

DECEMBER 2003

HARBETH MONITOR 30

Hi-Fi for Grownups - Part Deux

Are you a regular [Audio Asylum](#) reader? Then you may have read my coverage back in January 2003, of the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics and Home Entertainment Shows, or CES and T.H.E. Show respectively. I'd been particularly impressed with the [Harbeth](#) and [Art Audio](#) room in the San Remo where Harbeth US importer Walter Swanbon of [Fidelis](#) and Joe Fratus of Art Audio had teamed up for a combination of Art Audio's Jota stereo SET amp (about 20 watts), the Art Audio VPS-DM preamplifier, a Naim CD player, a Nottingham Space Deck turntable, and various Harbeth loudspeakers. I was particularly impressed by the two Harbeth loudspeakers on alternate display: The *Super HL5* and the *Monitor 30*. I stopped back in Walter's and Joe's room several more times before the show ended and awarded podium finish to Harbeth & Art Audio as one of my top three favorite systems at CES and T.H.E Show. That's quite an accomplishment for a system at any price, and a rather enormous feat for the \$3,195 Harbeth Monitor 30 and \$3,495 Harbeth Super HL5, which I thought performed better 'in show' than loudspeakers costing many times their price. And I wasn't the only showgoer duly impressed: This room was so packed with visitors that one had to be patient to get in for a good listen [or get the key from Joe and do some damage after hours - *Ed*]. Joe's and Walter's room was an audio oasis in the desert of Las Vegas. [Amen, brother - *Ed*.]

One of the things to keep in mind when cruising the halls of trade shows? It can be a daunting task to get a system to sound good in the sonically challenged hotel rooms available. True, a bad-sounding system at these shows doesn't condemn the equipment - an owner likely would get superior sound in his home. However, it's also true that if folks manage to get their gear sounding *really* good in those same crappy hotel rooms, it likely will be a breeze to set it up and have it sound great in *your* home listening room. Given the stellar sound I heard Harbeth make in Las Vegas, I wanted to find out more about these loudspeakers. I contacted Walter Swanbon and he arranged for a pair of \$3,195 Harbeth Monitor 30s for review.



For those of you not familiar with Harbeth, they've been around for over 25 years, quietly but prolifically making loudspeakers in the BBC tradition at their headquarters in Lindfield, England. Harbeth builds loudspeakers for professional monitoring applications as well as home HiFi use. The Monitor 30 reviewed is part of the home HiFi series and a wood-veneered version of the Mastering Series pro monitoring speakers. The Monitor 30 is a ported two-way with the same RADIAL™ woofer and SEAS Excel tweeter as the top-line Monitor 40. The 30's cabinet measures 10.7/8 x 10.7/8 x 18 inches W x D x H and needs to be stand-mounted to put the tweeter at ear level in the listening position. Walter handily provided a pair of the superb \$500 Atlantis Reference 24XL speaker stands, too. The Atlantis stands are of very sturdy metal construction and worked perfectly to elevate the tweeters at ear height in my somewhat taller than usual listening seat. The 24XLs are made from high-carbon steel and use four 3x3 inch pillars that can be shot or sand-filled to reduce resonances. They arrive with spikes to secure stands to floor after you've got the in-room speaker positioning sorted out.

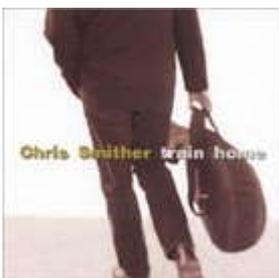
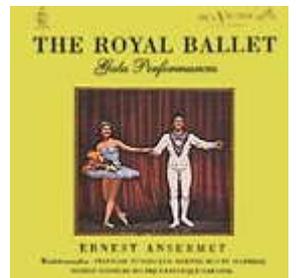
I ended up evaluating the Harbeth Monitor 30s in two amplification contexts,



with originally just planning on the Naim NAC 112/NAP 150 pre/power combo (\$1,250 + \$1,550) which I just [reviewed](#) and which you should rightly consider Part I of the Harbeth review. However, in a wild-hair moment, I also hooked up my 3-watt Fi 2A3 SET monos (\$2,950/pr) with the \$5,200 Tom Evans Design Vibe preamplifier. Normally, I am too sane to even think of hooking up a 3-watt micro-power SET to an 85dB (in)sensitive loudspeaker, telegraphing to one and all a rather absurdly mismatched pairing. Alas, with the words of Déjà Vu Audio's intrepid Vu Hoang echoing with remonstrance in my memory -- "You just never know until you try whether a SET-speaker combination will work or not; and the results may sometimes surprise you" -- I felt compelled to give it a try. Guess what? The Fis and Harbeths worked fine together. But more on that in a minute. First, let me mention the same source components used on either setup: A Meridian 508.20 CD player both in stand-alone mode and as transport for the mighty Audio Logic 2400 vacuum tube DAC; and the impressive Magnum Dynalab MD-90 Triode FM tuner from Canada still in for review. Ok, let's start talking 3-watt absurdity wired together with Cardas Golden Reference interconnects and speaker cables. I really thought hard about whether I should even report on my results. It seems a rather grotesque proposition altogether. That is, until you listen to it, at which point you say "Wow, that really sounds good", which was *exactly* the dumbfounded reaction of visiting TAS writer Stephæn Harrell.

But be forewarned: My present listening room is of moderate size, and Stephæn and I both tend to listen at lower volume levels than many. Our average listening levels during his visit were in the mid-70dB range, something with which I am perfectly content. However, if you listen a lot louder than that, look for an amplifier like the Naim, with more muscle.

Do you have a favorite classical performance? One of mine is *The Royal Ballet Gala Performances* under Ernest Ansermet [Classic LDSCD 6065] laden with grand old chestnuts: "The Nutcracker Suite Op. 71a"; "La Boutique Fantastique"; "Coppélia"; "Giselle"; "Swan Lake"; "Carnaval"; "The Sleeping Beauty"; "Opus 66a"; and "Les Sylphides". There isn't a clunker on this two disc set. Take Tchaikovsky's great "Nutcracker" ballet: About a minute and a half into it, there's an electrifying contribution from the strings that sweeps from right to left across the soundstage. That little number is repeated numerous times throughout the piece and never fails to raise goose bumps. It's the musical equivalent of an adrenaline rush - swoosh! The Harbeths capture the tone of strings in exemplary fashion, with just the right amount of rosy texture to make recordings life-like in the musical sense. And that's a treat. No steely and wiry strings here, these are the real deal. Classical lovers take note: You'll be hard-pressed to find better string tone anywhere.



The Monitor 30s pass on the full thrill of a performance with a musically natural level of resolution. However, listen closely and you'll notice that they don't resolve the last little bit of detail, air and space which I know the Fi-Vibe combo to be capable of. This doesn't impact the musical message and actually makes long listening sessions both relaxing and refreshing. Case in point - as I was working on the review draft, I had put on Chris Smither's *Train Home* [Hightone Records HCD 8158] and played it through three times before coming up for air. I didn't even think about friggin' sound or equipment once that entire time. I was just grooving to Chris singing and playing his Collings acoustic guitar, oblivious to sound and equipment which, in the end, is one of the greatest compliments you can bestow on any loudspeaker. I was focused on Chris' guitar playing and the meaning of his lyrics, thinking about how much I like his take on life's absurdities, how well he communicates that in his music.

I really wonder if most HiFi buffs have ever listened to an album all the way through, let alone three times in row. If you've never been guilty of such self-forgetfulness, it probably means that the *sound* of your gear is screwing up the message of the music. You should donate it to Wiley Coyote for explosives practice, then get something that can draw you into the music and *keep* you there.

Just for kicks, I thought it would be fun to directly compare the little 85dB Harbeths with the big 103dB+ Avantgarde Duos, about as different in sensitivity and speaker size as one could get! It was an interesting exercise, the outcome a little unexpected. Take image size and dynamics for example: Avantgardes are known for their life-size images and dynamic prowess, which you would expect given their size and highly efficient horns. What was unexpected? The little Harbeths had an image sized nearly the equal of the horns. Not! Yes, 'twas so! Okay, the image size of the Harbeths *was* a little smaller but not by much - quite some stunt, for a small two-way monitor loudspeaker to sound like a big speaker. The Duos kicked the Harbeths' fanny in dynamics as you would expect, but that's not a criticism. It's the same outcome with *any* box speaker going up against the Duos. Having said that, if you don't have a pair of Duos in your listening room to compare against, you'll likely think the Harbeth dynamics just fine - which they are.

