



The Devil Is In The Detail...

The Peak Consult El Diablo Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Peak Consult is both a new brand and an older establish one, just as this El Diablo is both a new speaker and an old and well recognised model. Peak – the company – was founded in 1996 and quickly established a reputation for its excellent cabinet work and robust sound quality. But by the 2020s the business was all but moribund, passed over by changing audio fashions, with the move to higher-tech enclosure materials and higher-tech drivers. That is, until it was rejuvenated by external investment (from, amongst others, Wilfried Ehrenholz – the man who built Dynaudio into a global loudspeaker power house) and expertise (on the organizational and developmental sides). The result was a remarkable resurgence, a small range of speakers that, despite their ambitious goals and pricing, quickly established themselves as serious competitors in a crowded marketplace. We've already reviewed the impressive

Sinfonia and mighty Dragon Legacy models, both of which have become price/performance benchmarks. Now comes perhaps the most interesting model in this increasingly interesting range.

The El Diablo has long been a staple in the Peak Consult range and was, for many years, their most successful, popular and recognisable model. It's not hard to understand why. It follows a blueprint first stamped on the audio public's consciousness by the Wilson WATT/Puppy: Big enough to deliver convincing bandwidth, compact enough to actually accommodate, a three-way, twin-bass driver topology built into a reflex loaded cabinet that promised impressive dynamic response. It's a winning formula that's been exploited by companies as varied as B&W and Magico, KEF and Coincident Technology and, although you can argue about who or what came first, there's no questioning the enduring influence of the



►► Wilson design. But while the current Sasha V sits atop the \$50k mark (and is being handily undercut and undermined in performance terms by the new \$40k WATT/Puppy Anniversary model) the price-point the compact floor-stander used to dominate has moved onward and upwards.

These days, the keenest competition is between boxes in the sub-\$100k category. Wilson has its own dog in that fight, the \$70k-\$80k (depending on finish) Alexia V, although it's a model that has (to me at least) always sat uncomfortably between the W/P and the post-MAXX Alexx, bastard off-spring of a multi-box marketing imperative rather than a clear design choice. There are plenty of listeners who disagree with me on that one, but to them I say, listen to the Stenheim Alumine 5 SE/SX – or the latest El Diablo. The revised Peak play-maker may have taken its time to appear, but it was well worth the wait. At €65,000 a pair (including sales tariff – I mean tax) it's also just about within reach of mere mortals, a price that also makes it significantly cheaper than most of the serious competition. Representing the same steps forward in musical and rhythmic coherence, natural tonality and dynamic expression that make the Sinfonia and Dragon Legacy models that flank it so musically engaging, the newly minted El Diablo also adds a few tricks of its own.



Appearances can be reassuring – and deceptive...

Outwardly at least, the El Diablo looks pretty much identical to its previous self. But like Dr. Who,

the origin story might be the same but the character is entirely new. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it", is an adage that could usefully be applied rather more often in the audio world. It's a lesson that Peak Consult's design team has clearly taken to heart. The sculpted enclosure and faceted baffle remain untouched, painstakingly constructed from three layers of laminated 12mm HDF, bonded with a lossy adhesive and covered with a 14mm layer of hardwood/ acrylic, for a total wall thickness of 50mm. I've covered the cabinet construction (and the company's rejuvenation) in detail, in previous articles (<https://gy8.eu/review/leaning-in/> and <https://gy8.eu/blog/summit-meeting/>) so I'm not going to labour the point here, but this is an excellent example of the high-mass approach to the management and dissipation of unwanted energy in loudspeaker cabinets. Anything but brute-force, it's a thoughtful application of different materials and exhaustively selected adhesives arrived at through years of

empirical experiment.

The split, angled baffle offers time-alignment for the Audio Technology bass and mid drivers and the Scanspeak tweeter. The extensive faceting is there to minimise diffractive affects. The sloping rear baffle adds asymmetry to the enclosed volumes. The massive,



▶▶ twin, rear facing reflex ports are heavily flared to help provide a smooth impedance match to the outside world. The outriggers and their adjustable, stainless-steel feet, each mechanically coupled via a ceramic ball, provide stability, an exit path for stored energy and precise angular adjustment of the speaker. So far, so familiar. But the rear baffle also gives the first hint to the nature of the El Diablo's infusion of current thinking and expertise. That row of four binding posts might not seem that unusual in themselves: after all, bi-wired crossovers are hardly new, to Peak or the wider world. The benefits of properly executed bi-wiring are well-recognised: the advantages of vertical bi-amping are even more profound. But what makes the presence of these four binding posts significant is the identity of the posts themselves. The large diameter, plastic bodied cylinders are hardly cut from the same cloth as the substantial cabinet and its associated hardware. Yet these are Argento binding posts, demonstrably superior on musical grounds, to pretty much everything else on the market. One of the industry's best kept secrets (a misguided affection for large chunks of gaudy, gold-plated brass is an on-

going affliction) you don't arrive at the Argento posts by accident. Their presence is a clear indicator of both close attention to detail and careful listening.

While we're on the subject of fixtures and fittings, it's also worth noting that the El Diablo is a joy to

set-up – and not just because of the accessible feet and nice, widely spaced terminals. Despite having greater bass depth and weight than the Sinfonia, the El Diablo is actually easier to position and optimise. That's down to the deft voicing of the bottom-end, low-frequencies that seem to positively resist unfortunate interference from adjacent boundaries. But don't go thinking you can take short-cuts – and don't be tempted to give up too soon when it comes to dialling in position, attitude and in particular, height. The El Diablo will sound great in a whole host of different rooms. How great depends on you putting in the work. It's important to get all four feet equally loaded and, whilst past experience with the Sinfonia and



Dragon Legend suggested leaving the locking caps off altogether, the introduction of Acouplex washers as an after-market fix means that the locking caps now function as intended. Peak supply an adjusting rod for ▶▶

▶▶ the feet (in the form of a screwdriver with a cylindrical rather than a flat head). This makes tiny angular adjustments of the speaker easy, but should also be used to make sure you don't inadvertently 'adjust' the foot when tightening down the locking cap. The only thing to look out for is that on very uneven floors, or with an extremely low or high listening seat, you might run out of thread to lock the feet, especially with the washers in place. But generally speaking, the washers and locking caps are the way to go.

One thing that has changed on the outside, is the range of available finishes. Peak's wooden cabinetry

is an artisan work of art, reminiscent of early (and still the most attractive) Sonus Fabers. The Walnut and Wenge options are still available, offset by black acrylic contrast panels on the sides. But now the cabinet surfaces can also be ordered in all-over acrylic,

with black or white offered as standard. Not only does this offer all the aesthetic appeal of piano finishes, it's a lot more cosmetically resilient and easier to care for. What's more, you can specify any alternative acrylic shade – a special order but normally at no extra cost. Finally, there's the option to replace the contrast panels with carbon-fibre, although that does cost more. What impact do the various finish options have on the sound of the speaker? Given that they amount to a whole lot more than a simple lick of paint, I'd be surprised if there isn't some sonic influence, although I'm in no position to speculate as to what it might be. The review pair was in the Walnut finish, both looking and sounding just fine.

On the inside, it's all change.

Although the original El Diablo design received an initial update, launched in May 2021, an update that introduced the current driver line-up and other internal tweaks, what we have here is a more complete redesign, bringing the speaker into line with the other Peak models, and incorporating lessons learnt from the design of the Dragon Legacy. Although the drive units are unchanged, the El Diablo has been completely re-voiced, with changes to the

reflex loading, crossover topology and components. The basic slopes remain phase-coherent second order, but a lot of attention has gone into refining the response of the system and the behaviour and impact of the crossover itself. More



significantly, subtle shaping of the speaker's phase response has angled the bass output upwards and away from the floor boundary, rather than the more popular voicing that angles it down, to augment the bottom end. The El Diablo's bottom end heft needs no help! Another result of the work on low-frequency linearity is improvements in the cabinet bracing to further tune and stiffen the enclosure, while the revised bass alignment has also mandated changes to the internal damping.

That might sound like a tweak here and a tweak there, but the sonic and musical impact of the changes is profound, the new El Diablo being significantly more articulate and faster on its feet than previous



▶ versions. It's almost like somebody took their foot off the speaker's throat, allowing it to breathe and emote. If it had hands, it would have developed extravagant gestures to underline its musically emphatic delivery. As it is, you'll need to rely on your ears – not that it's going to be too hard to figure out!

What three words?

So – you are supposed to be able to define any specific location with 'just three words.' Can you define a loudspeaker's sonic and musical 'position', its character and qualities, in the same way? That might be pushing it a bit, but when it comes to the El Diablo, how about: Expansive, Expressive and (not)Explicit? Hey – if you make the rules you get to cheat a bit. But as far as they go, these three observations do a good job of capturing what makes the El Diablo distinctive and special. Admittedly, I was tempted to go for Expiratory – just to keep the alliteration going, but it's not exactly mainstream. (Not) Expensive could be an option too, given the performance, the hand-built, hand finished nature of the cabinet and the overall attention to detail, but given the price of the El Diablo that might be considered anywhere between fanciful and actively misleading: Bit Of A Bargain doesn't have quite the same ring...

What do these semantic ruminations actually suggest about the El Diablo and the music it produces? Let's take each of those descriptors (and its implications) in turn...

Expansive

Listen to the El Diablos and it's likely that the first thing to strike you will be their generously

proportioned presentation. Whether it's an acoustic recording or a well-constructed studio session, the Peaks offer up the instruments and performers within a large and impressively defined acoustic space – one with boundaries (where appropriate) as well as space

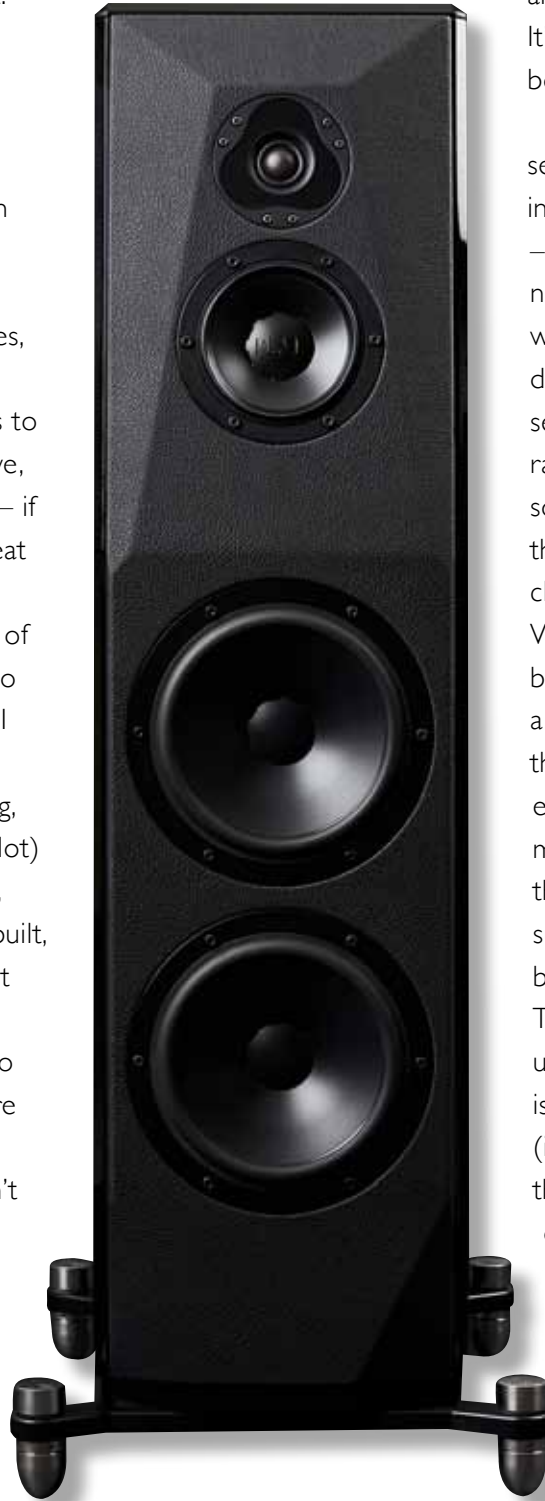
around and between instruments. It's a direct function of their bottom-end delivery and voicing.

We are accustomed to seeing bandwidth limits quoted in loudspeaker specifications – normally $\pm 3\text{dB}$ – without necessarily stopping to consider what that number does (and doesn't) tell us. A bit like a sensitivity rating based on a single random spike in the output, somewhere in the audible range, there are lies, damned lies and claims concerning bass extension. When it comes to a speaker's bottom-end its about far more than a measurable output level: it's about the linearity of the output and the energy generated. That -3dB figure might be perched on a bump in the low-frequency output, with a substantial dip above it. There might be almost no bass output below it. Then there's the question of how useable that bass output actually is? Too much bass can be just as (if not more) musically destructive than too little. Again it comes down to linearity and energy levels – factors that are simply not covered in a single number specification.

This whole question is complicated by the use of multiple bass drivers.

Boundary reinforcement

means that the output from the lower of two vertically arrayed drivers will be greater than and different from the one above it – a situation that's further exacerbated in loudspeakers that use



► differential bass drivers, a topology that's becoming increasingly common, with various Wilsons and Stenheim's Alumine 3 being examples. It's an arrangement that tends to create loudspeakers that are extremely position (and room) sensitive. As outlined above, the design team at Peak has been exercised about this very question, encouraged by the issues with integrating the potent lower-frequencies generated by earlier El Diablos into smaller or more difficult spaces. Their solution has proved spectacularly successful, maintaining both low-frequency extension and output, while improving linearity and tractability (set-up).

For a speaker with such (relatively) compact external dimensions, the El Diablo possesses a bottom end that is both deep and powerful. That's reflected in its modest 90dB sensitivity (the Stenheim A5-SX claims 94dB, albeit from a larger and more imposing cabinet) a factor offset by the impedance compensation executed in its crossover, which delivers an essentially flat 5Ω load to the amplifier(s). It also helps explain the speaker's predilection for bi-amping. Which in turn brings us to our second descriptor...

Expressive

The El Diablo's bandwidth and linearity generate a serious sense of musical substance, while at the same time, the flat impedance characteristic eases the amplifiers' task, encouraging enthusiastic dynamic tracking and temporal security. The Peaks sound remarkably agile and responsive to input, given their

middling sensitivity. The bandwidth delivers a place for everything, the responsive nature puts everything in its place. Combined with their rich tonal palette and the well-developed harmonic envelope that goes with it, they map shifts in musical density and energy with a disarming ease: Such ease that you don't hear them doing it, as they slip into the musical background. Listening to the Peaks gives you a real sense of real people playing real instruments, the way they vary their input and the way that affects the energy generated. You hear it in the texture and attack of violins and the embouchure of a horn player. You hear

it in the woody, sawing texture of bowed double bass and the quivering membrane that is a timpani's skin. But perhaps you hear it most of all in the diction and articulation, phrasing and intent of vocalists.

Whether it's the focussed power and intensity of a choir singing the 'Confutatis' from Mozart's *Requiem* KV-262 or a solo female voice, lamenting lost love, the El Diablo has an uncanny ability to capture the mood, emphasis and expressive intent in

the performance, to track switches in density and the sense a singer brings to a lyric. Some speakers tell you exactly what's being sung or played. The El Diablos answer a different question. They tell you why. That balance between 'what' and 'why' is at the heart of any system and key to a listener's preferences and prejudices – especially when it comes to equipment and system selection. Do you want a nitty-gritty, up close and personal presentation that lets you hear every squeak from a sax reed, the spit hitting the microphone? Or do you want a more holistic, all-embracing delivery that recreates the performance as ►►



►► a single entity rather than an assemblage of parts? In most cases, the goal lies somewhere between these two extremes – a sense of the whole, but enough detail to see into the performance...

(Not) Explicit

In the 1990s high-end audio took a swerve towards resolution and transparency *über alles* – and away from rhythmic coherence and musical flow. The result was a tendency towards systems and sources that delivered an etched, spot-lit and sterile sound. You could argue that in many ways, we're still trying to find our way back, although my own view is that that overstates the case and has resulted in an over-correction in the opposite direction – although the current fascination with high-res file replay and the obsession with sample rate and supposed sonic benefits over musical content and quality does signal a regressive move.

It all plays into the question of the balance between what is being played and why. What's refreshing is that increasingly, loudspeaker manufacturers seem to be understanding that it's possible to have both, tilting the balance of their products rather than slamming them into one or other of those end-stops in the presentational argument. But as speakers get more compact, achieving that perfect balance of immediacy

and resolution without sterility becomes increasingly difficult. The Stenheim A5-SX is one response, trading bandwidth and dimensionality for dynamic vitality and intimacy. The El Diablo is another, one that arguably tilts in the opposite direction. The Peak's holistic musical presentation delivers the performance as a

whole, with a distinctly mid-hall balance and perspective when compared to the likes of the A5-SX. In that, it sits far closer to the presentation of the original A5. But its saving grace is the relaxed way in which it tracks musical dynamics and maps the expressive range and shifts in a performance, the substance with which it projects musical energy. It doesn't stand performers right in front of you or fire notes at you. It places the band on a stage and you in the audience – but that doesn't stop the band firing notes of its own. It's an important distinction and one that allows the El Diablo to be both holistic without being distant, communicative and immediate without being raucous. If you are thinking that implies that the Peak is rolled off, it isn't. There's plenty of air, locational information is precise and upper harmonics are a joy. It might lack the ultra-clean, focussed transparency of diamond tweeters or the speed and extension of beryllium, but musically speaking, it's beautifully balanced against the rest of the speaker and it's

certainly musically satisfying.

Combine the El Diablo's all-embracing, wide bandwidth nature with its overall spatial and temporal coherence and natural tonality and you've got the ►►



►► recipe for a speaker that's as musically versatile as it is entertaining, as forgiving of recording quality as it is faithful to the original performance.



The proof and the pudding...

There's an old joke in audio retail that if you want classical music to show off a system's dynamics, then reach for ballet: the composer always includes plenty of loud bits so that the dancers know when to jump! Like a lot of jokes there's more than a hint of truth in it. If you want an orchestral showpiece/show stopper, you can do a lot worse than reaching for Skrowaczewski and the Minneapolis S.O. performing Prokofiev's *Romeo And Juliet Ballet Suites* (Mercury SR 90315). A 1962 recording captured on 35mm magnetic film, it's certainly got plenty of 'jump'. It's also got a typically wide, deep and well-defined stage – especially when you play it through the El Diablos. The Peaks deliver clearly defined side and rear walls and more than a fair stab at height – the sort of performance I normally associate with far larger speakers. They're rhythmically tight too. Just listen to 'Masks' with its insistent percussion. The

tone of the woodwinds is glorious and the muted timps that round out the track quiver delightfully. But what's most impressive is the speakers' response to those sudden tuttis, so often underpinned with a percussive bang. It's not just the jump in level that impresses, but the sheer substance the speakers generate. Each burst of orchestral energy is a complex construct, the separate instruments projecting their contribution from discrete, stable points on the stage. The sound leaps out of the acoustic space, without collapsing it or obscuring it. Even the intense blasts in 'The Montagues and the Capulets' are firmly rooted in the soundstage,



the familiar dark threat of the major theme is full of texture and brooding menace, without ever becoming ponderous or leaden. When I suggest that the Peaks let the music 'breathe' this is exactly what I'm referring to. The instruments energise the air within the acoustic space, instilling life and vitality into the music and the performance as a whole. Despite the bass weight that the El Diablos are capable of generating, they never sound slow or heavy, the bass never rolls along the floor.





▶▶ Playing exuberant orchestral works certainly shows off the Peaks' bandwidth and dynamic capabilities. But those qualities are just as applicable to smaller scale music and more intimate performances. Neil Young's *Live At Massey Hall 1971* (Reprise 9362-43327-2) is a case in point. Solo voice and guitar or piano, with plenty of vocal and instrumental interjections between, might not seem like an obvious choice, but it underlines the El Diablo's qualities perfectly: from the capacious space of the auditorium and the crowd that spreads forward of the stage and speakers, to the vocal presence and the body and harmonic substance in the guitar, everything underpins the intensity in the performance and the rapt attention of the crowd. The speakers might not have the obvious attack and vocal immediacy of some, but the key word here is "obvious." Young is set slightly back, with his voice and guitar beautifully proportioned and dimensional, enclosed in the space and atmosphere of the palpable acoustic. Throw in the crowd noise and enthusiastic feedback and the atmosphere is complete, the heady, sweaty excitement and sense of being there all too real. It's about presence, scale and energy – whether from the crowd or the artist – and the El Diablos master it perfectly. If you've ever stood and

clapped, called and pounded for an encore, you'll know exactly what to expect...

In the same way, play 'Strike The Viol' (from Christine Pluhar and Arpeggiata's Purcell improvisations, *Music For A While*, Erato 0190295250843) and where many speakers naturally fasten on the gymnastic brilliance and agility of Soprano Raquel Andueza's vocal, the Peaks set her singing in the context of the band as a whole, balancing it against the chorus contributions of the wind instruments and especially the clarinet: Again, less obvious, but a more complete performance.

From here – the top to bottom linearity and balanced energy, the integrated musical coherence and lack of exaggeration, the overall sense of scale and proportion – it's not too big a leap to understand the Peak's ability to respond to and lift live albums, to bring the best out of less than stellar records and recordings. Joe Jackson's *Live 1980/86* (A&M AMA6706) is a brilliant example. The double album maps the musical development of the artist and evolution of the band across that six-year period, culling live tracks from four tours and six venues, including three different versions of the seminal 'Is She really Going Out With Him!' Cramming nearly two-dozen songs onto four sides of ▶▶

►► thin and flexy vinyl ain't a recipe for stellar sound quality, but if you love Joe then this is essential listening, not least because he's such a brilliant live performer. Once again, the Peaks capture that energy and intensity, the tightness of the band and the growth from its raw, post-punk emergence to the increasing sophistication and variation of the later performances and arrangements. By side four you've got a set that includes songs as different as the stark 'It's Different For Girls', the Cab Calloway swing of 'Jumpin' Jive' and the mid '80s smooth of an extended 'Steppin Out'. You've even got the 'love it and hate it' relationship with the 'big hit' in microcosm, as it develops from its original form through an *a cappella* version to a pared-back, largely acoustic arrangement with accordion and violin!

Recording quality is variable (to say the least); pressing quality is perhaps best described as unfortunate, with a loss of low bass and a splashy treble that can tend to sharpness. Nevertheless, the focussed substance and energy generated by the Peaks, their refusal to expose or spotlight flaws or liberties in the reproduction, but to pull them in and balance them as part of a greater and more complete whole, brings the band, the performances and the album to vivid, vital, pulsing life. I started out dipping back into the discs, looking for specific examples. But in that old cliché, they just pulled me in and I ended up listening to the whole thing over again. When Joe sings about being "brutalised by bass and terrorised by treble" I know exactly what he means: I've experienced it all too often from this very album. But this time around, the El Diablos turned that on its head. Rather than constantly trimming the volume back to eliminate the worst of the glare, I found myself turning it up. As the needle runs out on side four it's almost like the band and the system are saying, "Follow that!"

The El Diablo's ability to bring things together isn't unique: it's something it shares with the other Peak speakers! But this latest model, perhaps drawing on the lessons hard learnt not just with the others in the range, but through decades of loudspeaker development, establishes a whole new price/performance high for the brand. Wilfried Ehrenholz and Karl-Heinz Fink (who has designed literally hundreds of loudspeakers for multiple clients) are nothing if not experienced. Both have tended

to work under tight budgetary constraint in highly competitive market sectors. It's a hard apprenticeship, but freed from the constraints of strict price bands, with engineering and execution tied directly to performance demands and priced accordingly, the results quite literally speak for themselves. Immediacy is a familiar term in audio reviews. Having already said that there are other speakers that are more obviously 'immediate' than the El Diablo, maybe this is a speaker that offers a different kind of immediacy, delivering it musical message with unusual clarity and power simply because of its completeness.

The Dragon Legacy remains an astonishingly listenable and capable speaker. It offers even greater bandwidth and dynamic impact than the El Diablo. But the smaller speaker matches the flagship's easy expressive range and attractive, natural tonal qualities and separation. It's easier to accommodate and easier to set up. It establishes an impressive musical benchmark alongside its more practical attributes. It brings that engaging, almost addictively musical quality to a system: exactly the quality that we are (or should be) looking for – but that's so hard to find. It really is the baby Dragon. When the El Diablo speaks, it's easy to listen – and hard not to.

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Prices and availability

Peak Consult El Diablo	€65,000
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Finishes –	Walnut, Wenge hardwood, Black or White solid acrylic (coloured acrylic to special order)
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