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Magico A3 floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

Magico is well known as one of the world's best high-end loudspeaker brands, but when it comes to that world where the high-end meets the word 'attainable', things get a little sketchy. This is a company that makes uncompromising loudspeakers with equally compromise-free price tags, so bringing the Magico name down from the stratosphere without sacrifice was not an option. There have been some very successful entry-level products from the company, but 'entry level' was still beyond reach for many, and the uncompromising stance that might work for more elite consumers (such as needing to return the speakers to the factory for repairs) is not an option as we join high-end's nursery slopes. The A3 addresses all these things, producing at last an attainably-priced loudspeaker that Magico can call its own, while making it suitable for a wider audience. In the process, Magico helps reset what high-end is all about.

At a basic level, the A3 is every inch a Magico loudspeaker. It uses high-tech materials in its drive units, it has a sealed cabinet made of solid panels of aluminium, there is no such thing as bi-wiring, and it sits on a set of spikes that would rip through the armour of a WWII tank if fired at sufficient speed. The finish options – in Magico's traditional manner – range from flat obsidian, through pitch, to coal. In other words... matt black. It's a fine anodised finish rather than a powder-coat and is the finish shared by Magico models that cost 20x the price of the A3, so it's nothing to be sniffed at. ▶



“Magico has also made a conscious effort to make the A3 more of a practical solution for high-end neophytes and down-shifters alike.”

► Beneath the surface there beats a heart of pure Magico, too. The 6061 T6 aircraft-grade aluminium enclosure (like Big Boy Magico models) includes a complex series of internal polished aluminium bracing sections, designed to add mass and stiffness while lowering internal resonance. This has similarities with the internal structure of loudspeakers in Magico’s considerably more expensive S, M, and Q series. To make the A3 both attainably priced and weigh less than a small car, this is just internal bracing (essentially the plates of the outside of the A3 here form the enclosure itself, where in bigger Magicos they are a heavy skin on an aluminium skeleton). While the heavier and more expensive construction adds considerably to the performance of upper echelon Magicos, this simpler, lighter form of construction sacrifices next to nothing sonically, and sets the A3 head-and-shoulders ahead of the pack at the price.

The drive units are remarkably similar to those found in more up-scale Magicos. The A3 features a 28mm Beryllium-coated tweeter (although the top-flight Magicos now feature a Beryllium-diamond composite, Beryllium is still a major part of the Magico sound). In addition, the A3’s single 160mm Graphene Nano-Tec midrange unit and two 178mm Graphene Nano-Tec bass drivers are – notionally at least – like combining the cone-type midrange driver from the S series with two of the three bass drive units from the M3. In reality, the drive units in these more esoteric designs have an order of magnitude more engineering applied, utilise different magnet structures and even different grades of material in the drive unit itself, but the A3 still represents a trickle down of Magico’s Graphene Nano-Tec driver technology, and the benefits it bestows on the sound quality.

Perhaps the biggest concession to the more compromised world that comes with attainable price points is the drive units are both conventionally mounted on the front baffle, and don’t demand being returned to the manufacturer in the event of damage. In fairness, the S series also has drive units bolted to the front baffle, but ideally requires an engineer competent enough to perform such a driver swap in a relatively complex loudspeaker system, and in reality that likely makes for a more expensive process and one that leaves the listener Magico-less for a long period. The A3’s less elaborate internal architecture makes swapping out a drive unit easier.

Magico has also made a conscious effort to make the A3 more of a practical solution for high-end neophytes and down-shifters alike. The 88dB sensitivity figure coupled with a four-ohm impedance figure actually holds, with no nasty little phase angle impedance dips that would rip the MOSFETs from many good amplifiers. This wasn’t just a lucky break; Magico consciously designed, tested, and listened to the A3 specifically with equally attainably priced amplifiers in mind. In fact, when showing the A3 to the UK press last year, Alon Wolf of Magico let slip that – in spite of the hundreds of thousand of pounds worth of system playing at the time – the A3s were tested on (and sounded great through) a Hegel H360 integrated amplifier, which cost slightly less than one of the power cords used in that press demonstration.

In that spirit, the A3 was used with equipment exotic and prosaic. I even used it with the Primare I25 Prisma (tested on page 57 of this issue). This is colloquially known as a ‘mullet’ system, because of the way the budget is allocated (the speakers are worth almost 3.5x as much as the amp), and is traditionally not recommended as the speaker shows up too many of the limitations of the amp. But not this time. In fairness, this is probably the entry point for A3-compatible amplifiers (the bigger I35 integrated amplifier made a lot more sense with the A3). Read this back again in the context of other Magico models and you’ll see why the A3 is so important... and so popular. Typically, a Magico would sit at the end of a collection of hyper-exotic audio (popular pairings include Constellation Audio and Soulution Audio, neither of which are associated with the word ‘cheap’), so a loudspeaker that more than plays nice with more affordable electronics is a bit of a game-changer from a brand like Magico. If nothing else, it means others must do the same.

This might seem like a trivial thing, but the A3s are not shipped in the usual wooden crates that normally arrive with high-end loudspeakers, but instead arrive in thick, double-skinned cardboard. The A3s still require at least two people to manoeuvre them out of their boxes (ideally, two people to hold the loudspeaker and one to hold the box... and one to change the lightbulb), but these are not the stuff of piano movers, back injuries, or hernias. There is an accessories kit Velcroed to the rear of one cardboard box containing spikes, floor protectors, the warranty, and a Magico-branded orange cleaning cloth. ►

“It works as you would expect it to sound, but more specifically as you would like it to sound.”



► The other big concession of sorts is installation. Magicos are loudspeakers that require careful and sensitive positioning, if not perhaps to the “three nanometres to the left” anal-retentiveness of some designs. While the A3’s user manual gives comprehensive instructions on setting up in the best possible way, the A3 seems more accommodating of both a less-than-perfect room and a less-than-ideal installation. The installation guide is relatively pragmatic, and free from voodoo. It does recommend using a well-recorded jazz track with a bass guitar to determine optimum position from the rear wall, and piano and female vocal to determine the best stereo imaging and distance from side walls. It also recommends overdoing both until finding the best position and compromise between these two important considerations. However, it’s a fact of modern life that as the man cave becomes increasingly a luxury unavailable to many, we have to place loudspeakers in environments and positions that are pretty far from optimal. The usual rear and side wall, equilateral triangle, and toe-in rules apply, but they can be considered guidelines instead of strict edicts. Yes, of course, the more you put into the installation process, the more you get from them, and no-one is going to just ‘plonk down’ a pair of loudspeakers like the A3. But, if you are one of those unlucky souls who craves high-end performance in a domestic environment where pragmatism reigns, this is one of the few truly high-end designs that will make concessions. So that right-hand loudspeaker that is a few inches closer to the wall than it should be is not something that ends in tears. Just remember to get as close to correct as possible... and make sure they are level. That seems to be extremely important.

Running in is a breeze, although the A3s do benefit from many hours of music replay to help shake them into shape. The loudspeaker’s basic character comes through from the first moment you play the A3s (although a trifle more bass seems to emerge after a few hours of play); it’s just that over time it improves and coheres.

From the outset, there is a precision to the performance of the A3. It works as you would expect it to sound, but more specifically as you would *like* it to sound. There is a myth that precision in loudspeakers spells some kind of boring mediocrity, but the A3 – like many Magicos before it – dispels that myth effectively. This is a piece of precision engineering and that precision applies to the sound just as much as it does to the enclosure and drive units.

The easiest ways of determining this precision engineering sound are using the same test record types Magico recommends in setting up a pair of loudspeakers; a well-recorded small jazz combo with a fine bass guitar line, a solo female voice, and piano. Perhaps this is why Diana Krall is so popular among audiophiles – she’s a one-stop shop for assessing equipment. Well, almost.

Starting with female vocals, and ‘Follow My Voice’ from Julie Byrne’s *Not Even Happiness* album [Ba Da Bing records], her ethereal, breathy vocal floats perfectly between the loudspeakers her guitar positioned just slightly in front of the mix, and the subtle strings to the rear – all combine beautifully. It’s not an ‘audiophile’ recording (the mix is a little forward, her voice is a little too close mic’d, and yet – strangely – there is a lot of reverb tacked on that voice), but it highlights just how much information is getting through the A3 that you can clearly define those imperfections in a recording. ►

“This loudspeaker is a transcript of recorded music, and makes many of its rivals sound like pale interpreters.”

► Moving over to solo piano – Glenn Gould playing the Bach Goldberg Variations [A State of Wonder, Sony Classical] I flipped between the mono 1955 version and the stereo 1981 interpretation and found the A3’s revelled in both performances, easily portraying the more showy earlier version against the more introspective later recording. The tonality of the two recordings isn’t that different (showing just how good Columbia’s engineers can be), but the musical intent is very different and the Magico plays both without favour. That is rare because even supposedly neutral loudspeakers here tend to either go with the impressiveness of the ‘55, or the more sonorous ‘81. The difference between them is not masked – if anything, it is more marked – but this loudspeaker is a transcript of recorded music, and makes many of its rivals sound like pale interpreters.

I’m not sure if the ‘jazz with bass guitar’ is solely directed at Jaco Pastorius, but it’s hard to leave him out of the mix. His eponymous debut on Epic includes the solo piece ‘Portrait of Tracy’, which is mostly harmonics. This really is an acid test for a loudspeaker; any flat spots in the presentation come across as dead music, any resonances buzz like crazy. But if it works, it’s an intensely moving personal work, as it is through the A3. The music flows entirely unimpeded by the loudspeakers and the system... and if you know just how rare that is and just how big a system you need to normally achieve that kind of result, you begin to get the reason why the A3 is so important.

The A3 has its limits, rather than weaknesses, but realistically those limits are only shown in comparison to bigger loudspeakers, and typically bigger Magicos. A sealed enclosure of this size doesn’t re-enact the Who’s *Live At Leeds* album [Decca] at the sort of deafening levels it was recorded at, but the A3 is so undistorted until it hits its end-stops, that might be a good thing – this sort of clean sound played very loud is deceptively easy to listen to, and that way spells hearing damage. Other speakers at the price sound as if they go louder than the A3s, but that’s often just the drivers crapping out!

Magico faces some tough opposition, both from similarly-directed high-end brands smart enough to recognise the high-end needs a shake-up, and from upper tier designs from well-established mainstream brands who can wield huge marketing budgets. Fortunately, it sees them off effectively by sounding damn good, making the A3 hit the ground running. It begins its life at the top of the tree of loudspeakers in the sub-£20,000 category.

The A3 is an important loudspeaker, and not just for Magico. In truth, the audio world already knows this... the lengthy hiatus between the A3’s launch and this, its first review in an English language high-end magazine, is simply down to the sheer number of A3s ordered every time they are demonstrated. There’s a reason for that. This isn’t ‘discount Magico’ or ‘Magico-lite’, and it isn’t even ‘Emporio Magico’: the A3 is a top-class Magico loudspeaker in its own right. It’s the one to beat at the price... and far beyond. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, four driver, sealed cabinet floorstanding loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 1 x 28mm Beryllium dome tweeter, 1 x 160mm Graphene Nano-Tec Midrange, 2 x 178mm Graphene Nano-Tec bass units

Sensitivity: 88dB

Impedance: 4ohms

Frequency Response: 22Hz–50kHz

Recommended power: 50–300W

Dimensions (HxDxW): 112 x 27 x 23cm

Weight: 50kg per loudspeaker

Price: £11,998 per pair

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