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*"The best loudspeakers that not all that much
money can buy."*



Magnepan MMG W and MMG C Loudspeakers

by Wes Phillips

Pssst! Wanna know a secret?

I have the answer to your multichannel-music prayers right here and nobody else knows about it -- *yet*. But you better act fast; as soon as word gets out, everybody's going to want a pair (or two) and you'll have to get in line. I'm betting it's going to be a *looong* one.

Here's the kicker: They're not just good -- they're unbelievably inexpensive.

And good-looking -- did I mention that they're good-looking?

Almost invisible, really.

Oh heck, let me just blurt it out: Magnepan's new wall-mounted MMG W loudspeaker costs only \$299 USD per pair and has a matching wide-dispersion center-channel, the MMG C, that sells for a matching \$299.

Don't shout like that -- this is a *secret*, remember?

The secret of style: have something to say and say it as clearly as you can



Review Summary

Sound "Robust and seamless" -- "much more like 'no speaker' than any \$300-per-pair speaker has any right to sound"; "the orchestral sound from the front three speakers was...rich, warm, and dynamic"; "the surround channels added a subtle touch of ambience, which seems like a small thing, but it added a convincing element of solidity to the entire experience."

Features Single-driver planar-magnetic speakers from "one of the classic American high-end-audio firms"; "so darn simple" -- "no crossover, no box, no individual drivers"; However, "you won't see the MMG W and MMG C at audio stores; they're only available direct from Magnepan."

If you're not familiar with Magnepan, a word of explanation is in order. The company is one of the classic American high-end-audio firms. The name is a compressed form of *magnetic planar*, the technology the company's speakers employ. Magnetic panel loudspeakers have no cabinet or "box," just a framework supporting a tightly stretched, electrically conductive Mylar membrane that is adjacent to arrays of small magnets. The membrane's motion creates the speaker's sound. Since there's no "box" to catch the backwave, a planar-magnetic loudspeaker radiates as much sound to the rear as it does to the front, so you have to place the speakers away from the wall behind them.

Use "Regarding mounting the MMG Ws, "Magnepan has designed a clever mounting bracket that enables you to mount the speakers flat against the wall and then swivel them into a "using" position when you want to listen to them." "The MMG W's 100Hz bottom end just doesn't give it a lot of authority," so "these Maggies really want a subwoofer."

Value "Getting to the magic that live music possesses remains tantalizingly out of reach for almost every loudspeaker, no matter how costly," but "the Maggies capture a piece of that magic, which is a trick speakers costing ten times more have a hard time doing."

The largest Magnepanns have different-diameter aluminum wire attached to the Mylar membrane, creating woofers and midrange panels (all models employ quasi-ribbon or true ribbon drivers as line-source tweeters). The new MMG W and MMG C use smaller-diameter tweeter-sized wire throughout their single driver panels.

The MMG W is a compact loudspeaker, measuring only 38" tall by 10 1/2" wide by 3/4" thick. My sample pairs were wrapped in an oatmeal colored fabric with a narrow band of walnut running down the speakers' 3/4" front edge.

The MMG W is designed to be mounted near a boundary (a wall) -- it won't really develop its full frequency response (100Hz-16kHz) without the boost that placement provides. That's not a bug; it's a feature. It allows you to place the MMG W unobtrusively in almost any room. Better yet, Magnepan has designed a clever mounting bracket that enables you to mount the speakers flat against the wall and then swivel them into a "using" position when you want to listen to them. That's about as close to invisible as high-quality loudspeakers get.

Magnepan deserves quite a bit of credit for the design of the MMG W and its mounting bracket. The speaker only weighs about 10 pounds, allowing the bracket to be quite small without sacrificing strength. Even better, the MMG W's hard-wired tail exits the speaker through its bottom bracket-mounting hole. The bottom bracket is drilled so that the wire can be fed through it. It's a neat solution to the cable problem -- and if you really want to make things tidy, you can route the speaker cables through the wall.

So how does this whole "swivel 'em to use 'em" thing work? Simply mount the speakers on the front wall (the one you face when you're listening to music) and store 'em flat against it. (If you're flanking a flat panel TV with them, just place 'em on either side of it; if your TV is in a media cabinet, just screw the speakers to its walls.) When you're ready to listen, just swing 'em out at a 30-degree angle that points the MMG Ws toward your command chair.

If you're using the MMG Ws as surround speakers, mount 'em on the side walls *behind* your seats. Then swing 'em out when in use so they are perpendicular to the side walls. The front channels should be placed more or less at ear height, and for best performance the surrounds should be as well, although this is less critical. Ideally, the surrounds should be at least three feet from the rear wall.

The MMG C does have a "box" -- sort of. It uses a version of the same panel as the MMG W (and has the same 100Hz-16kHz frequency response), but it's curved, so that the speaker's horizontal dispersion is broader than it would be if it were flat. Because of the panel's curvature, the MMG C is mounted within a bowed framework that is 36" wide by 9 1/4" high by 5 1/2" deep at its front, tapering to 2 1/2" at its tips. Speaker-wire connections are made through small set-screw-tightened sockets, a non-standard but very secure arrangement. The MMG C weighs 18 pounds.

I know that's a secret, for it's whispered every where

Before we proceed, a few comments are called for.

First, you won't see the MMG W and MMG C at audio stores; they're only available direct from Magnepan. The company is hoping to reach *new* customers, ones who probably wouldn't ever set foot in a specialty audio store. If you've never heard of Magnepan, buying direct from the company might make you uncomfortable, but it shouldn't -- in customer-satisfaction surveys, Magnepan consistently rates at the top of the list. Most Magnepan customers would rather step up to a better model from the company than seek a speaker from anybody else.

But if the MMG W and MMG C *aren't* your cup of tea, the company offers a 60-day money-back guarantee.

The other thing you need to know is that these Maggies really want a subwoofer. That's the downside to their near-invisibility. A small panel can only do so much, and the MMG W's 100Hz bottom end just doesn't give it a lot of authority.

The MMG W doesn't have a low-pass filter, but that's no big deal. Many audiophiles (such as me, for example) would rather run the speakers full range to avoid the audible effects of filters; if you'd rather employ some form of filtration, most subs have a high-pass filter built in.

In surround settings, which is how I auditioned the Maggies, you can establish the speaker/subwoofer relationship within your processor. As I said, no big deal -- in fact, leaving out a low-pass circuit makes a lot of sense.

To sin in secret is not to sin at all

I set the MMG Ws and MMG C up in a multichannel system, using four MMG Ws and a single MMG C. I was impressed by the ease of the setup process. It took less than an hour -- and that included finding my electric screwdriver in the morass of post-move boxes we're currently living amidst.

Digital sources were a TAG McLaren DVD32R DVD player or a Marantz DV-8300 for SACD, the preamp/processor was a Tag McLaren AV192R, and amplifiers were Musical Fidelity M250 monoblocks. The subwoofer was a Polk Audio PSW-650. Everything was connected with Kimber Kable KWIK-16 in-wall loudspeaker cable and KCAG interconnects.

I listened almost exclusively to multichannel music in the context of this review, but I have to confess I slipped a few movies into the DVD 32R as well -- and you home-theater buffs really ought to get in on this particular secret.

Love ceases to be a pleasure, when it ceases to be a secret

Wow! I get to play with some pretty impressive gear in this job, and it's hard not to get a little jaded. So when a product invokes my *gee-whiz* response, it tends to be really, really, *really* exceptional. The MMG Ws had me grinning like a jack-o-lantern from the moment I opened their boxes.

Well, perhaps that's a slight exaggeration. My first response upon opening the first box of MMG Ws was, *Huh?* That's because I thought Magnepan had sent me two pair of MGMC1s, a \$750-per-pair loudspeaker I had already reviewed. True, they were a little smaller than I remembered, but they sure looked like MGMC1s.

The MMG Ws sure sound like 'em, too. In fact, in a multichannel context, paired with a good subwoofer, the differences between the two models might well be vanishingly slight -- without having both speakers on hand for direct comparison, I can't say for sure. The MGMC1s *could* scrape by without a sub and may produce louder peaks without strain, but I don't imagine most people would notice much qualitative difference between the two models at normal listening levels. That's, ummm, surprising for a \$300 loudspeaker.

Perhaps even dumbfounding.

The MMG Ws simply excelled as surround speakers. In fact, as surrounds, their lack of deep bass might even be considered an advantage. If you have a stereo system that you love and you've been hesitating to venture into multichannel, the MMG W just might be the answer to your prayers. It may be the finest speaker I've ever heard at reproducing the subtle ambience cues that give you that U-R-there sensation. You want true dipole non-specificity? The MMG W will give it to you in spades.

The MMG C is a less universal solution, but that has more to do with the nature of center-channel speakers than with any shortcoming on the part of the speaker itself. In my opinion, the one crucial consideration in a center-channel is timbre matching to its left and right partners. One solution is to use three identical loudspeakers for all front-channel applications. In a strict multichannel-music system, this isn't too difficult to accomplish, but add a TV screen or flat-panel monitor and placing an upright center-channel speaker can be come more problematic -- that's why so many center-channel speakers are horizontally inclined.

However, this brings its own set of complications. Multi-driver center-channel speakers tend to have a "picket fence" dispersion pattern, which means that as you move from left to right (or vice versa), you run into sonic hotspots and nulls caused by the different drivers' acoustic cancellations. A single diaphragm, such as that used by the MMG W, avoids the hotspot/null problem, but flat panels work best on-axis -- move to one side or the other and the sound drops off. The answer is to bow the panel so its curve broadcasts sound across a wide pattern. It sounds easy, but it's devilish hard to pull off. Somehow Magnepan has managed this nifty little trick.

The MMG C may not be the best match for *every* loudspeaker, but it's sheer perfection when mated to a pair (or two) of MMG Ws.

To be prepared against surprise is to be trained...

The sound of four MMG Ws and a MMG C, mated to a dynamic, musical subwoofer such as the Polk PSW-650, is robust and seamless, although even the term seamless is a tad deceptive. The reality is that the sound is much more like "no speaker" than any \$300-per-pair speaker has any right to sound.

If that sounds elitist, I apologize. I have absolutely nothing against inexpensive loudspeakers. In fact, I adore 'em. I think the contemporary music lover lives in a golden age when it comes to loudspeaker choices. It has become decidedly difficult to buy a bad-sounding loudspeaker. But getting to the magic that live music possesses remains tantalizingly out of reach for almost *every* loudspeaker, no matter how costly. The Maggies capture a piece of that magic, which is a trick speakers costing ten times more have a hard time doing.

I suspect a big reason for this is that the speakers are so darn simple. There are a lot of things they don't have: no crossover, no box, no individual drivers. As a result, there's no crossover distortion, no box coloration, no cancellation -- which means that sound is generated over the whole panel and dispersed into the room in a manner that is closer to the way a musical instrument resonates in free air than conventional designs manage.

Maybe that's just my overactive imagination, but the Maggies disappeared sonically like \$10,000 loudspeakers -- and even if I was using a \$997 system to pull that trick off, it still seems like a bargain.

With a truly great multichannel performance, such as the Atlanta Symphony's Beethoven Symphony No. 9 [Telarc SACD-60653], the sound was literally engrossing. The orchestral sound from the front three speakers was cut from the whole cloth -- it was rich, warm, and dynamic. The surround channels added a subtle touch of ambience, which seems like a small thing, but it added a convincing element of solidity to the entire experience. It transformed my 2200-cubic-foot listening room into the Woodruff Arts Center's Symphony Hall -- truly an alchemical transmutation.

The secret of happiness is to admire without desiring

I recently reviewed the Athena Technologies Micra speaker system, which at \$549 set a pretty impressive

standard for affordable surround-sound systems. Although it manages to include a subwoofer *and* five loudspeakers at that price point, it seemed like a logical point of comparison for the MMG W/MMG C system.

For complete system simplicity, the Micra is pretty nigh impossible to beat. You get the subwoofer, of course, which you'll have to supply yourself with the Maggies, and you get five compact loudspeakers for less than the price of four MMG Ws (or a pair of MMG Ws and an MMG C). A subwoofer like the Polk PSW-650 and five of the Magnepan speakers puts the total cost of the system at \$2100.

Like the Maggies, the Micra system includes wall-mount brackets and is pretty unobtrusive, although nothing beats the MMG W when it comes to blending into the décor.

The same proved to be true of the sound, although the Athena system acquitted itself pretty well. About the only way a multiple-driver dynamic loudspeaker *can* compete with the broad dispersion of a single-panel speaker like the Magnepans is to place the drivers incredibly close to one another, simulating a point-source as closely as possible -- and that's precisely what the Micras do. They have to -- they're *tiny*.

That may be a matter of practicality and cost, but the result is a soundfield that is almost as open and airy as that of the Magnepan speakers. The only thing it lacks is the same sense of effortless ease the Maggies show on the big climaxes in the Beethoven symphony's final movement. Of course, some of that was unquestionably due to the dual 10" drivers of the Polk subwoofer, which all by itself cost more than the entire Athena system. If I turned the Polk off, the comparison was closer, but as I said earlier, a subwoofer is not an accessory with the MMG W/MMG C system -- it's a requirement.

The MMG C showed its mettle in the solo and massed voices of the Ninth's final movement. It centered the voices right in the middle of the stage (although not *too* precisely in the center) and it revealed the stage's depth to a far greater extent than the Micra's center-channel did.

The Empire Brass Quintet's superb *Baroque Music for Brass and Organ* [Telarc SACD-60614] showed just how well the MMG W handled the reverberant character of sparsely orchestrated music in a vast room. The *Contrapunctus I* from Bach's *The Art of the Fugue* pitted the five brass voices against that of Luther College's pipe organ, and the MMG Ws did a fabulous job of placing the instruments in a real space -- but it was the way that space informed and acted upon the music that took my breath away. The Micras reproduced the sound (no small feat that), but the four MMG Ws *re-created* it. My room disappeared; I was taken somewhere else for four minutes.

You really want to go somewhere else? Listen to *The Dark Side of the Moon*'s multichannel mix on its 30th-anniversary SACD [Capitol CDP 82136 2]. It doesn't sound real (not that that's a *bad* thing), but it will surely dazzle you -- the ability of the rear MMG Ws to create surround effects without appearing to be present at all was nothing but dazzling. The Micras tended to be a tad more apparent in the localization of the effects -- and in this case, not being there was a lot better than *almost* not being there.

The Micras continue to impress me, but the several-times-more-expensive Magnepans *astonish* me.

To be prepared for surprise is to be educated

Here's the best part of Magnepan's little secret: No one will ever know the MMG W/MMG C system is affordable if you don't tell them. Just let your friends ogle 'em -- they'll never have seen anything like 'em. Then let 'em *hear* 'em. Chances are they'll never have heard anything like 'em, either.

If they have, they'll assume you spent a fortune on those little wonders. If they haven't, well, they'll probably think the same thing. They'll assume you just went and bought the best-sounding loudspeaker money can buy. They won't be off by much -- you will have gone and bought the best loudspeakers that not all that much money can buy.

And that'll be our little secret.

...Wes Phillips

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Magnepan MMG W and MMG C Loudspeakers

Prices: MMG W, \$299 USD per pair; MMG C, \$299 each.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor; 60-day money-back guarantee.

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- [Current Issue](#) Equipment Reviews

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