



First Listen: Magnepan's New Flagship 20.7 Loudspeaker

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Wendell Diller, marketing manager at Magnepan, was on the phone. "Jacob," he said, "would you like to come and listen to our new Magnepan 20.7 loudspeaker and be the first to write about it?" Would I? Do audiophiles love tubes? Does Lady Gaga like to wear outrageous outfits? Suffice it to say that I was on the airplane almost before Diller hung up the phone. After a brief call to my wife, who initially thought I was joking about the idea of visiting White Bear Lake, Minnesota in the dead of winter, and an email to TAS editor Robert Harley, who suggested I was a "brave man" for facing the cold, I was on my way a few days later to visit Magnepan, a loudspeaker company that I've been gaga about for many years.

For the past decade, I've owned the Magnepan 20.1, which I originally procured from Gifted Listener Audio in Centreville, VA. Loudspeakers came and went. But the 20.1 stayed. Nothing seemed to match its lifelike scale and ability to reproduce the ambience of a concert hall. So naturally I was quite curious to hear its successor. At the airport, Diller met me and was carrying a copy of Men's Health under his arm. Had he suddenly become a fitness freak? Nope, it turned out that the discerning editors had named the new Magnepan 1.7 loudspeaker as one of the coolest products of 2012 and posed one Irina Shayk, a Russian supermodel, next to it. Magnepan, it seemed, was starting to travel in the fast lane.

Once we arrived at the factory, Diller gave me an extensive tour of the factory, which is as Old School as you can get. The labor involved in producing a Magnepan is more intensive than I had suspected. Much of it, as you can see, is done by hand, involving meticulous placement of wiring and ribbons. Magnepan even has its own full-time machinist as well as a CNC machine for cutting the frames for loudspeakers. On the day I visited, the factory was focusing on producing the venerable MMG, which retails for \$600. Magnepan's focus, as always, is on delivering as much value as possible. The entire place screams frugality and history.



Upstairs, Diller showed me the very first Magnepan that company founder Jim Winey produced and demonstrated for the late William Z. Johnson, the founder of Audio Research. It was a poignant moment. I had a Raiders of the Lost Ark feeling, as though I was looking at a unique historical object that few ever get to see. Today, Magnepan is run by

Jim Winey's son, Mark, who is striving to continue the heritage of the company, but also has redone much of the company line, beginning with the introduction of the 1.7 loudspeaker, then the 3.7. Now, Magnepan is debuting the 20.7.

Is it better than the 20.1? No, it is not. It is vastly superior.

The 20.1 has always had the ability to project a piano or orchestra with uncanny fidelity, the latter with a row-by-row depth that lets you hear the tympani is located in its own space all the way back even as a violin section is playing at full volume, while the trumpets blaze full-bore. What has always sounded so startling about such reproduction is the Magnepan's ability to give you everything simultaneously - the sonic picture isn't chopped up into discrete bits. This, I think, is the result of the tremendous whoosh of air that the planar loudspeaker seems to pump into the soundstage, endowing it with a cavernous character. But this is also precisely where the 20.7 took it up more than just a notch. On recording after recording, I was simply incredulous at the whirling, kaleidoscopic soundstage it produced. On a Chandos recording of the superb French pianist Jean-Efflam Bavouzet playing Haydn piano sonatas, the 20.7's ability to place the piano in space was awe-inspiring. I swear you could almost tell what kind of wood was on the floor that the grand piano was resting on so prodigious was the 20.7's prowess at producing the recording venue.

Something similar occurred in listening to Murray Perahia's recording on CBS Masterworks of the Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3. Here the improved coherence of the 20.7 came to the fore. There was always a slight gap between the midrange and tweeter transition on the 20.1. No longer. Magnepan has managed to efface that bothersome quality, both by greatly improving the quality of the capacitors it is using and by changing the design of the passive crossover itself. On the 20.7 the sweep of the orchestra came through more clearly than with the 20.1. Another audible improvement is in dynamics. On drums, the 20.7 has a quality more akin to that of a horn loudspeaker in its rapidity. Be careful with the volume



control:the 20.7 can almost snap your head off with its whiplash speed. The improved coherence of the 20.7 also means that the midbass reproduction is far more satisfying than with the 20.1. The improved alacrity of the bass panel helps to make for a more potent sound. Unanticipated bass drum whacks may make you jump. This speaker, in other words, has come to play.

Will the 20.7 prompt devotees of moving coil designs to decamp en masse for planar loudspeakers? Probably not. What I'm trying to say here is not that Magnepan has reinvented the planar loudspeaker, but that it has significantly improved upon its designs to the point that many of the drawbacks long associated with planars have now either been banished or rendered nugatory. To be sure, the 20.7 will not have the pinpoint imaging or ultimate bass dynamics or the supernatural black backgrounds of competitors costing ten or even twenty times as much (as of this writing final price has not been determined, but the factory seems intent on retaining or not appreciably raising the cost from the current \$13,000 for a 20.1).

But here's the skinny: no other speaker at this price will offer even remotely similar lifelike performance, and it should - no, will - scare the bejeezus out of most of its competitors. It's no accident that Audio Research, which I also got to visit, has 3.7 loudspeakers as part of its reference system. So go ahead. Search for another loudspeaker. But I can only wish you good luck. I defy you to find one at up to five times the cost with the scale and realism of the 20.7. I know. I heard it first.

