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MAGNEPAN TYMPANI IVa LOUDSPEAKERS

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When describing "subtle" differences between similar components, it is difficult to express in words the actual magnitude of those differences. Simply describing what you hear is difficult enough; the English language emphasizes the visual and the emotional rather than the audible. This is why reviewers so often resort to visual imagery to describe what they hear. As AHC has pointed out, this combination of an inadequate language and the need to describe subtle differences frequently results in unintentional exaggeration. For instance, readers may interpret use of the word "edgy" in a report as an outright condemnation of a product, even though the word is qualified by "slightly" or "subtly."

Please bear this particularly in mind in evaluating this review; the flaws I describe are *minor*. In this price range, of course, even a small flaw can be a major concern if it hits a particular listener's sensitive spot or fails to mesh properly with his other components. At this level, personal preference becomes a very important factor. No product, no matter how good, is a good value if it forces you to replace the rest of your components. For this reason I'm willing to risk exaggerating a product's problems, rather than not mention them at all.

The Tympani IVa is a large speaker, 6 feet high by almost 6 feet wide. Although each is only 2 inches deep, a pair of these speakers takes up a lot of space in the listening room. They also are deceptively heavy, at 106 lbs each. The speaker consists of three separate panels of equal size: two are bass panels with planar/magnetic radiators, while the third houses a Magneplanar midrange radiator and the same ribbon tweeter used in the MG-III.¹

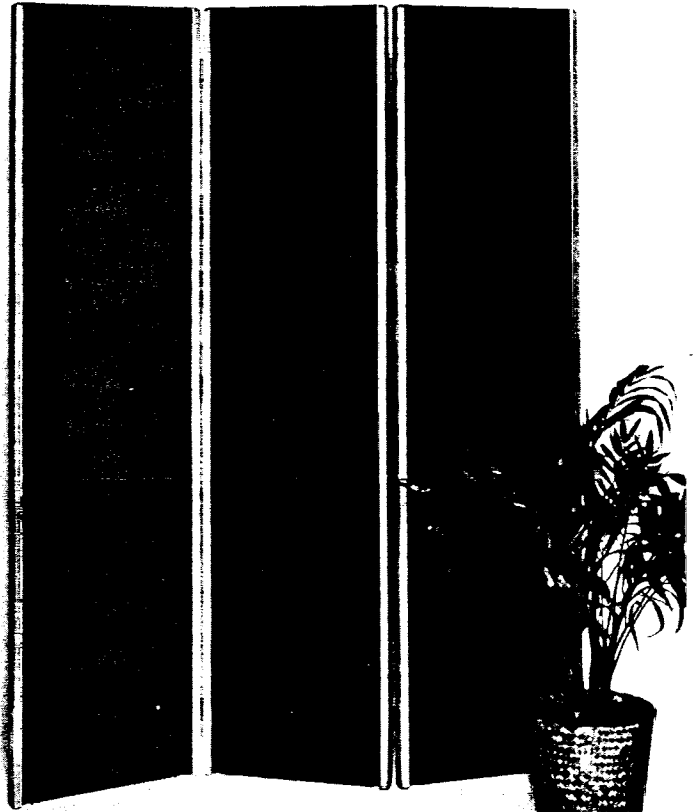
This is one of the most attractive speaker systems I've seen. The styling is modern but conservative, and the flat panels look like large, luxurious room dividers. My wife loved them! They are covered with a thistle-type of cloth and trimmed with wood, with several colors of cloth and varieties of wood available.

Normally, the three panels of each speaker are hinged together. They do not have to be attached, however; the panels can be positioned wherever necessary for optimal sound. The midrange/tweeter panels can be placed inside of, outside of, or separate from the bass units. This is fortunate; like all dipole (front- and rear-radiating) systems, the IVa's are very sensitive to room placement. You must put them where they want to be placed, or their performance suffers. The flexibility with which they can be configured makes optimum placement easier than it might be if the drivers could not be separated, but it still took me a good deal of experimentation before they sounded their best in my room. Particular attention must be paid to proximity of rear and side walls, and listening position distance. I found it necessary to sit well back from the speakers, about twelve to fifteen feet. Since in my listening environment the speakers needed to be about six feet from the back wall, you'd better plan on having a pretty good-sized room.

Each ribbon tweeter's output is balanced with the rest of the system by insertion of a resistor in series with the tweeter fuse. A special holder is provided, as are several values of resistors. Try different values until the correct HF balance is obtained. Crude, but effective.

I auditioned the IVa's with several amps and preamps, but most of my listening was done using my reference BEL 2002 amplifier and Klyne SK-5 preamp. This pair proved an excellent match for the Tympanis, providing plenty of power and detail while presenting the sound in a very neutral and musical manner.

Properly positioned in the listening room, and with the right electronics, the IVa's' sound is outstanding: well balanced and very quick, but a little thin in the lower midrange/upper bass. They are considerably faster than other Maggies I've heard² and much more detailed. The soundstage is not particularly wide or deep, but very natural. I had been listening to the Dayton Wright XAM-4s (see review in Vol. 8, No. 3), which create a soundstage as wide and deep as any speaker I've heard. The Tympanis were initially disappointing, but subsequent listening revealed the size of the soundstage to be more than adequate, the natural quality of the image transcending any shortcomings in quantity. Instruments are well separated, but with a natural blending of the instruments on the stage, as opposed to each being enclosed in an artificially self-contained space. The soundstage is



neither recessed nor forward, but instruments such as vibes, which should sound forward, do.

The midrange, on the whole, is also quite good. The most outstanding aspect of the IVa's midrange performance is the ability to convey subtleties—subtleties of detail, complex harmonic and tonal contrasts, and acoustical information, all of which show up most strikingly on woodwinds. Detail is excellent: on multi-miked violin concertos, you can tell how closely the soloist shaved the morning of the recording! And the IVa's do this without pushing forward the upper portion of the midrange to create a false sense of presence.

Where the IVa's fall short of perfection is in the lower midrange and upper bass, which are somewhat dry and thin, particularly on cello passages. The problem is not pronounced enough to be cold and analytical, but is definitely a deviation from my ideal.

Midbass, on the other hand, is nicely balanced with the rest of the range, and very tight. And low bass is impressive! The IVa's can put out clean sound well into the 20's, the low bass remaining free of any hint of mushiness, though with some loss of level in the bottom-most octave. The IVa's can't produce room-shaking bass at 28 Hz, but few systems can. The tightness of the bass, and the excellent speed and detail which the IVa's maintain all the way down, work very well with synthesizers. Synth-rock

¹ A planar/magnetic driver—"Magneplanar" is a registered name of Magnepan—consists of a flat diaphragm driven by separate wire or foil conductors attached to it by an adhesive. With a ribbon driver, the diaphragm is itself the conductor. Both are electromagnetic drivers, in that respect identical to what we refer to as "dynamic" drivers. Electrostatics, which look like planar/magnetic drivers because they are almost universally both planar and dipoles, operate on the principle of electrostatic attraction and repulsion; neither the diaphragm nor anything attached to it conducts current. JGH

² The latest version of Magnepan's MG III's also share this improvement in speed and detail.

See FAJ #42, p. 58 part 1
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47, p. 73 - rec. Comp.

groups such as Yaz are shown to advantage, and the IVa's give the synthesized drums of Phil Collin's *In the Air Tonight* or Peter Gabriel's *Lay Your Hand On Me* a most impressive demonstration of what is meant by "quick" bass.

At the high end, the IVa's sound as if they have no upper limit! The treble is detailed and airy, staying smooth and sweet all the way up. Cymbals, notoriously difficult to reproduce accurately, sound right: they have the proper metallic character without sounding hard or glaring. I have never heard any speaker distinguish as well between crash and ride cymbals.

At least as remarkable as the high frequency extension is the integration of the highs with the upper midrange. Normally, with ribbon tweeters, the difference in sound character between tweeters and midrange make the crossover apparent. I suspect that only thin diaphragm speakers, such as electrostatics or planars, are fast enough to allow the use of ribbons on the top end. So far, though, none of the electrostatics using ribbon tweeters have been able to pull it off as well as these new Magneplans.

The IVa's are also outstanding in vocal reproduction, capable of reproducing voices, both solo and choral, from the middle of the baritone range through the highest soprano more accurately than any speaker I've heard. The sense of presence and realism is uncanny. Individual voices in choirs are not only well separated, but the unique character of each voice is quite distinct. This latter virtue is something I've heard in very few speakers.

One of my only criticisms of the IVa's concerns their dynamics. They will play loud, but the feeling of dynamic impact is only fair. They achieve changes in level very quickly, but the power just doesn't hit you as it should, particularly on rock recordings. I suspect this is related to the mild thinness in the upper bass/lower midrange mentioned above; much rock music depends on upper bass for its dynamics. The dynamics on classical music fare better. The Telarc recording of the Tchaikovsky Fifth symphony, exceptionally demanding of a system's dynamic capabilities, is believably reproduced on the Tympanis.

The IVa's uncannily reveal differences between electronics. The character of the difference revealed is the same as I hear from other fine speakers, but with greater audibility from the IVa's. They work best with neutral electronics, and require an amplifier capable of providing a significant amount of current. If the amp or preamp errs from neutrality, it should err in the direction of added warmth. The Tympanis are very unforgiving of any electronic distortion; the ribbon tweeters unpleasantly expose any roughness or grain.

No dissection of the Tympani IVa's capabilities in individual areas can really convey the outstanding character of this speaker as a whole. They present the music in a well-integrated and believable manner, and their few shortcomings can be listened around; they don't grate on your nerves.

The IVa is, in fact, the best speaker system I've heard for under \$4000. The Martin Logan CLS might have slightly better detail, but it can't match the IVa at the frequency extremes or in volume capability.³ I would even venture to say the IVa is in the same league with speakers costing several thousand dollars more, such as the Infinity RS1b, the large STAX and Apogee, and the Dayton Wright XG-10.⁴

The Tympani IVa represents an excellent value for the price. I leave it to the individual listener to decide whether it equals or betters the more expensive alternatives I mention; in this report, however, those speakers were my standards of comparison. I strongly recommend that anyone in the market for a speaker system in this price range listen to the IVa. It should be on your list even if you're willing to spend a great deal more! You may find the Tympani IVa will satisfy your needs for considerably less than you had planned to spend.

LA comments:

It wasn't brought out in Steve's review, but one of the major technological steps embodied in the Tympani IV is a reduction of the midrange diaphragm's thickness from 1/2 mil to 1/4 mil. In my limited auditions of the product, this reduced diaphragm thickness (and mass), results in significantly lower midrange coloration than previous Magneplanar designs; the Tympani is markedly better than the MG-III in this respect. Combined with the superior bass available from the two separate panels, and Magneplanar's provision for balancing the ribbon tweeter to different systems, rooms, and tastes, the Tympani IVa sounds like a winner to me. All you need is a large room!

By the way, Magneplanar's ribbon tweeter is inherently less durable than their planar/magnetic panels, but they have ingeniously made it very easy to replace. And cheap: \$50 (once the speaker is out of warranty). Magneplanar dealers should have them in stock.

³ It can't match it in price either; the CLS costs \$1350/pair less than the IVa. JGH

⁴ Readers who saw JGH's unenthusiastic review of the XG-10, and who wonder at SWW's inclusion of it in this list, should know that SWW owns a pair of XG-10s and finds them marvelous. LA

Bass driver: 1254 sq. in. Midrange: 135 sq. in. Tweeter: 1/4" W by 57" L by .0001" thick ribbon. Dimensions: Three panels, each 18" W by 72" H by 2" D. Frequency response: 30 Hz to 40 kHz ± db.

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms. Manufacturer: Magneplanar, 1645 9th Street, White Bear Lake, MN 55110.

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