

September 2006

Part Two

Magnepan MG20.1 Loudspeakers



by Marc Mickelson

Even during especially taxing days here at *SoundStage!* -- when missed deadlines or show-coverage overload rear their homely heads -- memories of past jobs, some of which were truly dreadful, are never far from my mind. Like so many kids growing up in the Midwest, I began working on a farm, where glamour jobs like digging post holes and washing machinery were offset by cleaning sheep pens or stacking hay bales in a dark, dusty and *hot* barn. Even as I sit down to begin writing a review, which requires a confluence of mental energy, I don't forget the most challenging job of my life: teaching English composition and literature to college freshmen and sophomores. And back then, when I was in the midst of grading papers, I could always tell myself, "It beats shoveling sheep poop."



read [Part One](#)

Everything is relative -- jobs *and* audio equipment. When we evaluate any new product, we compare it to our memories of others we've heard -- whether we are trying to do so or not. Over the course of our audiophile journey, we create a personal database of past experiences that influences what we think of present and future products. There's no way around it.

Thus, after finishing with the setup of the MG20.1s, after all the luggering, assembly, and nudges this way and that, I thought about all of the times I've heard Magnepan speakers. In nearly every case, I heard various speakers -- MG3.6es, MG1.6es and a few smaller models -- in home-theater or multichannel setups. Even when I heard the MG20.1s for the first time, in Jim Winey's listening room, five were in use, not a stereo pair. I think I *may* have heard a pair of MG3.6es years ago, when Magnepan showed with a number of other companies at the Golden Nugget during CES, but I can't say for sure.

In these days of large-scale custom installations, one can hardly blame Magnepan for trying to sell its products in new markets. But this is unfortunate for audiophiles -- the MG1.6es, MG3.6es and especially the MG20.1s are exquisite stereo speakers. This is not to say that they can't do home theater or multichannel music; Magnepan has proved the surround-sound worth

of its speakers in all those CES demos. But in stereo, set up attentively and with enough good power behind them, these large panel speakers shine. The MG20.1s ended up teaching me a few things about musical reproduction, and reminding of a few others that I had forgotten.

I first came to understand the distinction between "you are there" and "they are here" in regard to music reproduction when I bought a pair Thiel CS3.6 speakers. They replaced a pair of Mirage M3si's that I owned for a few years. I grew accustomed to the big wall of sound that the Mirages cast, much of this due to their bipolar output. They weren't particularly resolving, however, which is one of the reasons I turned to the CS3.6es and their ability to extract detail from recordings.

Speakers that have a microscopic way with detail often give listeners a view into each recording -- the relationship of performers to each other and the acoustic space in which the recording was made. This is "you are there" sound; you are transported into the world of the recording. A "they are here" speaker brings the sense of space and especially the performers to your listening room, presenting the music as an end product of the recording (and equipment) and not an artifact for study itself. The Thiels were firmly "you are there" speakers, and the Mirages "they are here."



Where does this put the MG20.1s? While they are much more resolving than my old Mirages, they present music with astonishing in-room presence. They don't so much pull you into the space they are able to wrest from each recording as much as create their own facsimile of that space through the immense layered soundfield they cast. They embody the sort of realism that listeners call "spooky" -- the sense that performers are *in* the listening room. While much of what I've just written has become reviewing cliché -- a way of saying a product is "really, really good" -- in the case of the MG20.1s, it literally describes the experience of listening to them. They *are* spooky.

JVC has used the term "big mono" for its older XRCD jazz releases. It describes those

recordings' ability to sound much more spread out from the center image than you might think, given their mono nature. The MG20.1s are "big mono" speakers -- "big stereo" too. The center image they create has granite-like solidity, but it is no pinpoint of sound. It spreads horizontally and vertically, creating a musical space that belies the mono nature of the recording. However, what this translates to with stereo is one of the areas in which the MG20.1s outdistances speakers I've heard other than the big Wilsons. It's not just that images are big or small depending on the recording; it's that they are *believably* big or small -- not in any way limited by the speaker in terms of their stature. This sense of scale coupled with "they are here" presence makes listening to the MG20.1s a nearly physical experience.

Associated Equipment

Power amplifiers – Lamm M1.2 Reference monoblocks.

Preamplifier – Audio Research Reference 3, Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP.

Digital – Audio Research Reference CD7 and Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP CD players, Esoteric P-3 and D-03 CD/SACD transport and DAC, Ayre Acoustics C-5xe universal player.

Interconnects – Shunyata Research Antares Helix, Crystal Cable Ultra.

Speaker cables – Shunyata Research Orion Helix, Crystal Cable Ultra.

Power cords – Shunyata Research Anaconda Helix Vx and Alpha, and Python Helix Vx and Alpha, Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference.

Power conditioner – Shunyata Research Hydra Model-8.

Equipment rack and platforms – Silent Running Audio Craz 4 Reference isoRack Plus rack and Ohio Class XL Plus² Equipment Platforms.

The MG20.1s have a stirring way with drums, capturing their tautness like no other speaker I've heard. The MG3.6es do this as well, but they don't go nearly as low as the MG20.1s or have the midbass heft. This can make drums sound merely taut, while the MG20.1s convey weight and depth as well. While I loved much of what the MG3.6es did, including the *quality* of their bass, I can't say that the low frequencies were particularly deep or powerful. If I were an owner of MG3.6es, I would accept this about them and not use the speakers with a subwoofer -- or I would save for a pair of MG20.1s, which need no excuses or help down low. The difference between the MG3.6 and MG20.1 in just this one area justifies the difference in price. At the point where the MG3.6 simply can't go any lower, the MG20.1 plows forward; when the MG3.6's ability to move air has reached overload, the MG20.1 shows no signs of strain.

There are qualitative differences as well. The tightness and speed of the MG3.6 down low come without a sense of bloom and elasticity -- exactly what the MG20.1 displays. Even when compared to dynamic speakers, the MG20.1s hold their own. While they don't have the power of the Wilson Alexandria or MAXX 2 and their large separate bass cabinets, the MG20.1 is certainly full range and notably expressive down

low.

On the other end of the spectrum, the purity of Magnepan's ribbon tweeter is a revelation. The highs of some well-regarded dynamic speakers are overlaid with a fine dusting of distortion (and sometimes a heavy dusting of the same) that manifests itself as an unnatural crispness. The treble is too evident and out of alignment with the rest of the speaker's sound. With the MG20.1, there is cleanliness and clarity -- from the soft "ting" and "tsshhh" of a cymbal through the propulsive blat of a trumpet -- along with effortless balance. Any crispness or highlighting are part of the music, not qualities of this extraordinary tweeter. I'll echo what I wrote about in my follow-up review of the MG3.6: "Taken on its own, the Magnepan ribbon is the very best tweeter I've heard."

Well-recorded classical music highlights another specialty of the MG20.1, which I'll call "dynamic launch," for lack of a better term. The MG20.1s can go from no sound to full orchestral clamor with remarkable speed and agility. Again, "spooky," especially outside the concert hall. Of course, this presumes an amplifier that is equal to the task -- in terms of sonic ability, not sheer power. While some will tell you that 200 watts are minimum for the MG20.1 and even more power is preferable, the Lamm M1.2 Reference monoblocks were the only amps I used and the ones with which I formed all of my listening impressions. These amps are rated to deliver 110 watts each into 8 ohms, but, as [our measurements of them show](#), their actual output is 157 watts (300 watts into 4 ohms). I never reached their limit, never even pushed them hard, and the results were thrilling with all kinds of music, at all volume levels.

Of special consideration is the quality of the partnering amp's treble -- the MG20.1's ribbon tweeter will give no relief from hardness or grain that's part of the amplifier's character -- and its overall constitution. Avoid amps that are obviously soft and forgiving; the MG20.1s don't need any taming. In terms of power, while I wouldn't want to have less than 100 watts with the MG20.1s, which are rated as 86dB sensitive and a uniform 4-ohm load, after that threshold is reached, the quality of the amp has more to do with the final sonic outcome than its power reserves. I would *love* to hear Audio Research's Reference 210 mono amps driving MG20.1s. How about it for CES 2007?

We reviewers can be a self-absorbed lot, becoming lost in our own world, forgetting that the kind of audio gear that helps us write reviews is not necessarily what everyone should buy for long-term enjoyment. Do you want your audio system to be a tool? Heck no! It's a source of peace and participation with music, not something with which you do *work*. The MG20.1s are not for would-be reviewers or equipment jockeys. Other speakers, some that cost far less, can tell you more about the other products with which they are used. As transparent as the MG20.1s are through the midrange and especially the treble, they still present music their own particular way, taking over your listening room more than giving you a pristine view into everything upstream and each recording.

But that's nothing new. If you're a minimonitor or small-floorstander kind of listener because precision appeals to you, the MG20.1s will probably make you scratch your head. On the other hand, self-proclaimed Maggie guys will find all the more to love with the MG20.1s, which boil down the strengths of Magnepan speakers to their most concentrated form, banish the thought that planars can't do deep bass, and offer up some of the purest, most delicious highs you'll hear from any speaker.

Taken on its own, the Magnepan MG20.1 is as distinguished as it is unique; considered in relation to other statement-level speakers, it provides a listening experience that, even at €16,400, is downright cheap. While the MG20.1s won't be everything to every listener, in some ways there are no better speakers made today.

I arrived at this conclusion through hours and hours of listening to great music. It was a tough job, but, as they say, *someone* had to do it.

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Magnepan MG20.1 Loudspeakers

Price: €16.398,00 per pair.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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