

Taking a Vantage


It's less than half the cost of the mighty Summit hybrid, yet ML's latest baby sounds so delicious and so right that when it comes to choosing between the two it's a very close call. Ken Kessler greets the Angelina Jolie of the speaker world

REVIEW SYSTEM

Sources: Musical Fidelity kW25, Marantz CD12/DA12 CD players, SME 20/12 turntable, 312S arm, Transfiguration Orpheus cartridge
Amplifiers: Audio Research PH5 phono pre-amp, Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista pre-amp, McIntosh MC275 and Quad 909 power amplifiers
Cables: Yter, Acrolink and Kimber interconnects, Atlas speaker cables, Isol-8 mains regenerator

WE LISTENED TO

 Claudio Abbado/London Symphony Orchestra: Mendelssohn Overtures (Deutsche Grammophon 423 104-20) CD

 Keb' Mo': Peace ... Back By Popular Demand (Okeh EK92687) CD

 Taj Mahal: Recycling The Blues & Other Related Stuff (Pure Pleasure PPA31605) LP

 The Who: Sell Out (Classic Records Track 613.002) LP

Last September, a revelatory speaker entered my world. MartinLogan's Summit so disarmed those aggravatingly stupid hi-fi parrots who utterly refuse to accept the concept of a working hybrid (the same Children of the Damned who

having charged the panels from the mains for only a half-hour, it was clear that the Vantage would prove even more important to ML than the Summit.

How so? Let me beg of you to dispense with all of the mundane influences like specification, test measurements, A/B

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refuse to believe in decent-sounding direct-drive turntables) that the Summit has emerged as something of a reference around the world. It is, deservedly so, a huge success for the Kansas-based brand. But it also carries a price tag of £8498, which is – for most people – prohibitively expensive. But, cynic that I am, I figured an 'economy' version was unlikely. O! me of little faith!

ENTER VANTAGE

Then the Vantage appeared. Around 10% physically smaller than the already-room-friendly Summit, its 273 x 413mm footprint should trouble few. But more importantly, the Vantage bore a price of less than half that of the Summit. Most shocking, however, was the sound. Within seconds of powering them up,

comparisons, Pavlovian responses and arch prejudice. Every one of you with a heart and mind of your own will admit that sometimes, on precious few occasions, you switch something on, or you attend a demo, where the sound is so 'right' that you're positively taken aback. The Vantage will do that to you.

My *satori* took place with a fellow-traveller, civilian audiophile buddy Jim Creed, himself

RIGHT: The electrostatic panels hand over to the bass units at 400Hz; each unit contains a single 8in woofer driven by a 200W amplifier

DETAILS

-  MartinLogan Vantage
-  £3998
-  www.absolutesounds.com
-  020 8971 3909
-  Looks, sound, size, delicious transparency
-  Sounds best with valves

an ex-ML owner. We looked at each other with dumb, trailer-park trash, post-lobotomy, aw-shucks grins which indicate that your mind has switched off and base instinct has taken over. The Vantages weren't merely good, nor merely excellent. They were simply world-class.

Bear in mind that it takes a lot to impress Jim, who, over 40 years, has owned a What's What of sublime hardware. But I knew that look. After less than three revolutions of the LP, he was figuring out what he could sell in order to buy a pair of Vantages.

For those of you already familiar with the Summit, this truly is a scaled-down version of it, including a powered sub with a 8in woofer per side and powered by 200W internal amplifiers compared to the Summit's two 10in woofers per enclosure driven by two 200W amps. But don't let the 'less than half' woofer sections suggest for a moment half the bass. Other downsized details include height reduction of 1444mm



compared to 1500mm, width down from 320mm to 273mm and depth reduced from 520mm to 413mm. Crossover point from woofer to panel is 400Hz versus the Summit's 270Hz. Other than that, the spec is nearly identical.

Connections and controls follow recent MartinLogan practice, with wonderful bespoke multi-way terminals suitable for bi-wiring, an IEC AC input to energise the panels, a rear slot-shaped port for the woofer and a rotary to adjust the bass output $\pm 10\text{dB}$ at 35Hz. In my 12 x 18ft room, I was happy to

'Make no mistake that the Summit outperforms the Vantage. But this will be evident only in a larger space'

leave it set at the flat position, used the spiked feet as supplied – you also get floor-friendly feet *sans* spikes – and ran it single-wired using my own links. EC rules forbid ML from supplying bi-wire terminals already linked. [Why, oh, why don't we get out of the frikkin' EC?]

SPARKLES

There's no escaping it: the Vantage is simply delightful. It positively sparkles with clear and fast treble, a natural midband and impressively controlled bass, all of a 'whole' despite the hybrid topology. Like the Summit, the Vantage disappears, enabling the listener to focus on sound rather than hardware. And it was independent of musical genre. Whether the leanest, most unplugged tracks from Taj Mahal and Keb' Mo', or the richness of 'The Hebrides', the mid-sized 'Logans were able to decipher fine details while giving the dynamic contrasts free rein.

Put it another way: they sounded like a line-source dynamic speaker standing 6ft tall. Impressive? They belie their dimensions exactly as do the Tannoy Autograph Minis. It's a permanent party trick that you



LEFT: A Summit in a smaller package, the Vantage sacrifices nothing in the way of looks and will suit those with smaller rooms

ALSO CONSIDER

Used Quad ESL 57s and a subwoofer: Still the one to beat
Used Quad ESL 63s and a subwoofer: Still the one to beat if you need more level than the '57 provides
MartinLogan Summits (£8498): If you can afford them, just do it

will use continually to befuddle anyone who has to live with small-ish speakers, but wants panels, and yet needs convincing that such scale is possible from so compact a design.

But, as ever, it was the midband that wooed me, especially vocals over acoustic guitar from the aforementioned bluesmen, and Mr. Big's glorious 'To Be With You' and its aggressive pounding of an acoustic guitar. So convincing are both the space and textures, so natural the tonal balance, so discernible the finest details that you will experience – like the lucky woman capable of multiple orgasms – frisson after frisson of in-the-room reality.

SUMMITS

When reviewing the Summits, I wrote of their electrostatic virtues, 'What the Summit adds, in its way rewriting the rules, are unbelievable dynamics, speed, transient attack and force in measures one would sanely attribute only to speakers of the dynamic variety.' The Vista does this in even greater measure for a smaller model. And it's here that we are reminded of that immutable Law of Diminishing Returns.

It's impossible, really, to say things like 'Model X delivers Y percent of Model Z for half the price.' It's never that precise, when all you can say with certainty is that the Vantage gives up 10Hz at the bottom, or a X amount of decibels for maximum output (a figure not supplied by ML).

What we're left with is this subjective observation. The Vantage delivers performance so close to the Summit that all I could verify repeatedly are the following: the Summit certainly goes louder, perceptibly deeper, and the presentation includes



DATA FILE

SPECIFICATIONS

Frequency Response	34Hz-23kHz ± 3db
Horizontal Dispersion	30°
Vertical Dispersion.....	102cm line source
Sensitivity	92dB/2.83V/metre
Impedance.....	Nominal 4 ohms Minimum 1 ohm at 20kHz
Crossover Frequency.....	400Hz
Components.....	Custom-wound audio transformer, air core coils polypropylene capacitors
Woofer type.....	8in cast basket, high excursion, aluminium cone with extended throw driver assembly, bass reflex
Woofer Amp Power	200W/ch (4 ohms)
Bass Controls	±10dB@35Hz
Power Handling.....	100-250 watts/channel
Signal Inputs.....	Custom bi-wire binding posts
Mains Power Draw:	
Idle.....	8W each
Max	140W each
Weight.....	23.6kg each
Overall Size:	1447 x 273 x 413mm (hwd)

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Easy to drive, incredibly natural sound, gorgeous looks, small footprint, genuine bass, the ability to go very loud, delicious transparency – the Vantage is the Angelina Jolie of loudspeakers. (Or, if you prefer, Brad Pitt.) The only reason anyone could criticise the Vantage would be political, be it anti-American, anti-hybrid or infected with Flat Earthism. To everything you love about the Summit, deduct more than half to cost of ownership. It's as if Gordon Brown hadn't been born.

a wider, taller and deeper soundstage. But going from one speaker to the other reminded me of my favourite analogy. The Vantage is to the Summit what Porsche's Boxster S is to a 911 – that is, so close in performance that the manufacturer has to worry that the differential almost fails to justify the extra money.

Make no mistake the Summit outperforms the Vantage. But this will be evident only in a

larger space; in my case, I could experience that in my 14 x 22ft home theatre room. But, with

Summit-like majesty regardless the Vantage will give you all the speed, transparency, neutrality and seamlessness that the naysayers insist are not possible with hybrids.

REVEALING

Caveats? The speaker is so revealing in the upper registers that you will hear the difference in D/A converters and CD players, especially any tendency toward digital sibilance. The speakers sound best with valves. They to be need at least 2ft from side and rear walls. They like some toe-in. That's it.

Let's leave it at this: I can think of no speaker for under £4000 that I would rather own. And it's so pretty that you'll even get it past the Bitch Housewife From Hell. ■

LEFT: A rotary to the rear of each bass unit allows bass output to be tailored to suit different listening environments while twin speaker terminals allow bi-wiring