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hardware

harbeth vs. spendor

HP3ES and S3/5 Mini-Monitors - A Space Thing
as reviewed by Bob Neill

BOB NEILL'S SYSTEM:

LOUDSPEAKERS

Harbeth Monitor 40's sitting on Sound Anchors with Blue Tak.

ELECTRONICS

Blue Circle AG3000 tubed preamplifier and Blue Circle AG8000 mono-blocks.

SOURCE

Naim CDS2 retrofitted by Naim of North America with RCA outputs, feeding into a custom Blue Circle RCA/XLR converter.

CABLES

Speaker and interconnects are Nordost Valhalla.

ACCESSORIES

Blue Circle Isolation Cones. Power cords are currently TG Audio SLVR's plugged into Blue Circle Music Rings which are in turn plugged into dedicated lines.

I'm a big-speaker guy. I want to hear it all, with authority, without strain, and on a scale that does not bring HO model trains to mind. I am not fascinated by miniatures of any kind. I am not frugal, practical, or modest. I find Thoreau and Walden occasionally bewitching, but "Simplify, simplify" does not strike a thrilling note in my being. In my lexicon, simplifying and purifying are both euphemisms for taking things away. One day, twenty years ago, I heard a pair of tiny ADS speakers that impressed the hell out of me. They did something I'd heard very few larger loudspeakers do: create a marvelous sense of music in space. A couple of years later, I heard a pair of KEF Ref 101s do it even better. I did not want to own either of these speakers, as I could hear what they weren't doing in addition to what they were, but I loved the Space Thing. To this day, I have not heard a larger speaker do it as well.

For the past year or so, I have been the happy owner of a pair of big British speakers— Harbeth Monitor 40s. Around four and a half cubic feet in volume, nearly 85 pounds, with heavenly SEAS Excel tweeters, matchlessly articulate RADIAL midrange drivers, and authoritative 12-inch SEAS woofers, the M40s are the best speakers I've ever heard in a domestic setting. They transcend virtually all of the audio adjectives, and deliver the closest illusion I've heard of what live music sounds like in a real venue. I love them, but they do not do *all* of the Space Thing. Neither do the smaller, excellent Compact 7s or the smaller still, splendid Monitor 30s, though both do somewhat more in this regard than their big brothers.

Since I have learned to live quite happily without such a dramatic rendering of space, it is at least partly sentimentality that led me to ask Garnet Lewis of Winter Tree Audio, North American importer of Harbeth, to indulge me. If the M40s are this good at the big-speaker thing, I wanted to find out if the HP3ESs, descendants of the much-loved LS3/5As, could do a share of what its larger siblings do—plus the Space Thing. If they had a *decent share* of full range sound and did the Space Thing superbly, might they be an alternative to, rather than a compromise with respect to the M40s?

Unfortunately, HP3s are hard to come by these days. Harbeth is just beginning to expand production capacity in response to the recent rise in demand for their speakers in the U.S. and Asia. Also, Garnet Lewis has only been in business for a little over a year, successor to an earlier importer who, it seems, lacked the necessary passion for Harbeth to compete with its long-time British "adversary," Spendor, which has been well established (if also not widely distributed) in the U.S. for a generation. So, while I waited for Garnet to free up a pair of HP3s, I had the idea to call Spendor's very generous and supportive U.S. importer, QS&D, and ask them to lend me a pair of S3/5s, which are the HP3s' logical (and real) competitors. (S rather than SP because there is no port—both the 3/5s and the HP3s have sealed cabinets.) The S3/5s have been justly appreciated in the press. Paul Seydor of *The Absolute Sound* wrote "in the crucial midrange it is one of the most musically truthful speakers you can buy." Herb Reichert (www.EnjoytheMusic.com), asked rhetorically, "Is this the most accurate loudspeaker manufactured today?" and then, with a flicker of uncharacteristic equivocation, more reasonably suggests that they are "(most probably) the best small speakers manufactured today."



Spendor S3/5

Their appearance is acceptable, with a small medallion on the bottom edge left over from its days in the now-cancelled FL Series. Recommendation: lose the medallion. The speaker taps are perfect, meaning that they accept my Valhalla spades! A rare treat. I started this audition in my large listening (living) room and with my reference system because I wanted to hear what these speakers "really" sounded like before I put them into a room and system more in keeping with their scale and price. My listening room is 18 feet wide, 29 feet long, and the ceiling slopes from around 11 feet at the speaker end of the room to around 8 feet, a total of around 5000 cubic feet. Floors are cement slab covered by wood, with an 8 x 10 area rug in front of the speakers. Floor to ceiling bookshelves are on listener's right, a brick wall on the left. There is floor to ceiling glass behind the speakers, with drapes that are only drawn when the Audio Police come by. In the reference system is a Naim CDS2 with Naim retrofitted RCA outputs, a Blue Circle AG3000 tubed line stage and AG8000 150 watt hybrid monoblocks, both fully balanced. (Conversion is via a custom Blue Circle RCA/XLR converter.) All cabling is Nordost Valhalla; power cords are TG Audio SLVRs plugged into Blue Circle Music Ring power filters plugged into dedicated lines. The speakers sit on my own very heavy filled clay pipe stands, about 5 feet from the side walls and 4 feet in front of a floor to ceiling glass rear wall.

I had the 3/5s in the reference system for a couple weeks before the HP3s arrived, and very soon came to understand what Reichert is talking about. Spondors tend to be more finicky about amplifiers than Harbeths, so, remembering how unimpressive the SP1/2s had been with Blue Circle hybrids six months ago, I started them out on Gilbert Yeung's latest assault on the real world, the single-ended, all solid state, 50 watt Blue Circle CS integrated amp (\$1150). Even with this modest little piece of electronics, it was "deja vu all over again"—the Space Thing was back in all its glory. The music sounded damn good, too, which I guess was the real surprise. I know the SP1/2s and SP100s and appreciate their virtues, but both of these popular speakers sound like speakers to me. With the 3/5s, my first impression was not that these were charming speakers, but that everything sounded so good. Unlike the much larger 1/2s, the 3/5s did not seem rolled off at the extremes (though they obviously are), in addition to having a classic BBC 1.5 to 2.5 dB drop and recovery in the presence region, according to Jeff Stake, who did the measurements for me.

In judging small speakers, it's not what is missing that's at issue, it's what you notice is missing. The 3/5s are so wonderfully balanced that what's missing doesn't come to mind. They create a marvelously real sense of music in space, they get the midrange largely right (which Spondors always do), and they do what can only be called an ingenious job of tempering the extremes while maintaining an overall balance. I did not hear, as I do with the SP1/2s, the typical Spondor midrange-focused presentation. The 3/5s are not the most accurate loudspeakers manufactured today, and are the best small speakers only if you incline toward Spondor's view of the world, but to my ears they are clearly the best Spondors, which is a lot. The bass in particular sounds considerably more impactful and foundational than that of the SP1/2s. It's an illusion, but a successful one, so what the hell.

The Schumann Piano Trios by the superb Florestan Trio, on Hyperion, are warm, natural, detailed, in perfect overall balance. Scale is not an issue. On the Nielsen *Symphonies 1 & 6*, with the Danish National Radio Symphony conducted by Schonwandt, on De Capo, I love how the minis do space! Especially on orchestral music, which helps to fool you that they're also doing bandwidth. You cannot have orchestral fullness with minis, nor can you have the exhilaration that comes with a high end that soars smoothly out of sight, or the overall sense of ease that full range speakers provide. But once you've adjusted, you hear horns, strings, brass, tympani, all clear, tonally convincing, and present. You hear a very pleasing, scaled-down reproduction of a symphony orchestra.

On Wayne Shorter's *Footprints Live on Verve*—Shorter's new one—percussion and bass are surprisingly satisfying, and not just for small speakers. The sax is warm, crisp, and clear. The piano doesn't sound reduced at its high end, though it is. On C.P.E. Bach's *Solo Keyboard Works*, Vol. 8, from BIS, the clavichord—not a dynamic challenge for sure, but getting both its warmth and "pluck" is difficult—sounds fine. The imaging is pinpoint, if that sort of thing matters to you. The minis do not get the room and some of the finish of the notes, so while satisfying, they're not exhilarating, but that's an expensive difference. On Tony Rice's *Unit of Measure* on Rounder (yeah, I read Art Dudley's review and believed it), I not only heard superb flat-picking but great presence and drive. From a mini!

With my normal gear, I was surprised at how well the 3/5s responded to the increased investment, but also that while they got better—more clear, mainly—the difference was not dramatic. The 3/5s are obviously designed to perform well on less than premier electronics, and we should all be relieved that they do so.



Harbeth HP3ES

About this time, the HP3s arrived. I plugged them into my reference system right out of the box because that was what I had been listening to, and cranked up the same musical program I'd been using with the Spondors. Hmph. Very different. I listened to a few cuts, then switched back to the 3/5s. Hmph again.

As I found out over the next day or so, A/B-ing the 3/5s and HP3s didn't work very well. It exaggerated their differences, but didn't really help me home in on what each sounded like. When the Harbeths first entered the system, following directly on the Spondors—the first hmph—the music sounded more present, assertive, pushy even, and seemed to have less body. After my aural memory of the Spondors had faded a little, the Harbeths became incisive, lively, and informative. I could hear more of everything, though everything was a little less comforting. Switching back to the Spondors, things sounded a little muffled and shut down—the second hmph—then, after a few minutes, the Harbeths receding in my mind, the Spondors changed back to how they'd sounded before: warm, sweet, full, and airy.

Once I focused on each pair of speakers with live music in mind, the contrast settled down to the good old Spondor/Harbeth thing that I have come to know well. On the Spondors, recordings were warm, full (for a mini), satisfying, and pleasing, while the Harbeths were more crisp, immediate, a little leaner, and more exciting. The Spondors provided a more appealing, solicitous, slightly softened presentation.

There was plenty of drive, but the edges were a bit extra-smooth. Colors were clear, but a tad on the pastel side. The Harbeths offered a more interesting, firmer, more "objective" presentation. Colors were more vibrant. Both speakers are true to the music in their fashion, and both are engaging. Both do space well, though the Spondors seem to do it more noticeably, which is probably at least partly the result of their warmer presentation. They are also higher in output than the Harbeths between 80 and 400 Hz. Both speakers are clear, though the Harbeths seem clearer because of their comparatively leaner low end—with a greater degree of recovery from the BBC dip in the presence region—and their considerably more gradual rolloff of the highs. The Spondors render music as if it were "recollected in tranquility," while the Harbeths are closer to the immediacy and directness of a live performance. But there is no denying that the Spondors "took" me—I, who tend to prefer immediacy to recollection—before I heard the Harbeths. That is why I consider them the best Spondors.

The Spondor approach is safer in a mini. A warmer overall balance helps belie the necessarily reduced sense of scale and weight, and the narrowed bandwidth, though I should add that I don't really feel these limitations with chamber music and small jazz groups. The warmth of the 3/5s helps give a sense of increased spread and fullness. Cellos and basses play a bigger role through the Spondors than they do through the Harbeths. Poorly designed minis that don't take this approach—that try to maintain flatness through the upper mids—tend to spit and honk. The Harbeths, needless to say, do neither, which makes the HP3s very impressive. They are better reflections of what recordings truly sound like, which makes them better "monitors." They are also more exciting. However, they are not always as entirely pleasing as the Spondors. The Spondors are clearly brilliant compromises. They hold violins and brass back a little to maintain a more even balance with cellos, which minis can't get all of. The Harbeths are not willing to compromise quite so much. They occasionally shout just a little, but they almost always tell you more about the music and the performance than the Spondors. The Spondors win friends easily, while the Harbeths are less charming, but smarter, more direct, and more sophisticated. The Spondors' charm is genuine, the Harbeths' directness sometimes brings with a shock of candor. Again, this is less evident on the larger Harbeths, which have a fuller range to work with.

Over the course of several weeks, I predictably (for me) developed a preference for the HP3s. I love the crispness and clarity of live music as well as its airiness and warmth, and hate to trade one for the other. I listen to music to get excited rather than soothed. I heard a bit more bite in the cello on the Schumann trio, and the piano was more brilliant. The Nielsen was a little leaner, but the violins were clearer and the orchestral texture was more interesting. Wayne Shorter's sax was crisper and Danilo Perez' piano rang clearer. The clavichord on the C.P.E. Bach was a bit less pretty, but I felt I could hear down into its little body farther. Tony Rice's picking had more crispness to go with his band's drive. Individual instruments sounded more real, the whole sounded less blended. What part of your anatomy do you listen with? We are talking about a matter of taste here, folks, not about superiority or inferiority.

This has been fun, but not too many folks will be playing minis in a 5000-cubic-foot room or with top-of-the-line electronics and Valhalla cable. As I said, I started this review that way because I thought it would tell me more about the sound of these speakers. Now it is time to return to earth.

Small room, reasonable gear

My backup room for this audition is 12 feet by 24, with an 8-foot ceiling. The floor is covered with wall-to-wall carpet over slab. On the walls, close by, are floor-to-ceiling books on the listener's left, dry wall on the right. The speakers were now around 6 feet apart, 3 feet from each side wall, and 5 feet from the front wall. The front end remained the Naim CDS2, for consistency and because I was not been able to get a more reasonably-priced CD player here in time. Amps were the 50-watt Blue Circle CS and an Australian Redgum 120-watter (\$1800), both solid state, the latter here just in time for the review, and a very handsome, compact component. Both pairs of speakers, with their very low sensitivity, need more power than the CS has to offer, but even in the larger room, when the volume knob was turned up pretty far, I never

felt any sense of strain, and on most recordings the music was loud enough for my taste. Interconnects and speaker cable were Stage III Baron, which stepped in ably for the Valhalla, no small accomplishment at their price (the ICs are \$200/meter pair, the speaker cable \$600/two-meter pair). Power cords were TG SLVR into undedicated wall sockets.

No real surprises. The Space Thing was considerably reduced, but the issue of scale disappeared altogether. The system filled the room comfortably and persuasively, with plenty of sound. The CS' 50 watts still favored the slightly more sensitive and warmer 3/5s over the HP3s, but the Redgum's 120 watts made both speakers notably more dynamic and detailed. A fine little powerhouse for a little less than twice the money, and given the insensitivity of both speakers, a more natural choice. I left the Redgum in the system for most of the audition.

The fundamental differences between the speakers did not change in the smaller room, or on the less sophisticated electronics and cable. Both, with their BBC dip in the upper mids, anticipated the boundary effects, so there was no noticeable boost from wall or ceiling reflections. The Spondors remained the warmer and more comely speakers, taking some of the defining edges off strings and giving the sense of a warm and reverberant listening venue, putting the listener in rows 10-15. The Harbeths remained more exciting, revealing more detail and revealing the defining edges of strings, keeping me on the edge of my seat, in row 3.

Conclusions

In a large room, I prefer the scale, bandwidth, ease, authority, and downright beauty of my Monitor 40s by far, and I would not trade them for either of these fine little creatures, despite their ability to do the Space Thing. I do not consider minis an alternative to an M40-based system if you have the room. No real news there. More to the point, faced with a smaller room and a reasonable budget, I would think long and hard about these two little minis, with their ability to produce a very satisfactory version of live music. With the same space and another \$1000 or so to spend, I might well stretch to a Harbeth Compact 7, which I have also auditioned in this room. Bigger is better, when it's a Harbeth. I liked the HP3s a lot, and would be entirely happy with them in a room that would make the 7s unreasonable. I preferred the HP3s to the S3/5s, but they are not the best Harbeths. As I said, I think the S3/5s may be the most satisfying, best-balanced iteration of the Spondor philosophy. Clearly it's possible to get music for less than a zillion dollars if you've got the right audio designer on the project.

Spondor S3/5

Retail: \$899 (plus \$249 for Sound Anchor stands)

QS&D

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Harbeth HP3ES

Retail: \$1129 (plus \$249 for Sound Anchor stands)

Winter Tree Audio

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