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MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

"... High-quality music enjoyment without annoying cables as well as harmonious integration in the living room ambiance and easy to operate control makes the Magnat Magnasphere 33 stand out. ..."

Magnat

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klare worte. guter ton.



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Test 02/2017



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Magnat has decades of experience in the design of loudspeakers. With the Magnasphere Set, however, the Pulheim-based manufacturer is venturing into a new realm. The fully active loudspeaker ensemble, designed for digital wireless reception, relies on the developments of the company's own Quantum technology and has musical content delivered to it from an accompanying transmitter unit - with the overall set meeting audiophile demands, not least of all due to the system's Hi-Res capability. Let's see how it delivers on this promise.

The new range comprises the Magnasphere 33, a two-way shelf-top loudspeaker, and the 21/2-way Magnasphere 55 floor-standing model. With active technology inside and consistently developed for wireless music reproduction, they offer a number of advantages in terms of convenience and a friendly living-room ambiance.

The Magnat Magnasphere 33 with front cover

For the very reason alone that, on the Magnasphere 33 tested here, the otherwise customary wiring is done away with apart from one power cable per speaker. And there are also more possibilities and freedom for setting up the loudspeakers. Normally, the amplifier and auxiliary source devices are located near the speakers to avoid unnecessarily long speaker cables. With the Magnasphere, the separate amplifier can confidently be sent into retirement and the source devices accommodated just about anywhere in the living room - also out of sight if needed. This is made possible by the discreet black-coated TX-11 transmitter with its very compact dimensions, which is included in the package. Despite its unexceptional appearance, it forms the centrepiece of the system and keeps all of the source devices on, quite literally, a short leash in order to transmit their signals to the loudspeakers via WLAN. Up to three Magnasphere systems can be configured and operated as a specific listening zone, either synchronously with the same content or with different music (exception: Line 1 and 2 as well as Bluetooth and USB input cannot serve different zones at the same time).

Connector panel of the TX-11 transmitter unit

In addition to two analogue inputs (1 x RCA and 3.5 mm jack), there is a choice of two digital optical inputs (Toslink) as well as one USB input for connecting a laptop, PC or Mac. Connected to a Mac or PC, the TX-11 transmitter acts as an external sound card, recognisable by the name "Magnat Magnasphere", and is very easy to select, as in my case, via MacBook Air and Audirvana Plus. The possibility of transmitting content with 24 bit/96 kHz to the loudspeakers via USB or the optical ports with little effort definitely arouses curiosity. But on top of that, the TX-11 transmitter unit also offers another special treat: Those who have parked their music library on their smartphone or, better still, on digital audio players like the Pioneer XDP-100R or an Onkyo DP-X1 can send this to the transmitter unit wirelessly in CD quality via Bluetooth aptX. You can hardly get "more wireless" than that. Zone selection, audio source input selection as well as the volume control operating ostensibly loss-free internally with 24 bit resolution are carried out via a remote control which, edged with anodised metal and equipped with pleasant pressure points, fits well in the hand.

But wireless comes in different forms: The Magnasphere concept relies on a standalone system and is therefore independent of any WLAN already being used in the home.

The transmitter unit and the receiver unit accommodated invisibly inside each of the loudspeakers are tuned to each other and are also provided with a certain intelligence. There are three frequency bands available in the gigahertz range (2.4 GHz, 5.2 GHz and 5.8 GHz). Should errors

occur, a different transmission band be selected easily via a slide switch at the rear of the TX-11. All channels have further sub-bands that can be used automatically as a fall-back in the event of an error. This happens unnoticed and is the result of constant monitoring of transmission quality on both the transmitter and receiver side.

Set-up

In my case, the whole thing looks like this in practice: as soon as the Magnasphere 33 and the TX-11 transmitter unit have been connected to the mains and the Discovery Music Server from Elac has made contact on the optical input, it takes about a minute for the first sounds to emerge from the loudspeakers. When turned on via remote control, the two Magnaspheres connect to the transmitter unit automatically, with the LED light switching from red to green documenting the interruption of the power-saving stand-by mode, in which the system draws just 0.5 watts from the power socket, as well as the successful merger. The two loudspeakers show the input selection and double-digit volume level on the miniature display at the front. Simple and efficient. The only thing that is confusing is the permanent illumination of the red diode, although this is moderated by attaching the front cover, which is held in place by magnetic force. It would perhaps be desirable for this to switch to green and, when musing on this, the author would maybe also like to see the respective word length and sample resolution illuminated in the display, as well as the option to turn it off completely.

Being able to access basically all the functions like volume control, input selection, mute and even frequency channel selection comfortably from the sofa via remote control - which even works perfectly when pointing it away from the speakers - is an added convenience. So, in overall terms, what we have here, in a word, is Plug & Play. The Magnat Magnasphere 33's, weighing in at just about 7 kg, feel at home on a loudspeaker stand - where they essentially sound best - as well as on a shelf or sideboard. There is no cause for criticism whatsoever, either with regard to the lacquer finish or the workmanship of the speakers. Everything is well thought out and very high quality.

The plain white finish of my test sample contrasts well with the slivery gleaming (mini-)wave guide of the tweeter. This is designed to help it achieve homogeneous, targeted and broad dispersion characteristics as well as a high level of efficiency. A powerful neodymium magnet provides the drive of the 25 mm dual compound textile tweeter, the voice coil of which is cooled in a ferrofluid bath. The "fmax" dome tweeter is designed to reach the 50 kHz mark in its upper transmission range. The ceramic-aluminium membrane of the 170 mm subwoofer, on the other hand, is designed to facilitate low weight and high rigidity with a low tendency to partial oscillations and THD. Unlike the sheet metal or plastic baskets of cheaper chassis, the loudspeaker baskets of the subwoofer chassis at Magnat are made of a carbon fibre composite material. This allows more delicate bracing with higher stability and also ensures substantially lower reflections of emitted sound components to the rear. In addition, more efficient heat dissipation is achieved through the improved flow conditions. Like numerous manufacturers, Magnat also uses the modern, laser-assisted "Klippel Analyser" system, which enables distortions or even the "bursting" of the membrane at certain frequencies to be detected as early as in the development process of the chassis. Just as it should be for a fully active loudspeaker, each chassis has an amplification stage. Class D technology ensures that, despite low heat generation, there are 65 watts available for the treble ranges and 110 watts for the bass ranges respectively.

Located below the bass reflex channel next to the mains

switch for complete disconnection from the mains, the power supply connection and the slide switch for configuring the speakers (left, right, mono) is also a black control panel fitted with three knobs: The first one allows selection of the room zone, while the other two can be used to adjust the speaker to the conditions of the respective room. Adjustment is possible by raising or lowering over a range of 2dB in both the treble and bass ranges.

Magnat Magnasphere 33: Sound impressions

With an active loudspeaker system that controls both speakers wirelessly and from a central wireless unit at the same time, I first ask myself whether latencies, interferences or interruptions can do something to spoil the music signal. Well, I can give the all-clear in this case: None of this is even vaguely noticeable.

The Magnasphere 33 basically behaves like a quite normal shelf-top speaker - just that it doesn't want to sound average: Its soundscape is effortless and fluid, accompanied by a dry, deep and contoured bass and a blaze of colour in the mid-range. As if it wanted to say: "You weren't expecting that, were you?" Hm, I certainly wasn't. And then also this fineness and sharpness of detail, with no burrs or edges, with everything so well measured. But first things first...

Sometimes reverent, sometimes gentle, sometimes irascible in the darkest gloom (D minor) and with high dramatic density, Arnold Schönberg's "Transfigured Night OP. 4" in the string orchestra version is one of my favourites (can be heard on Amazon) when it is a matter of sounding out the capabilities of a loudspeaker in a single session. This masterpiece of symphonic poetry, derived from the poem of the same name by Richard Dehmel, cast its spell over me many years ago when I first heard it in the Beethovensaal room at the Liederhalle in Stuttgart. It has become a familiar companion over time. Listened to countless times but still poignant, the trials and generosity of the people are woven into a lyrical-musical work of art, full of depth and iridescent emotionality. Whenever this song takes its turn in the Linn Sneaky DS playlist, surging strongly and powerfully into the listening room from my Signature Vertigo working loudspeakers from Isophon, the world appears to me to hold its breath for a Magnat Magnasphere 33 moment.

The art is to capture the intensity of this sombreness and severity in such a way that it cannot leave you unaffected. With a rumble of thunder, the Isophon descends into the deepest regions, forcing the severity of this minor key work tangibly into the listening room. In doing so, it effortlessly stretches out a broad soundstage with enormous depth.

Looking at the Magnat Magnasphere 33 operating next to it like a timid novice and controlled by Linn Sneaky DS in parallel, the question inevitably arises whether we really want to subject it to this burden at all. But this is far from the truth. I have to admit that I do not cease to be amazed as soon as the Magnat is activated. Although not providing the same fullness and explosiveness, the orchestration by no means shrinks into a miniaturised version but, rather, is preserved in quite authentic dimensions. Interestingly, the Magnasphere involves the listener in a different way to the large Vertigo: Instead of placing him or her in the middle of the front rows, preferably in the half-way up location of an expensive box, it invites him or her directly onto the conductor's stand. This focuses the view on each individual instrument and makes the performance more direct and more nuanced in its overall structure. Precisely when the delicate dialogue of the violins fades and the viola and cello go to a deeper level with unexpected, fervent intensity, just the right degree of tension is transported via the Magnat, which

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is only released when the elongated pause signals the change from d to b minor. Although I am very used to such an intensive music experience from the Vertigos, I would never have expected this from a small shelf-top speaker in this form.

The Magnat does not acquire its micro-dynamic enthusiasm through exaggerated brilliance in the upper ranges. Individual strings come across as incisive and brilliant, can be easily distinguished and retain their typical whiny-warm tone. Nor does the Magnasphere leave fading notes simply hovering in the room in an uninspired way but, rather, accurately follows their trail. The active Magnat presents the finest background information, such as a slight cough from one of the musicians, as if on a silver platter - and it becomes clear in very general terms that my large Isophon covers up some of these nuances through its opulence. Even at low levels, the Magnat demonstrates its ability of not wanting to deprive the listener of transparency and fine detail, which is an interesting quality, especially for those who like soft tones. The dynamic abilities the Magnasphere is capable of really do make you noticeably raise your eyebrows now and again. Without any apparent signs of fatigue, it studiously follows the changes in the levels of sound, from the gentle piano to the forte, presenting these right on the mark and with the correct timing. Ok, the deep bass is missing, but I'm happy to overlook this in view of its other virtues.

Leonard Cohen. Now I'm extremely curious how the Magnat is able to deal with a sonorous male voice. So, the "You Want It Darker" album by Leonard Cohen (can be heard on Amazon), which has been running in a continuous loop for months in my system, now finds its way into the playlist. In the title "Treaty", it quickly becomes apparent that the normal abundance of basic tones is accompanied by a certain degree of additional warmth. This is particularly noticeable when the Nubert nuPro-A 500, also located in the listening room, is used for comparison and performs the piece slightly more brightly and neutrally.

So the Magnat is, on the one hand, subtle and finely dynamic while, on the other hand, firmly committing to a pleasing, slightly warmer naturalness for the timbres.

A Perfect Circle. When it's supposed to get a bit more rocky and more powerful, the timeless number, "The Package", by A Perfect Circle from the Thirteenth Step album (can be heard on Amazon) is recommended. As if on their own, the fingers wander over the volume button of the remote control, driving the Magnat Magnasphere 33 to higher levels that could seriously damage relations with the neighbours and which respond easily without appearing strained or overextended. It does not, of course, have the reserves that the large Isophon has in this regard - logically enough - but some such active shelf-top speakers would already have given up the ghost at this stage. The song is really interesting right from the intro at the start, where the space is spread out into which a percussion instrument setting the rhythm in the background is embedded with an electric guitar playing gently in the foreground. The Magnat demonstrates the details very vividly and with exemplary location accuracy, moving on to the full-bodied bass runs played by Jeordie White quite seamlessly. The bass playing does not come across as over-saturated even at higher volumes but, rather, as well-measured, sinewy and with adequately dimensioned substance.

Manu Katche. And the active Magnat also presents an authentic, though slightly "warmed up" reproduction on Manu Katche's "Songs For Her" from the Playground

album (can be heard on Amazon), here too combining fine resolution with a vibrant, velvety naturalness. This means that the Magnat does not need any artificial treble boost to present details.

The clearly audible reverb tails between the sometimes gentle, sometimes vigorously struck piano runs are one thing, and the authentic size and warm blaze of colour of the piano presented in this way the other. Katche's drumming is handled via the Magnat with control and - considering its size - righteous authority. There is power in the bass drum, without this coming across as superficially gimmicky. The mid-range of the Magnat is balanced in overall terms and, as already mentioned, tends more towards the pleasant-wood-warm style of playing instead of the metallic-cool manner. The brass instruments and the plucked bass are provided with great attention to detail, as well as appropriate physicality. As far as stage graduation is concerned, the Pulheim-based company would appear to prefer more width than depth, though its precision reproduction, impulsive temperament and balanced serenity do compensate for this.

Tori Amos. The listening comparison continues with Hi-Res content: I have grown especially fond of the soulful, velvety soft voice reproduction of Tori Amos with a combination of the Cayin MT-34 L tube amplifier and the KEF LS-50 compact speaker. Together, the distinctively clear KEF and the fiery-warm tube amp not only convey precise location and great three-dimensionality but, rather, also establish an almost intimate link with the artist by virtue of following the vocal performance in every form.

So, a hasty change of set-up: On "Pretty Good Year" from the Under The Pink album by Tori Amos (can be heard on Amazon) in 24 Bit/96 kHz, although the Magnasphere 33 makes Tori Amos' voice sound brighter, more concise and without the buttery melodiousness of the soulfully warm performance of the KEF-Cayin combination in a direct comparison, the comparatively better contour and precision provide it with better speech intelligibility. Despite all the attention to detail, the Magnat remains homogeneous and complex, it unravels the individual levels of the number more finely with its more direct, dynamically more appealing pace, though without also tending towards "picky over-dissection", which makes relaxed listening possible over longer periods.

Test result: Magnat Magnasphere 33

The principle of "more is better" used to apply, but the Magnasphere system now shows that this saying is pretty outdated. High-quality music enjoyment without annoying cables as well as harmonious integration in the living room ambiance and easy to operate control makes the Magnat Magnasphere 33 stand out. The compact wireless speakers can be configured as a multi-room system and provide numerous connection possibilities - making the connection of the mostly lean-sounding flat screen TV a very uncomplicated option.

The Magnat units sound sophisticated and dynamic at the same time. The powerful, though not too deep-ranging bass is accompanied by a multi-coloured, slightly warmer mid-band, complemented by a transparent, free treble range. In addition to its micro-dynamic abilities, its strengths include an expressive tempo, discharged in its fast-paced and homogeneous playing.

Another positive feature of the Magnasphere is its extremely easy set-up, as well as the relaxed and convenient handling via remote control and the direct wireless transmission of 24 bit-96 kHz content without any interference artifacts. This is intelligent, space-saving audiophile listening reduced to the essential.

The Magnasphere 33's stand out through ...

- its, considering the size, quite substantial, though not particularly deep-ranging bass due to the concept. It is neither inflated nor artificial but, rather, controlled and tight. You would not normally expect such bass performance from speaker enclosures of this size - this demonstrates the advantages of active technology.
- naturally sounding mid-range tones, whose slight warmth convey naturalness and authenticity. Female vocals retain their melodiousness in this way and, thanks to the good resolution, instruments like the piano and violin are nonetheless differentiated and presented with a great deal of finesse.
- fine resolution treble range that does not achieve its transparency with sharpness or glassiness.
- spirited, vigorous-dynamic enthusiasm. The vigorous performance impressive for the size not only gets you in the mood, it also suggests the presence of considerably larger loudspeakers.
- the ability to play in a gentle and delicate manner, even at low levels. Nor does this affect its overall homogeneous tonality.
- a soundstage that comes across as direct and "forward playing". The reproduction precision is very good. The Magnat is more concerned with the authentic dimensioning of the individual musicians than adding very vast spaciousness. The Magnasphere prefers the width of the stage image to the depth.