

First Sounds: Magnepan 3.7i/DWM Speaker System *The*

by Marc Mickelson | October 1, 2014

Late last summer, during a trip to Minneapolis, I had dinner with Wendell Diller of Magnepan and a few other "industry folks," as President Obama might call them. Among the topics at this dinner (and at all such dinners, truth be told) was the state of high-end audio amidst ever-shrinking customer and dealer bases. This subject is of special interest to Wendell, who regularly deals with both dealers and customers. One of the ways that audio companies renew sales is through the introduction of new models to replace existing ones -- except at Magnepan, where new products don't appear on some set schedule, and sometimes don't seem to appear at all. Wendell is decidedly old school, touting Magnepan's desire for new speakers to exhibit clear value to customers, not just be placeholders within the company's product line.



As these discussions with Wendell often go, the rest of us began to speculate why Magnepan didn't introduce a new top-of-the-line speaker, perhaps an updated Tympani, which was the name of its long-ago flagship: a three-panel affair that looks more like a room divider than a speaker. I've even heard people call them this when they see them. Given the market's migration to ever more expensive products in all categories, Magnepan's current flagship, the 20.7, looks somewhat pedestrian at its sub-\$15,000 price. Wouldn't Magnepan be better served by a speaker that costs twice as much -- especially one with the recognition of the Tympani name behind it? So went the general line of questioning. I have to admit that it made a great deal of sense to me, given that I have reviewed sets of cables that cost considerably more than a pair of 20.7s.

Wendell is not one to back down from such a debate. In fact, I think he enjoys such mental wrestling, especially when he's the only one who thinks the way he does (which is often the case). There we were -- a bunch of us proclaiming the wisdom of a Tympani for the 21st century and Wendell countering with a simple question, "Where's the value?" We were deadlocked, but I remained convinced that the voices of the chorus were correct and creating a new Tympani seemed like a very good idea.

CES came and went, during which Magnepan introduced the 3.7i (not by actually *playing* it) at THE Show. I immediately began lobbying Wendell for an early pair of the speakers to write about. He relented a few months later, also sending along a pair of DWM woofers, Magnepan's outboard bass drivers, for good measure.

How is the 3.7i (\$5995 per pair) different from the 3.7 that it replaces? This is a good question without even a cursory answer. Magnepan reveals nothing about the 3.7i. The most I could get from Wendell was, "Nothing that is technically all that impressive" has gone into turning the 3.7 into the 3.7i. Wendell did tell me that the decision to offer the 3.7i was based on listening tests, which I personally find satisfying. Too often an upgrade means *different*, not *better*, and this happens because the changes in parts and circuitry aren't tested rigorously with listening. Owners of the 3.7 can have their speakers upgraded for the price difference between the two models, \$500.

I listened initially to the 3.7i alone and then along with the DWM woofers (\$795 each). Magnepan speakers need to be placed a reasonable though not excessive distance from room boundaries because of their dipole radiation -- they output sound from the front in phase and from the rear out of phase. My room is large, allowing more placement flexibility, but the speakers sounded good just about anywhere. I eventually settled on the spots slightly in front of where a pair of Wilson Audio Alexias had stood -- about four feet from the wall behind and four feet from the side walls, with toe-in aiming the speakers directly at the listening seat.

The listening position is integral in positioning Magnepans -- more so than with most other speakers. Maybe this seems obvious, but in our quest to determine how far each speaker should be from the walls around it, we often forget that our ears are also part of the sonic equation. After moving the speakers and my listening couch around the room, I came upon an important truth: Sit as close to the 3.7i's as possible and preferably no farther away than the speakers are apart. As dipoles, the speakers excite the room to a degree that probably no other speaker will. Sitting where I was meant that I was hearing more of the speakers and less of their reflections and the room itself.

Another tip: move the speakers as far apart as possible, but not so far apart as to skew the distance to the listening seat. I could seemingly move the 3.7i's away from each other as far as my room would allow -- from wall to wall -- and still get a strong center image. Yes, the soundstage grew wider, but reflections also became more audible, smearing images. There is a point at which everything aligns -- speaker positions, room, and listening position -- and, in your room, it may mean that the speakers are closer together than you may like given their size, or you're sitting closer to the speakers than you are accustomed. You will probably not be able to put the 3.7i's where you had your previous speakers and hear them at their best.

Of greater concern for me -- and you -- involves the speakers' ribbon tweeters. Do you use them on the inside or outside? Magnepan boils this decision down to room acoustics and whether a small or large sweet spot is desired. I boil it down to putting the tweeters on the inside. No matter the speakers'

positions or toe-in, I could distinctly hear the tweeters when they were on the outside, but I couldn't detect them when they were on the inside. With them outside, the treble region had exaggerated width, detaching it from the midrange and bass, the exact opposite of coherence. I will concede that in a narrow room where the speakers are closer together, outside placement may create a wider, more lifelike soundstage, but in my room, in was it.

Amplifier power is a concern with any Magnepans, as the speakers are insensitive. However, their impedance is a constant 4 ohms, a load that most modern amps can handle with ease. I used a number of amps and settled on my Lamm M1.2 monoblocks, which provided the best low-end grunt and top-end shimmer. These amps are spec'd at 110 watts each, but they deliver more power than this. A hundred watts seems like a safe minimum, but more power is definitely welcome, because Magnepans can soak it up, especially if you try to play rock at high levels. A pair of vintage Kenwood L-07M monoblocks also worked well. These are astonishingly good amplifiers even 35 years after they were made. I will write a blog about them at some point.

What I hear with the 3.7i's, and with all Magnepans, is directness and purity that are startling at first. It all begins with the treble -- the ribbon tweeter's finesse is a revelation. High-frequency detail is something listeners often pay for with fatigue, but not with the 3.7i -- or any recent Magnepan speaker. Taken on its own, the Magnepan ribbon is the very best ribbon tweeter I've heard. It's not hard or splashy, as some ribbons can be, and at the same time infinitely detailed. Treble speed, air and delicacy are absolute but not overblown. The quasi-ribbon panels continue the directness through the mids and into the bass. The 3.7i, like other Maggies, starts and stops in rare fashion, with no leading-edge emphasis or post-transient slop. The speaker is either reproducing the music, without blurring or overhang, or it is not. Each note takes only its space in time and nothing more. This can make even some of the best dynamic speakers sound a little blurry and imprecise, but the 3.7i does its thing without any tricks.

The 3.7i sounds light and stiff at first, but after 50 hours or so of use, bloom and weight begin to appear. Before the DWM appeared, Magnepan owners had to decide whether or not to pair their speakers with a traditional subwoofer. I speculated about this many years ago, when I wrote about the MG3.6R, and decided that perceived benefits of a sub came at the cost of muddling the bass. The DWM makes this no longer an issue -- the 3.7i's are universally better with it -- or a pair. Don't call the DWM a subwoofer, because it's not. Unlike a traditional subwoofer, the DWM is not powered and its high-pass point is set (at 200Hz) and not adjustable. Wendell calls it "a tool," meaning that it aids in tuning the speaker's -- any Magnepan speaker's -- bass phase and amplitude, not merely deepen or increase its bass output.

The two DWMs were easier to set up than the speakers themselves -- you can really put them almost anywhere in the room, although you can further tune the bass with placement on or off the listening axis. Magnepan has been devising ways to camouflage the DWM since it was introduced, offering a trim kit and tabletop to turn it into an end table. I put one DWMs behind and to the side of each 3.7i, and the results were easy to hear. There was greater bass weight and depth to be sure, but without affecting the upper bass or lower mids in the least. The beauty of the DWM is that when you're ready for it, you can simply add it to your existing setup. It's almost plug'n'play simple.

I've had 20.1s in my room, and I don't have to speculate as to whether they or the 3.7i/DWM system is better. Take the newer speakers and the dipole woofers, which, even with their four separate pieces, are easier to set up than the larger panels.

But there's some obvious irony here relating to the dinner last year. The 3.7i's with a pair of DWMs certainly qualify as big, even complicated given all of the cables required, and the sound is certainly befitting a flagship speaker. On the other hand, the value is obvious as well, the entire system coming in at under \$8000. It's certainly the kind of speaker system you can use with pricey electronics, although my vintage Kenwood L-07M mono amps, which cost less than \$400, made a compelling case for themselves.

If you think, as we all did at dinner last summer, that a big, expensive speaker, especially one like the Tympani with multiple panels, is missing from Magnepan's product line, you've gotten your wish with the 3.7i/DWM system. Just don't expect to spend double the price of a pair of 20.7s, and under no circumstances let Wendell know he's right. He's more entertaining when he's fighting city hall. ☺