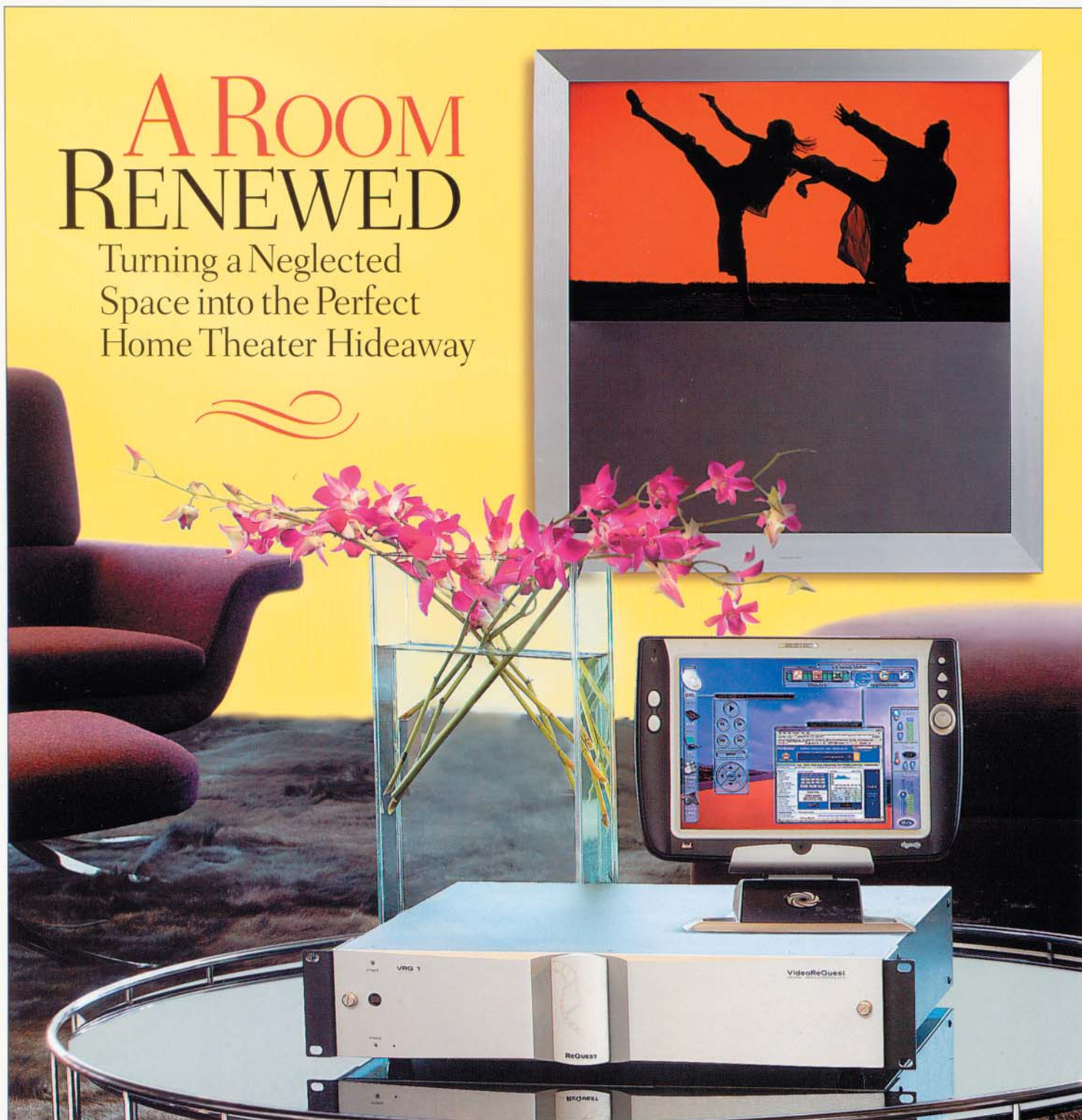


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RISKY BUSINESS

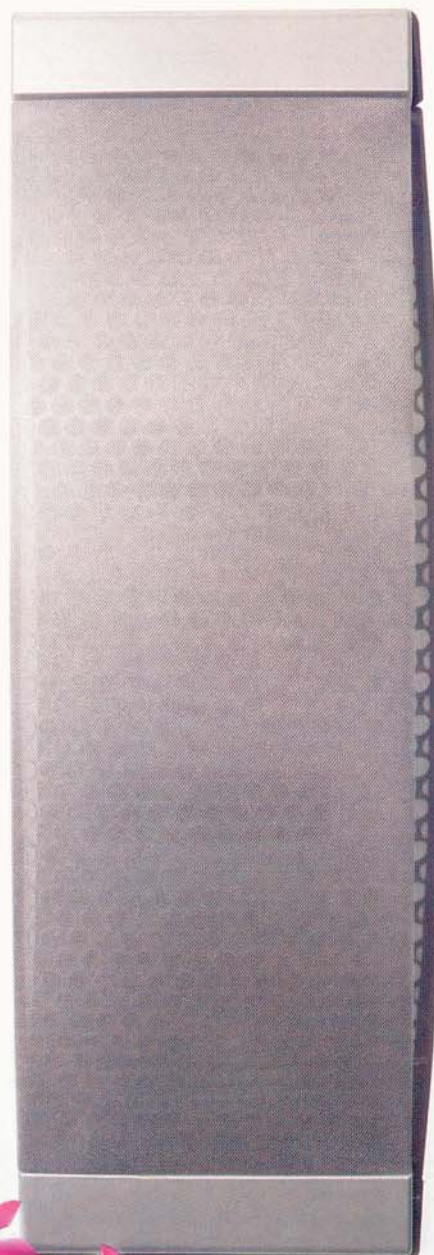
MartinLogan's Passage and Voyage flout every convention of in-wall speakers. Are they better—or just flashier?

BY BRENT BUTTERWORTH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CORDERO STUDIOS

By my wild guess, there must be 2,000 different in-wall speakers available today—and 1,998 of them look the same. They are all white, and they all fit flush in a wall. Only one company, to my knowledge, has dared to break these rules: MartinLogan.

Undoubtedly, you have already noticed that MartinLogan's new in-walls sport a silver finish, and the speakers' grilles curve outward, extending out about one inch. Both of these styling decisions defy the original intent of the in-wall speaker, which is to hide inside a wall and be as inconspicuous as possible. MartinLogan's move

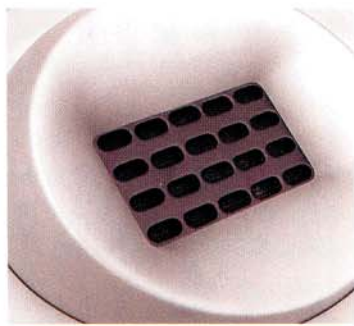
In the right light, you can see the Voyage's black ribbon drivers through its grille. The two long, horizontal ribbons are for midrange; the short vertical ribbon is the tweeter.



looks as bold—and as risky—as running a marathon in Army boots.

MartinLogan President, Gayle Sanders, and his team of industrial designers felt that conventional in-wall speakers fail in their quest for invisibility. Sanders points out that even if your installer paints the speakers to match your walls, they remain visible. And if your installer does not paint them, the chance that the speakers' white factory finish will match the shade of white used in your design scheme is nearly zero. Therefore, Sanders and his team decided to make the Passage and Voyage look as stylish—and as noticeable—as other design elements, like lighting fixtures and artwork.

Although the company minimized its risk somewhat by offering optional kits with white or black end caps



The tweeter (above) in both speakers pivots up to 20 degrees and turns up to 90 degrees. The Passage (lower right) and Voyage display extraordinarily sturdy frames stiffened by rear-mounted aluminum rails.

and grille cloths, the speakers' silver color adapts well to different surroundings. It would certainly complement most plasma TVs, and it looks stunning when I mount the speakers on each side of my projection screen. Place the Passage and Voyage in any of the showrooms in Los Angeles' Pacific Design Center, and no customer would look askance at them. The silver sheen seems to take on the color of its surroundings; Sanders calls it a "chameleon color."

The technology behind these speakers is almost as unusual as their looks. The woofers are fairly ordinary, but MartinLogan's engineers chose a rather unconventional technology for the midrange and tweeter drivers: a ribbon. A ribbon driver employs a strip of metallic film that moves back and forth as electrical current flows through it; the motion creates sound. Because the

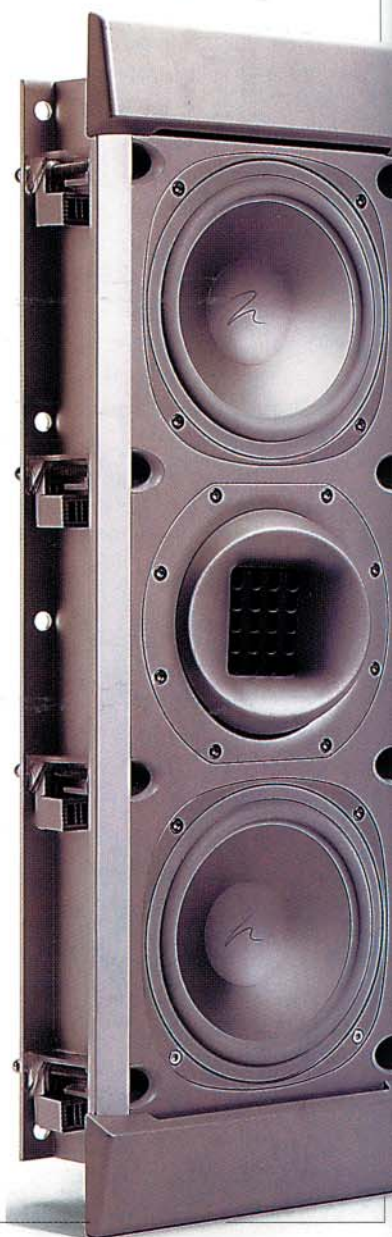
ribbon is so light and thin, it moves faster than a conventional speaker driver. This speed lends the sound a delicacy and precision audio enthusiasts crave. You may notice that the ribbon drivers in these speakers resemble those used in the Bohlender-Graebener in-wall speakers we examined in our November/December 2004 issue. In fact, MartinLogan acquires its ribbon drivers from Bohlender-Graebener.

The tweeter ribbon sits inside a pivoting, twisting ball turret. You can pivot the tweeter (up to 20 degrees) to face directly at your prime listening position for slightly better sound. You can also twist it 90 degrees. The latter feature comes in particularly handy on the Passage, which is likely to find itself mounted horizontally for use as a center speaker in a surround-sound system. By twisting the tweeter into an upright position, you improve its sound somewhat.

Immediately upon MartinLogan's launch of the Passage and Voyage, I call the company to request a pair of each for review. I open the Passage first, and am delighted to see each component of the speaker stacked in logical order. First I encounter the manual, then a template to mark the size of the hole required to mount the speaker, then the body of the speaker, then the grille. Even a 3mm hex wrench insert for a powered screwdriver is included; less-thoughtful manufacturers would force your installer to scramble all

over town to find this rare tool. The speakers are not only a delight to behold, but also a delight to install.

The Passage and Voyage bear no resemblance to ordinary in-walls. Instead of the usual molded plastic faceplates, they employ heavy slabs of medium-density fiberboard sandwiched between layers of matte-finish aluminum. Two aluminum beams on the back further stiffen the assembly. The solid aluminum fasteners



■ DESCRIPTION

In-wall speakers for stereo or home theater use. Subwoofer recommended for use with Passage, optional for Voyage

■ COMPONENTS

Passage: 2.3-inch ribbon tweeter, two 6.5-inch aluminum-cone woofers

Voyage: 2.3-inch ribbon tweeter, two 6-inch ribbon midranges, two 8-inch aluminum-cone woofers

■ CONNECTIONS

Four-way metal binding posts; accept bare wire, pins, banana plugs and spade connectors

■ DIMENSIONS

Passage: 24.5 x 8.9 inches (hw); 3.2-inch installed depth

Voyage: 35.9 x 10.5 inches (hw); 3.8-inch installed depth

■ PRICE/CONTACT

PRICE: Passage \$749 each, Voyage \$1,995 each; optional black or white grille covers and end caps \$55 per speaker

CONTACT: 785.749.0133, martinlogan.com

that clamp the speakers to a wall are both more robust and more numerous than in most in-walls. The entire assembly feels like part of a luxury car in its sturdiness, the quality of its finish and its flawless operation.

MartinLogan did not impart this stiffness and mass only to make a superficial impression on the buyer. The heft and rigidity help damp the wall vibrations that mar the sound of so many in-walls. Unlike many high-end competitors, the Passage and Voyage do not employ a back box. They simply radiate sound into the wall cavity. However, since the speaker's stiffness makes the wall so much more resistant to vibration, the absence of a back box does not much matter.

Eschewing a back box also allows the speakers to produce far more bass. In particular, the Voyage, with its dual 8-inch woofers, produces enough bass on its own to fill a fairly large room. It plays reasonably deep, too—it will not shake your couch, but it does deliver the pulse of music and some of the impact of crashes and explosions on movie DVDs. Yes, you would get better bass from a high-quality subwoofer, but the Voyage's bass is surprisingly satisfying for an in-wall speaker.

The Passage, being much smaller, does not produce as much bass, yet it is quite adequate on its own for casual music listening. If you seek to use the Passage for loud music and home theater applications, though, it will require the help of a subwoofer.

Describing the Voyage's bass as merely satisfying is as close as I can come to criticizing the sound of these speakers. Both speakers easily equal and perhaps surpass anything in their price classes. The Voyage, in particular, sounds shockingly natural—not just for an in-wall speaker, but for any speaker. Well-designed speakers are the norm now, rather than the exception, but hearing one that sounds as *right* as the Voyage is still a rare treat.

Normally I only listen to the first minute or two of a piece of music when evaluating speakers—that's enough to tell me how the speaker performs with that material. With the Voyage, I find myself listening all the way through every piece of music I play.

Both speakers sound rather mellow and warm because the highest part of the treble region is slightly restrained. Yet despite their forgiving nature, neither sounds dull. The sound is detailed and lively. I seem, at times, to hear a slight “cupped hands” coloration, perhaps from the flared “mouth” surrounding the pivoting tweeter, but I notice this effect only occasionally and always fleetingly.

The Voyage loves to play loud—even when I put on a heavy metal CD and crank it up to a level that would embarrass Eminem, I detect no distortion. It also fares well with action movies, which often shred the drivers of other high-end speakers. I use a Passage turned sideways for a center speaker, with Voyages as my left and right speakers, and enjoy a home theater experience that far outclasses what I expect from in-walls. In fact, it outclasses what I have heard from most freestanding speakers.

Although the Passage is an outstanding performer within its class, it does not sound quite as natural as the Voyage because the larger speaker's two midrange ribbons smooth the transition between the woofers and the tweeter. But the tonal quality of the two speakers is practically identical, which is important if you want to use both models in a surround-sound system.

MartinLogan's decision to take the Passage and Voyage in a completely different direction looks as smart as investing in Yahoo! back in 1995. These speakers are completely different from their competition—and, in my opinion, completely better.

Sometimes risky bets do pay off. HE