

EQUIPMENT REPORT

Harbeth HLP-3ES2 Loudspeaker

The Best Mini-Monitor?

Paul Seydor

Within a few minutes of firing up Harbeth's HLP-3ES2 mini-monitor, I smiled and thought, "I *know* this sound. It's every bit as good as I remember." For several years in the nineties, I used a pair of the original HL-P3s in my film work. Replacing LS3/5as, they displayed far more neutral tonal balance, greater timbral accuracy, *much* lower coloration, better bass, and wider range. When I had just finished a project with several months to go before the next and no place for the speakers to go except storage, I finally gave in to a musician friend who, after carefully auditioning several small speakers (including LS3/5as), had been begging me to sell them to him. Come the next project, Harbeth was in the process of changing U.S. distribution. I never did get around to replacing the P3s.

Meanwhile, since 1999 I've reviewed three Spendor mini-monitors and Stirling Broadcast's resurrected LS3/5a (in Issues 119, 143, 166, and 182). As this might suggest, I've had something of a longstanding romance with mini-monitors, especially when used in the applications for which they were originally intended: high-accuracy reproducers in settings too small to accommodate larger speakers, spaces that typically cannot support low bass and where very loud playback isn't required. But I wouldn't choose them as main speakers for normal and larger listening rooms because their limitations become more difficult or impossible to overlook. And since optimal performance requires stand-mounting away from boundaries, their small size doesn't really even save all that much space. Still, there's something about the sheer impossibility of the problem and the ingenuity of the various solutions that appeals to me.

Designed by Harbeth's owner Alan Shaw and introduced in 1990, the HL-P3 and its successors were by no means the first mini-monitors in the wake of the LS3/5a. But I believe they were the first to build *directly* upon the BBC research that went into the LS3/5a and upon the 3/5a itself, right down to lifting one of its hat-tricks, a little boost in the upper bass to suggest more bottom-end than is actually there.

Slightly larger than the LS3/5a, the ES2 is otherwise similar, being a sealed two-way with SEAS drivers instead of KEFs. This is, in fact, the second revision of the original P3, the first being the ES, the differences mainly in the crossover, treatments for the cone edges, and a rounded cabinet-edge in the ES2. Impedance is complex, but nominally 6 ohms (treat it as 4 with tube amplifiers). Sensitivity remains a low 83dB, recommended minimum power



25 watts—a mite optimistic for a normal-sized room. In my plus-2600-cubic-foot space, I managed to make a high-current 110Wpc amplifier clip before the speaker gave out (this may have owed partly to the ES2's complex impedance). For most of the evaluations I used the reference McIntosh MC-402 (400Wpc) and Quad 909 (140Wpc). Think a *good* 50 watts minimum and don't be afraid to use 100.

For this speaker's something of a little giant when it comes to loudness, doing a commendable, even an impressive job reproducing the dynamics of Richard Goode's Beethoven sonatas (Nonesuch) and placing the piano in the room. It also played the Kings College Advent service on Argo LP, large organ and all, to levels too loud to talk over. But when the big stuff, deep stuff, powerful stuff came along—organ, piano music in its lower registers—the sound was perched right on the edge of stress and strain, where I found it preferable to ease back.

Yet Shaw is such a gifted designer that the ES2's low end manages things none of the other minis does. For one thing, that upper-bass boost is to my ears subtler and better integrated than the LS3/5a's, which always sounded a little coarse to me. For another, the ES2 is good enough to suggest a bit of the low-end ambience of recorded venues, more difficult than reproducing top-end air. Finally, it will actually reproduce bass drums and other low-end instruments, not room-fillingly, but with more than a mere suggestion that they are actually there. And string bass is handled convincingly, without the bloom of a larger speaker, but with superb articulation and harmonic integrity backed by surprising strength and even some power. Ray Brown on *This*

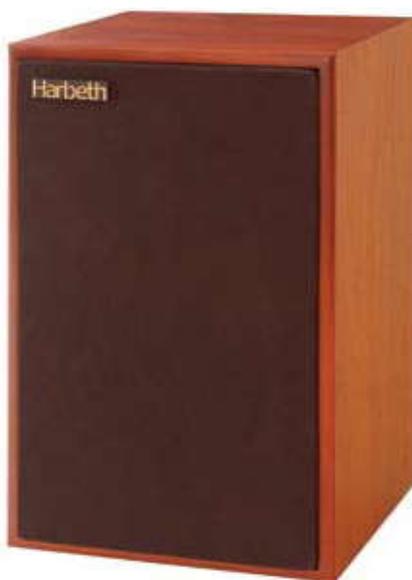
One's for Blanton (45-rpm vinyl reissue) will show you what I'm talking about. So will Harmonia Mundi USA's *Eroica*, Andrew Manze urging his medium-sized orchestra to play in the style of the early classical period, with sonorities lean and *sec*. But the Harbeths clearly reveal that these are modern, not period instruments, double-basses and cellos coming through with sufficient warmth and foundation to balance the spectrum. And the virtuoso timpanist has to be heard to be believed in the *Marcia funebre*, his attack reproduced with stunning clarity, ferocity, and even some size by these little buggers.

In other words, while Shaw hasn't rewritten the laws of physics when it comes to bass performance and loudness capability, the ES2 is the only mini-monitor I could live more or less happily with as primary speakers if I had to. And because the bass is so well behaved, this is one mini-monitor that really will mate well with a good subwoofer (the LS3/5a has always been the very devil in this regard).

The tweeter is that rarity, a metal dome that doesn't ring or otherwise constantly point to itself. One of my notes reads, "The highs—clean, clear, pretty characterless, practically perfectly balanced." This is not just because the tweeter doesn't rise in the manner typical, say, of so many non-BBC-oriented British speakers these last twenty years, but because it is very extended yet *of a piece* with the mid/low-end driver. I am reliably informed that Shaw expends fanatical effort in all his designs in getting the drivers to dovetail coherently at their crossover points. It shows, but experiencing this coherence requires on-axis listening and stands that bring the tweeter to ear level.

Some people find the LS3/5a's highs more detailed. I disagree. They may sound more detailed because its top end has a few peaks that accentuate detail. Put the same peaks into the Harbeth with an equalizer and *voilà!*—there's the same detail, the differences being: (1) that it's bogus, and (2) that you can switch it out. The ES2 reproduces details in truthful proportion to what else is on the recording.

Which brings us to the midrange. I've already mentioned its



neutrality and freedom from coloration, with timbral accuracy superb by any standard. But there *is* a small anomaly, a tiny rise in the 1kHz–2kHz range. With most program material, you might not even notice it, though pink noise reveals it. And unlike the LS3/5a's similar but bigger rise in the same region, the ES2 never gets nasal. Instead, it provides a bit of extra presence-projection that makes for a very open sound. But it also makes the speaker sound, again in common with quite a number of mini-monitors, a bit more midrange-y than it might otherwise. (Spendor's S3/5R is dead flat in the same region.)

One recording that lets you hear this anomaly immediately is the LP of Doris Day's "Over the Rainbow" from *Hooray for Hollywood*. Day's voice is recorded with glorious presence, richness, and warmth,

but on the Harbeths it can sound slightly too forward, as in a little bright, especially as it approaches its loudness limitations. Pulling back the 1.2kHz band on the McIntosh C46 preamplifier's equalizer to around 10–11 o'clock makes her voice sound just right. On the other hand, play Shelby Lynne's new tribute to Dusty Springfield, *Just a Little Lovin'*, and she sounds too distant EQ'ed this way, just right bypassed.

In other words, I don't want to overemphasize this anomaly; it's not noxious and it truly *is* subtle. Moreover, from the top of the upper-bass through the highest octave, fewer than ten percent of speakers on the market, I'd guess, are as flat and thus as accurate in frequency-response as the ES2. It really *earns* its "monitor" moniker.

The ES2 images more or less as all these subcompacts do: with near holographic precision that belies its small size, albeit with the usual reduction in image size and scale, less so here than with most. The Harbeth is more open and somewhat bigger sounding than the others, less boxy too. And because Shaw has paid his usual careful attention to reducing diffraction effects, you won't hear the typical beyond-the-speaker-boundaries soundstaging artifacts, beloved of audiophiles but hardly accurate.

Is there an issue of value here? Of the five mini-monitors I've reviewed, the cheapest is \$1499/pair, the costliest these Harbeths at \$1895/pr. And I don't know of comparably priced larger speakers that equal the sheer accuracy of the best mini-monitors over their admittedly restricted frequency range. But my colleagues have written about several quite good larger speakers in this price range that, in addition to playing louder and responding deeper, will also suggest a more life-size scale in their reproduction. Which matters more to you: high-accuracy, restricted frequency and dynamic range, reduced scale versus deeper bass, greater loudness, a bigger presentation at some sacrifice to ultimate tonal accuracy? Not a decision I can make for you . . .

Meanwhile, the HLP-3ES2 sufficiently pushes the boundaries of mini-monitor performance, while reducing the compromises imposed by the small size, that I've made a decision of my own: I bought the review pair, and this time I will not make the mistake of selling them any time soon. **TAS**

SPECS & PRICING

Drivers: custom 4.33" polymer midrange/woofer, 0.75" aluminum-dome tweeter
Frequency response: 75Hz-20kHz +/-3dB
Nominal impedance: 6 ohms
Dimensions: 12" x 7.4" x 7.8"
Weight: 13 lbs.
Price: \$1895/pr.

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