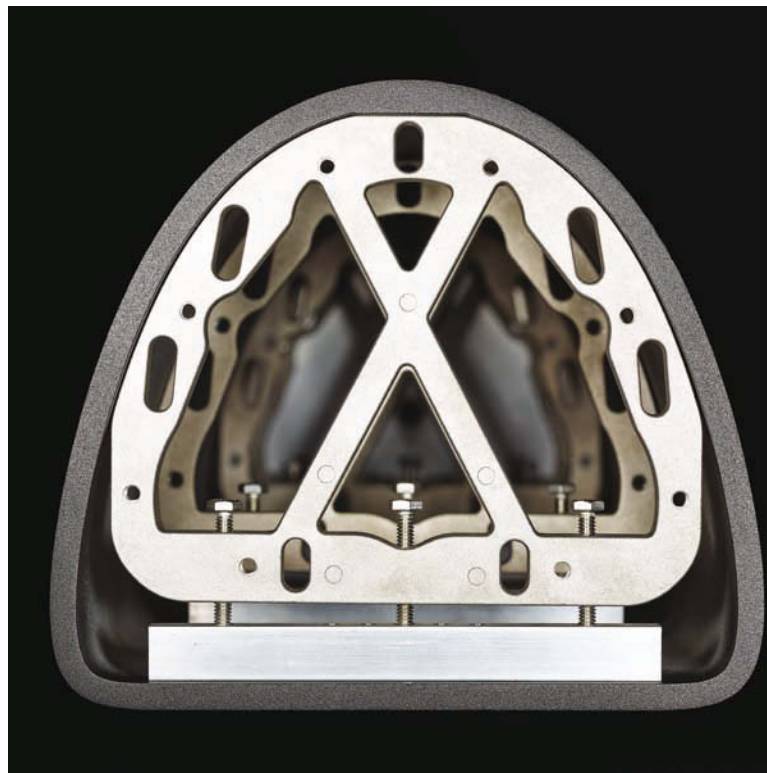


And that's the real winning part of the S1's presentation; it does astronomically expensive speaker performance without the Apollo Space Mission sticker price. It has the 'no magic in the Magico' neutrality, but where the Q-range takes that to the logical extreme, this is a more fun speaker. This makes for a combination of intrinsic honesty to what's on the recording and an articulate freedom that makes you want to play music more. And not in that audiophile kind of way, either. You know something's doing well when you spent an hour listening to Dent May singing about alcoholism to his ukulele and Sufjan Stevens Enjoying his Rabbit (two of the most 'non-audiophile' albums I own). Eventually, something had to give; I was playing odder music louder and louder; the amp could take it, my ears could (for a short while), but the rest of the house couldn't, and the letter box began to flap wildly along to 'Chameleon' by Trentmøller like we were being invaded by aliens. Two weeks later and the neighbours still aren't speaking to me.

As a consequence, writing this review was an on/off switch thing. If the music was on, I wasn't writing; making this the easiest and hardest review to write. Easy because it just does what the music asks of it. Easy because no speaker at the S1's price gets close to meeting the demands of that sentence so well. Hard because that means the things audiophiles put on their watch list (detail, tonal separation, imagery, dynamics range, vocal articulation, etc) are as much functions of the recording as the loudspeaker. Yes, if you add more speaker to the equation, so the potential for even more resolution and power handling increases, but not in small to medium sized rooms.

There was no music singled out here. OK so the 'Chameleon' part was a successful experiment in electronica played at furniture-moving volume levels, But I really did find myself throwing everything but the musical version of the kitchen sink at these speakers and nothing bad happened. Ever. The nearest to 'bad' was the last movement of Mahler's Eighth, where the soundstage and the instruments compressed slightly into a ball of sound between the speakers when played at the 'right' (as in very loud) volume level, but that's hardly unexpected – many speakers I have used in playing that movement have failed.

The S1 is a Magico that fits into tighter spaces than before. Even the Q1 requires more space behind and to the sides and that deep bass can cause a problem in the sort of tiny listening spaces in Manhattan apartments or London living rooms. In some ways, this makes for the perfect 'now' loudspeaker; highly accurate, designed for modern life and without any of the fake 'niceness' or 'impressive' tailoring that normally comes with a high-end design. Highly recommended! +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Sealed box floorstanding loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 1x 25mm MB30 tweeter, 1x 178mm M390 mid-woofer

Sensitivity: 86dB

Impedance: 4 ohms

Frequency Response: 32Hz-50kHz

Recommended minimum power: 50W

Dimensions (WxHxD): 25x117x23cm

Weight per loudspeaker: 43kg

Price: £13,900 (M-Cast), £17,500 (M-Coat)

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