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MAGICO S3

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Magico S3



LISTENING OUTSIDE THE BOX

In the latter half of last year, I flew to Durban to listen and review a loudspeaker that had already been internationally lauded as one of the best in the world: the Magico Q7.

These huge, 370 kg behemoths, with a SA rand price tag in the seven-digit category, were every bit as sonically spectacular as expected, linking approachability and presence to outright resolution and fidelity.

Almost a year later, I found myself reclining on the same couch in the demonstration studio at Audio Excellence, this time to audition a somewhat more compact Magico floorstander: the S3.

The S3 is the most recent addition to the Magico loudspeaker line-up, and fits in nicely between the slender two-way, S1 and the larger, beefier S5. It's a speaker that Magico describes as occupying the 'sweet spot' in its S range (and perhaps in the Magico line-up as a whole) and I was naturally keen to hear what the floorstander had to offer.

Compared to the complexity and sheer physical presence of the Q7, the S3 is sleek and understated. The all-aluminium enclosure, with its rounded corners, is manufactured as a single extrusion, which is not only a lot less complex than the multiple panels of the Q7, but also ensures mechanical consistency.

Indeed, according to Magico, the casing is the world's largest aluminium monocoque enclosure, and the benefits of its uniform construction include superior rigidity, as well as minimal diffraction and internal

The Magico Q7 is considered one of the world's ultimate loudspeakers. But to what extent can the more compact, more affordable S3 emulate the performance principles of its larger, dearer sibling?

resonance, which in turn means it doesn't require extensive internal damping.

The four drive units are mounted flush on a baffle that's barely wider than the bass drivers (great to counter diffraction), while the sides curve rearwards, which not only adds visual appeal, but also avoids parallel surfaces, and any possibility of standing waves.

The result is a handsome speaker that stands just over 1,2 metres tall, yet is never visually assertive in any imposing sense, and is easily incorporated, both aesthetically and practically, in most home environments.

The S3 is located on alloy feet that extend from the base of the enclosure in the interests of stability, and are equipped with screw-in coupling spikes. The rear is home to a single pair of binding posts, arranged vertically near the base of the speaker, and well up to the task of coping with thick speaker cables if required.

Not apparent from the outside, but considered a vital aspect of the S3's design and performance is the polycarbonate sub-enclosure which isolates the midrange from the larger cabinet.

The ovoid-shaped pod's irregular shape has been meticulously developed using CAD/CAM design software, and is described by Magico as a 'sound pressure absorption device', with the purpose of allowing the midrange to operate unencumbered by the enclosure characteristics, or by interaction with the woofer array.

Talking of which, the proprietary drivers are another highlight of the S3. The 25 mm MB30 tweeter is the same beryllium HF device employed in the S5, as is the MB380 midrange. But the two 203 mm woofers are new, developed specifically for this application.

The midrange cone is manufactured from a carbon fibre-based compound dubbed Nano-Tec by Magico. It consists of a Rohacell core with a carbon fibre weave



on either side, and impregnated with carbon-infused resin. The woofers are a hybrid Nano-Tec/aluminium design.

Other technical highlights of these drivers includes high-power N48 neodymium magnets for the motor arrays, large voice coils and, in the case of the woofers, high-excursion spiders.

Pertinent is that the S3 shares a lot of the technology with its much larger, and much dearer, Q7 stablemate, but in a form factor which will be much better suited to smaller spaces, and at a price that, while not exactly cheap, is significantly more affordable than the Q7.

As can be seen from the 'Associated Equipment' panel, the Magicos were partnered by a primarily McIntosh-based system, with the C2500 pre-amp (featured as our cover review in the previous issue) in charge, linked to the 425 watts-a-side MC425 stereo power amp.



Associated Equipment

McIntosh MT5 turntable
 McIntosh MCD550 universal deck
 McIntosh C2500 pre-amp
 McIntosh MC425 stereo power amp
 Kimber Select and Supra Sword interlinks
 Kimber X speaker cables
 Supra 2.5G power cables

Software

Glenn Frey — *After Hours* (Music Direct LP)
 The Doors — *Strange Days* (Analogue Productions LP)
 Ry Cooder/VM Bhatt — *A Meeting By The River* (Analogue Productions 45 RPM LP)
 Paul Simon — *Graceland* (Warner LP)
 Chopin — *Piano Concerto No. 1* — Ingrid Filter/Scottish Chamber Orchestra (Linn Records)
 OST — *Birth* — Alexandre Desplat, London Symphony Orchestra (New Line CD)
 Leonard Cohen *Old Ideas* (Sony Music CD)
 Various — *Exotic Dances From The Opera* — Eiji Oue, Minnesota Orchestra (Reference Recordings)

The latter is important — while the S3s are relatively efficient at a rated sensitivity of 88 dB, they do enjoy, and significantly benefit from, the reserves and extended headroom of a power amp with decent muscle.

The floorstanders were arranged in a freestanding position, toed in towards the listening position, and had been well run in by the time I arrived for what turned out to be an engrossing listening session.

The first selections provided by Audio Excellence's Klaus Wagner were sourced from vinyl, utilising the highly competent and engaging McIntosh MT5 turntable. From the first, deep and resonant electric bass note of 'You're Lost Little Girl' off *Strange Days* by The Doors, I knew I was in for a treat.

The sound was atmospheric, with a very stable, finely focussed image, despite the recording's exaggerated stereo mix. Jim Morrison's vocals were allowed to float on the almost cinematic soundstage with chilling realism.

There was a sense of flow, of pace, of coherence that captured the essence



of the performance. The S3s presented every detail and nuance with meticulous care, but were able to do so to the benefit of the intent and the realism of the performance.

By comparison, the musical dialogue between Ry Cooder and VM Bhatt on *A Meeting By The River* results in a delicate, almost fragile performance, with an intimacy that demands poise and transparency for the full, acoustic impact of Cooder's bottleneck guitar and Bhatt's mohan veena to be enjoyed.

The S3s easily rose to that challenge, creating a soundscape that warmly embraced the two instruments, and allowed the timbre and character of each instrument to come to the fore. The fine tonal hues were accurately and believably rendered, adding richness and nuance to the performance, but without allowing the sound to become overly saturated.

Ladysmith Black Mambazo's opening chorus on Paul Simon's 'Homeless', off the landmark *Graceland* LP, was rendered with goose bump-inducing intensity, the vocals perfectly layered across and into the soundstage, while the timbre of the

vocals and the ambience of the recording venue took on an immersive, compelling intensity. The Magicos could pick out individual details with ease, but never to the detriment of the music's overall cohesion or impact.

Moving onto Ingrid Filter's insightful and technically adept reading of Chopin's *Piano Concerto No 1* on Linn Records, it was the liquid ease of the piano that stood out: the Magicos never hindered that flow, but were smooth and articulate enough to allow the instrument to truly come alive. They rendered the pace and attack of the faster passages with precision, but always allowed the music itself to take centre stage.

The 'electronic barrier' that sometimes compromises the relationship between music and hi-fi, was never prevalent here: in that sense, the Magicos (and yes, the

VITAL STATS

Enclosure type Sealed, extruded aluminium
 Drive units 1x 25 mm MB30 tweeter, 1x 152 mm M380 midrange, 2x 203 mm hybrid Nano-Tec woofers
 Bi-wiring No
 Impedance 4 ohms
 Sensitivity 88 dB
 Frequency response 26 Hz – 50 kHz
 Power handling 50 – 500 watts
 Dimensions (HxWxD) 1 225 x 302 x 305 mm
 Weight 68 kg each

PRICE R280 000 (exchange rate dependent)

VERDICT

A sound that's always bigger, more powerful and more authoritative than the form factor of these sleek floorstanders suggests. Inherently musical, and ultimately convincing.

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OUR RATING: 90 / 100





system as a whole) were the means to a musical end.

It's not an easy trick to pull off, but the S3s were able to open that elusive door to the music with such ease that one felt completely absorbed in Filter's piano, and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra's beautifully executed accompaniment.

Unsurprisingly, Alexandre Desplat's soundtrack for the movie *Birth* has a cinematic, dramatic approach that demands full-scale capability from any system. The 'Prologue' slowly builds from delicate beginnings, gradually expanding into a broad, sweeping soundscape that explores the full sonic potential of the orchestra, complete with kettle drum rolls and some truly deep, almost subsonic bass notes.

The S3s were well up to the task of recreating both the expanse and the power of the performance, and weren't in the least intimidated by the vast tonal range required. They delivered those deep sub-bass notes with an almost tactile force, yet remained clearly and authoritatively in control.

Nor did they shirk their responsibilities at the other end of the scale, providing full access to crystal-clear trebles, and the subtleties and nuances they contained.

Leonard Cohen's gruff, almost impossibly deep vocals on 'Banjo', off his compelling *Old Ideas* set, were reproduced with astonishing realism. His vocals powerfully positioned centre stage, embraced by the female backing vocals, and embroidered by the guitar and banjo, while the deft brushes on the snare, and melancholy brass, provided the finishing touches.

The Magicos' propensity for bottom-end slam and purity was also compellingly portrayed on Scandinavian death metal band Opeth's *My Arms, Your Hearse*, with the percussion and bass on 'Credence' creating the brooding backdrop to the acoustic guitar, and the haunting vocals of Mikael Akerfeldt.

This selection of tracks, and the many others we listened to during the review session, highlighted a couple of key aspects.



Firstly, the S3s are hugely entertaining, easy and unfatiguing to listen to. These are musically engaging loudspeakers that dig down to the core of the music, and deliver the depth, the power and the pace for a thrilling and convincing listening experience, regardless of genre or scale.

The Magicos also maintain a consistent level of excellence and sonic authenticity: from pounding death metal to large-scale symphonics, from fragile acoustics to brasher electrics, from simple to complex, the focus of these speakers resolutely remains on delivering the music with

thrilling, engaging authenticity.

Their sonic character is certainly akin to that of the much larger Q7s, but in some ways, their smaller form factor, and their transparency, helps them to become more musically accessible than the imposing flagships.

Of course, in absolute terms, the Q7 is still the superior speaker. But in real-world rooms, the S3s are perhaps more benign, more easily accommodated – and still exciting, absorbing and hugely rewarding to listen to.

Deon Schoeman