

Magnepan 1.7

Close encounters of the audiophile kind

By Steve Guttenberg

A “full-range” driver – one that could reproduce all frequencies from the deepest bass to the highest treble – has been an impossible dream for generations of speaker designers. The new Magnepan 1.7 gets closer to that ideal than any speaker I’ve heard, but it’s a three-way design with bass, tweeter and super-tweeter elements. Even so, it speaks with one voice; maybe that’s why it sounds less like a speaker and more like real, live music than any affordable speaker on the planet. Priced at \$1,995, the 1.7 is, hands down, the greatest deal in high-end audio.

Magnepans don’t use conventional dome tweeters or cone drivers of any kind. The 1.7’s slim panel instead houses a 442-square-inch low-frequency driver and a 96-square-inch tweeter/super-tweeter. The 1.7 is a dipole design, so it projects sound from its front and rear surfaces, just as every previous Magnepan has, but the similarity ends there.

The 1.7 is the company’s first “full-range ribbon” speaker, and before we go any further, let’s try and clarify the terminology. You see, the 1.7 and most of Magnepan’s other speakers, except the MG 3.6 or MG 20.1, feature “quasi-ribbon” tweeters.

That’s Magnepan lingo for ribbons that use a conductor bonded to Mylar (or some other substrate), which makes for a more durable – though somewhat less transparent-sounding transducer than Magnepan’s 3.6 and 20.1’s ribbon tweeters. Those are classified as “true” ribbon designs because the conductor is the only moving part of the tweeter. That approach lowers moving mass and greatly increases the tweeter’s speed and resolution. Alas, most speaker manufacturers using ribbon tweeters opt for quasi ribbons for their superior durability. With the 1.7, the woofer, tweeter and super-tweeter’s ribbon conductors are all bonded to the same Mylar membrane. That’s why the 1.7 is considered a full-range (quasi) ribbon design. That’s a first for Magnepan.



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The 1.7 replaces the 1.6, which had a more than decade-long and very successful run. The new speaker's super-tweeter provides improved lateral dispersion and greater power response compared with the two-way, woofer-tweeter 1.6. Magneplan also claims the upgraded crossover components for the 1.7, and new technology capacitors improve the sound. Sure, I'd like to know more about the exact crossover points and slopes and other info about the crossover, but Magneplan is keeping mum about such things.

Proper placement in the room is crucial for achieving the best possible sound quality. Experimentation with different placements – distances from the front and side walls, and distances from each other – can yield sizable improvements. Just be aware that the 1.7 must be directly toed-in to the listening position to get the best sound. This speaker needs a lot of space around it to do its best, so figure on placing it at least 30 inches from the front wall and 24 inches from the side walls.

Magneplan speakers take their time with break-in. My 1.7 review samples had some hours on them before arriving here in Brooklyn,

but they rapidly improved over the first week. They sounded a bit uptight at first before they loosened up and started to boogie. Figure on a solid month of use before the sound truly blooms.

The speaker is manufactured at the company's factory in White Bear Lake, Minnesota, and almost all of the 1.7's parts that aren't fabricated in-house are sourced from U.S. suppliers. Who says you can't make affordable high-end audio in the U.S. anymore? And speaking of value, Magneplan also offers a factory-direct \$599 a pair panel speaker, the MMGI!

The 1.7 is 64.5 inches high, 19.25 inches wide, and just 2 inches thick; pairs are shipped in one 95-pound box. They come with sturdy, cast-metal T stands that bolt to the back panel. Instead of binding posts, there are a pair of receptacles that accept banana plugs.

The optional, extruded-aluminum side pieces make for a more contemporary look than previous Maggies, and it's available in black, aluminum or primed for custom finishing. More-traditional buyers can opt for wood trim in black, natural or dark cherry.

The metal trim adds \$100 to the cost, and wood trim bumps the price up \$150 over the \$1,995 base price. You can get the 1.7 with black, off-white or dark-gray cloth grilles.

If you're a newly minted audiophile or never heard a great panel speaker, the first thing you'll hear is the lack of box-type resonances and the associated diffraction effects, not to mention the problems associated with cone and dome drivers. No wonder the 1.7 sounds less like hi-fi and more organically alive than almost any box speaker you've ever heard priced under \$5K. The standard set of hi-fi cues are banished by the 1.7. They're gone.

It's also worth noting that what makes a well set-up pair of 1.7s so special isn't just something that only dyed-in-the-wool audiophiles would notice. Pretty much anyone with ears will immediately grasp what's going on here. That's not always the case with high-end speakers; few "civilians" hear the finer points of audiophile sound, which is generally an acquired taste. With Maggies, the sound is so different than standard fare that just about everybody is wowed by their first Magneplan audition.

I loved the way the 1.7's clarified dense recordings, such as the Moody Blues *In Search Of The Lost Chord* on LP. The entire mix is submerged in heavy reverberation, but the 1.7 easily cut through the haze. The acoustic guitars were naturally warm without sacrificing transient speed; the "analogness" of the sound was truly remarkable. The speaker's musicality is perfectly balanced with its clarity, which some might say is exactly what distinguishes the best of analog from state-of-the-art digital. The 1.7 plays well with both.

Bass? Yeah, some folks say you "need" to use a sub with Maggies, but I retired my sub when I started using MG 3.6s. They easily reach down into the low 40 Hertz range in my room, and while the 1.7 doesn't go quite as deep, their low-end is pretty impressive. Bass definition is also a marvel, capable of revealing textures and nuance like no cone woofer. The 1.7's low-end extends to the mid 40 Hertz range, but the skinny speaker doesn't have the impact of a big dynamic speaker or sub. You *hear* the bass, but you never feel it in your *gut*. (continued)

The recently released *One Night Stand: Barbra Streisand and Quartet Live at the Village Vanguard* CD is a knockout. This is the first Streisand album I've ever really listened to, and hot damn, her voice was a wonder over the 1.7. So real, so human, such a New Yorker! The 1.7's midrange is quite possibly its most defining attribute.

I changed gears with the *Muddy Waters at Newport 1960* CD, which totally kicked butt. Waters was still in his prime and he sounds like a man possessed on "I've Got My Mojo Working." The 1.7 unleashed his stinging guitar leads and left no doubt why Waters inspired legions of British and American rock and rollers.

Miles Davis once described his music as painting with sound. I wonder what he would have thought about the sound of the 1.7. Not to get all analytical on you, but if you want to hear everything in your recordings, the 1.7 is the speaker for you. But if you prefer something more romantic, a speaker that makes everything sound sweet and pretty, sorry, the 1.7 won't be a good fit.

Max Roach's *M'Boom's Live at S.O.B.'s New York* CD was another one that just about knocked me over. I recently played this one on Wilson Sasha speakers and they were pretty revealing. But the 1.7 better delineated the tone of the timpani and big bass drums. You want speed and super-quick transient response? Listen to the way the 1.7 reproduces the glockenspiel and vibes on "Epistrophe." I love it! Now sure, the Sasha was more powerful, visceral and physical in its presentation, and that's something you're not going to get with a Magnepan or most electrostatic speakers. Our publisher insists the Martin-Logan Summit X (\$13,995) and CLX (\$19,996) 'stats would rock my world, and I'm ready to be convinced. Bring 'em on!

The 1.7 clicked with both my reference Parasound JC 1/JC 2 electronics and Audio Research's new digital integrated amp, the DSI200. The Parasound duo is almost twice as expensive and twice as powerful as the DSI200 (400 vs. 200 watts). No matter, the ARC exerted tighter control over the 1.7's bass panels. The Parasounds were sweeter/fuller balanced and consistently produced a deeper soundstage.

Then I tried a set of Pass Labs XA100.5 mono amps with the 1.7, which immediately had me revising my opinions of the speakers. The amps transformed the 1.7's sound to an astonishing degree. In fact, I was surprised to note the XA100.5 sounded more powerful than the 400 watt JC 1s; bass firmed up, soundstage width and depth expanded, and treble detail and overall resolution were all markedly better. Best of all, the midrange was sweeter, which reads as more natural to me. The 1.7 was now sounding more like the two and a half times more expensive MG 3.6! The XA100.5 is a wonder. It's exceedingly transparent, tonally neutral, and it develops a soundstage you have to hear to believe. Top-end clarity was nothing short of amazing.

The 1.7 sounds great at soft, late-night volume, but it really comes to life turned up fairly loud. Sure, go too far and you'll hear them or your amp running out of juice.

The XA100.5 managed a feat I've never heard before at home: it rendered the applause on the Barbra Streisand *At The Village Gate* CD/DVD set realistically. Applause is almost impossible to reproduce, but the 1.7/XA100.5 combination positively nailed it.

Hold on, just for fun I tried Nelson Pass' First Watt J2 amp (25 watts per channel), and it sounded positively magical with the 1.7. *(continued)*

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When everything is right, you get the feeling that you're hearing back through time, back to the original recording event.

The J2's big draw was its sweet, downright tubey tonality with the Maggies. Please don't misunderstand; it's hardly an ideal match, though I can imagine some folks would really dig the First Watt with the 1.7, especially if they have them in a very small room or like to listen quietly.

Before I lived with the Maggies, the only time I ever heard them sounding great was in audiophiles' homes. For some reason, dealers and shows never really demonstrate the speakers' true potential. When everything is right, you get the feeling that you're hearing back through time, back to the original recording event.

I know some of you are waiting to see if Magnepan will soon revamp its entire line to full-range ribbon status, but that doesn't look too likely over the next two to three years. Besides, the 1.7 is already a smash hit, and Magnepan is putting most of its energy into keeping up with the demand. As much as I love what the 1.7 can do, I still prefer the sound of my MG 3.6 (\$4,995/pair). The MG 3.6's "true" ribbon tweeter is just a lot more transparent, and the 3.6 sounds like a bigger, ballsy speaker. That said, the 1.7's sound holds together better from bottom to top than a 3.6.

The 1.7 is an incredible achievement, but it needs the right amp to really sing; it's downright fussy about placement; and Magnepan bass won't punch you in the gut the way hefty floorstanding speakers or subs can. So it falls short of perfect, but I don't care how much money you care to invest on a set of speakers, there's no such thing as a speaker that excels in every area. That said, the 1.7 is easily the most transparent \$1,995 speaker on the planet. I'm happy to announce the Magnepan 1.7 will receive a *TONEAudio* Exceptional Value Award for 2010. ●

REVIEW

Magnepan 1.7

MSRP: \$1,995 a pair

MANUFACTURER

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source VPI Classic turntable with a van den Hul Frog cartridge

Digital Sources Ayre C-5xe MP Universal Player, Oppo BDP-83 Special Edition

Electronics Parasound JC 1 preamp; Whetst 2.0 phono preamp; Parasound JC 1, Pass Labs XA100.5 and First Watt J2 power amps

Speakers Dynaudio C-1, Zu Essence, Mangepan 3.6

Cable Zu interconnects, speaker cable, and XLO Signature-3 interconnects, speaker cable, power cords