

July 10, 2012 - Frank Berryman

Magnepan began business in 1969, which was about the time I got interested in this hobby in a serious way. I remember reading about the Magnepan Tympani planar-magnetic loudspeakers in *Stereophile* and *The Absolute Sound*. Both JGH and HP had high praise for them, but they were not without their criticisms. Interesting, HP thought the bass was particularly good, with reservations about the midrange and treble. On the contrary, JGH was critical of the bass, praised the midrange, and found the treble somewhat lifeless. Opinions changed frequently as new models were rapidly introduced. It just goes to show that differences of opinion among reviewers is not a new phenomenon. If anything, I see a trend toward greater consensus among reviewers with respect to products. Now that would be an interesting topic to explore.

Anyway, I remember seeing small ads showing these three-panel oriental screen style Magnepan Tympanies and thinking how cool those would be in a listening room. However, there was no way a pair would fit in my bedroom, much less my dorm room when I headed off to college. So I filed them away in the back of my mind, thinking some day I would have to give planar-magnetics a try.

My interest was again piqued a few years ago when I saw ads for the smaller MMGs at the low-price of \$599. However, it wasn't until this last year that I had the luxury of a second, smaller listening room and an audition became a real possibility. I contacted Wendell Diller at Magnepan about sending me a pair for review, but he candidly admitted that with the introduction of the 1.7 and 3.7, trying to keep track of inventory of product out for review was becoming an impossible task. So I said what the hell, I'll just buy a pair, review them, and then keep them for a reference if I liked them or off they would go to Audiogon. Nothing ventured, nothing gain.

Within two weeks, the UPS truck arrived. I



saw my UPS delivery lady wrestle a box approximately 54'Lx24' Wx6'D off the truck. My heart sank. I figured my wife had ordered a bookcase from IKEA or something. So I dutifully wheeled my hand truck down to the UPS truck so she wouldn't have to schlep the obviously heavy box up to the front door. But when I got down there, my spirits started to lift as I saw Fragile stickers plastered all over the box. A quick check of the address label showed they had been shipped from White Bear Lake, Minnesota, home of Magnepan. My Maggies had arrived.

Setup is simple. You remove the panels from the box, screw on the L-shaped bracket floor stands, and you're read to go. The MMGs tilt slightly back in their normal position, but they also have free-floating hinged bars at the back of the stands so you can tilt them so that they are almost vertical if you so desire. The only nit I have with the MMGs is that they do not have five-way binding posts. You simply strip back the insulation on your speaker cable, insert it in a small nut, and tighten down using the supplied Allen wrench. A set of spade lug adapters is available. Be sure to ask for them when you order your pair.

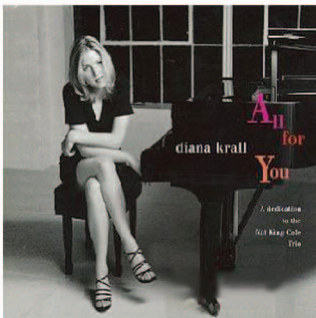
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Unfortunately, the MMGs do not accept banana plugs (they do accept BFAs), but banana to spade adapters are readily available at nominal cost.

There are two other connectors on the rear panel. The first is for a fuse to prevent you from blowing out the speakers at high volume. The second is for treble attenuation. The MMGs are shipped with a shorting block in place for normal operation. However, Magneplanar also supplies you with 1 ohm and 2 ohm resistors you can insert if you feel the treble is too bright. And you can experiment with other values of resistors or audiophile approved brands to fine tune the high frequency to your preference. It's a nice touch.

You cannot imagine how thin and lightweight the MMGs are, and how easy they are to move around. They are 1.25" thick and weigh about 18 pounds. Although they are 48"H x 14"W, and look somewhat imposing from the front, they take up virtually no floor space. They are perfect for tight quarters. It's a breeze to move them out of the way when not using them, and to move them back into position for a listening session.

These are dipole speakers so make sure you pull them out into the room. I set mine up 30 inches from the front wall (untreated), 28 inches from the side walls, and about 72 inches apart, toed-in directly toward the listening position. This resulted in both a strong center image as well as a wide and deep soundstage.



I put on that old audiophile favorite, Diana Krall's All for You for a number of reasons: it is well recorded, has solo piano passages, sparse arrangements so that each instrument is distinctly rendered, and female vocals, all bellweathers for accurate speaker assessment. I cued up the second track - Gee Baby, Ain't I Good To You - and was in for a surprise. I really didn't expect much of a bottom end with the Magneplanar MMGs.

With a -3db point of 50Hz, I expected them to be bass light. Boy was I wrong. The bass appeared dead center, and was palpable, articulate and fast. I think this has to do with panel size. A 6.5" woofer, which you find in speakers in this price range, while it may be able to reproduce a 50Hz tone, generally doesn't move enough air for you feel the

bass in your chest. Magneplanar's 14" x 48" panel does. The same can be said for the bass in Baby Baby All the Time. I swear I could feel the bass through the floor.

Low frequency reproduction wasn't limited to the bass. Left hand piano passages in Hit That Jive Jack had substance. I'm not talking about pant flapping bass, but about a low end which is accurately reproduced and can be felt. Speaking of piano, I found the right hand passages in Boulevard of Broken Dream just a little bright. Inserting the 2 ohm resistor was all required to tone the treble down to my preference.

Where the MMGs really excelled, however, was in the midrange, in this instance, Diana Krall's vocals. In You're Looking At Me, her voice was liquid gold, each syllable distinct, and, although close-miked, without the slightest hint of sibilance. The same can be said for her vocals on I'm Thru With Love. I would be remiss if I didn't mention the reproduction of the electric guitar, played in the orchestral style with some beautifully timed leads. Miking an electric guitar is accomplished by placing a microphone very close to the guitar amplifier speaker. In this case it is clear that the amplifier in question was of the tube variety as the notes were warm and smooth, with no harshness, which is not to minimize the virtuoso technique in evidence.

To assess soundstage and imagery, and upper midrange tone and clarity, I play Mozart's two Duos for Violin and Viola, K.423 and K.424, penned sequentially in 1783. The viola is larger than the violin, has thicker strings, and is tuned a fifth lower, giving it a warmer, deeper and more resonant tone. In general, it tends to be played with less alacrity than the violin. This makes playing duos of violin and viola challenging, as timing is so critical, which is perhaps why there are so few in the repertoire. Here Itzhak Perlman (violin) and Pinchas Zukerman (viola) are up to the task. In this recording, both the violin and the viola are close-miked and the two performers appear closely spaced. On a lesser speaker, the imaging become confused, and the



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sounds of the different instruments are not well delineated. This is especially important here, where the music is contrapuntal in nature, meaning that two independent melodies are being played at the same time. The MMGs excel in this scenario. The violin is clearly slightly to the left of center, with the viola slightly to the right and perhaps a step or two to the rear. The tones of the instruments are clearly demarked, and the separate melodies easy to follow. You know two different instruments are being played and where they are located. That may sound like an easy task, but it is not, especially for a speaker in this price range. The compositions are thus a joy to listen to.



Okay, so the MMGs sound great on small jazz ensemble and chamber music. What about something more demanding like a large orchestral work. Nothing says large orchestral work like Wagner (well, Mahler too), so I put on a collection of his opera overtures and preludes with James Levine conducting the The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, and selected the Prelude to Act I of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. The first thing you notice is that the speakers completely disappear and, due to their dipole nature and my untreated front wall, the soundstage extends from sidewall to sidewall. Nevertheless, you can pick out the locations of the different instrumental sections, and thus visualize the orchestra in front of you. The presentation is, say,

tenth row orchestra, and when you turn it up, the music really becomes, well, exciting. I am not saying the MMGs allow you to suspend disbelief and imagine yourself in in large symphony hall, at least not in my relatively small listening room. That is simply too much to ask; but they come damn close. Of particularly note is that the MMGs are extremely dynamic, and can go from pianissimo to fortissimo in a flash. This is possible due to the extremely lightweight panel membrane. Fans of symphonic music will be delighted with them.

## Conclusion

At \$599/pair, the Magnepan MMGs are an absolute steal. Nothing I have heard comes close to them for the price. They provide bass which is fast and articulate down to 50Hz, though you think they go lower, and their midrange and treble are stunning. Their dipole pattern provides a soundstage which is both wide and deep. Acoustic instruments sound entirely natural. They are extremely dynamic. Although Maggies have a reputation for requiring large amounts of power, I was able to drive the MMGs to uncomfortable levels using a 35 watt/channel Prima Luna Prologue Premium integrated tube amplifier. The only shortcoming they have is that, like dynamic speakers coupled with ribbon tweeters, the treble rolls off when you stand up. But at 48" tall, as long as you remain in your listening chair, this poses no problem. I'd encourage you to buy a pair of Magnepan MMGs just for the experience of listening to planar-magnetics. You will be floored. And you have a 60 day return privilege. I'm betting you won't exercise it – unless it is to trade up to the 1.7s or higher.

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## Contact Information

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## Associated Equipment

Analog Source: VPI Scout; Dynavector 20X2; Musical Surroundings Phonomena II; Otari MX5050BII-2  
Digital Source: Meridian G08; Mac Mini; Wadia 121; Halide Design Bridge and DAC HD; Pure Music  
Preamplifier: Meridian G02; Meridian G68ADV  
Power Amplifier: Meridian 557; PrimaLuna Prologue Premium integrated amplifier  
Loudspeakers: Meridian DSP5500; Silverline Minuet Supreme Plus  
Cables: Digital: Meridian; USB: Wireworld Starlight; Analog: Mogami/Amphenol (RCA), Mogami/Neutrik (XLR);  
Speaker: Mogami/Audioquest (BFA/banana); Power: Volex/Marinco  
Accessories: GIK acoustic treatments; dedicated 20 amp circuit; Audience aR2p power conditioner