

Three's Company

HARBETH HL COMPACT 7ES-3 (£1799)

The company's 30th anniversary relaunch proves addictive for Christopher Breunig

If you can get speech right, says Harbeth's designer Alan Shaw, almost everything else will fall into place – apart from earth-shaking bass. It's what he calls 'the BBC way of doing things'.

Launched first in Japan, the new Compact 7ES-3 shares with other BBC designs enclosures constructed as tuned 'thin wall' cabinets. These are assembled from damped MDF panels with front and back each fixed to bearers by twelve screws. This is said to result in a 'lossy joint' structure with low energy storage, that 'breathes' like a string instrument.

The 7ES-3 front-ported two-way is 520 x 273 x 315mm (hwd) with cherry as the standard finish, eucalyptus or ebony to order. Harbeth's drive units feature RADIAL

cone technology – an acronym for a patented blended polymer formulation. The 200mm mid-bass driver has a new rubber surround, revised for superior damping. There's a re-specified crossover to the 25mm aluminium dome tweeter, which is made by SEAS to Harbeth's specifications. Using stranded OFC

wiring, this new circuit is claimed to enhance vertical integration of the drivers and to allow the user more flexibility in stand-height. A range of 375–535mm is suggested. Bi-wiring is not an option.

Listening with the grilles on is recommended. The transparency of grille cloth in the 7ES-3 has been increased to allow the tweeter a more open character. And both

the port resonance frequency and cabinet damping have been revised to give better bass.

TAKING A STAND

Mounting this speaker for the most natural tonal balance is quite critical – although room placement is less so. Harbeth suggests a minimum spacing of 500mm behind the speaker. Routinely pressing them down on Blu-Tack gave a bloated, bass-heavy character. They need a lightweight stand, and I found experimentation with three oak cones (Russ Andrews), points up or down, brought significant changes.

Given that most Harbeth sales are in Japan, what better to start my listening than an obscure Harmonia Mundi LP of Noh Theatre? This has actors growling in a kind of song-speech, shrill traditional pipes and wooden percussion thwacks. The decay of sounds, the immediacy of

'Mounting this speaker for the most natural tonal balance is quite critical'

transients and complex male voice sounds make it ideal test material.

The Harbeths passed with flying colours, just as they did with Weather Report's 'Port Of Entry' with its hand-drumming and electronic keyboards. Kate Bush's diction in 'Wuthering Heights' was crystal clear, as well as the reverberation layers in the stereo mix.

VERDICT

These are enormously tuneful, addictive speakers which can create deep soundstages with pinpoint instrumental detail. You need to set the replay levels correctly for accurate tone-colours. That said, they do respond to quite high replay levels – although a quite modest amplifier will drive them. Don't be put off by the plain 'studio' styling. ⏻

AUDIO FILE

Stand-mount two-way front ported loudspeaker

Price: £1799

Made by: Harbeth Audio

Telephone: 0870 803 4788

Web: www.harbeth.com

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1m for 2.83V rms input)	84dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	5.7ohm @ 2.79kHz 23.4ohm @ 62Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-45° @ 78Hz +41° @ 656Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±0.9dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	38Hz / >40kHz / >40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL at 1m)	0.7% / >0.1% / >0.1%
Distortion (10W, 20Hz–20kHz)	0.0024–0.045%

hi-finews
HIGHLY
COMMENDED