

THE HARBETH MONITOR 30

"HI-FI FOR GROWNUPS PART DEUX"

If you're a regular reader at the Audio Asylum (www.audioasylum.com), you may have read my coverage back in January 2003 of the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) and The Home Entertainment (THE) Show in Las Vegas. I told the AA regulars that I was particularly impressed with the Harbeth (www.harbeth.co.uk) and Art Audio (www.artaudio.com) room in the San Remo that Walter Swanbon of Fidelis (www.fidelisav.com) - the US importer for Harbeth - and Joe Fratus of Art Audio teamed on. Walter and Joe were using the combination of the Art Audio Jota stereo amp (about 20 watts), an Art Audio preamplifier, a Naim CD player, a Nottingham Space Deck turntable, and various Harbeth loudspeakers. I was particularly impressed by the two Harbeth loudspeakers I heard: the Super HLS and the Monitor 30. I stopped back into Walter's and Joe's room several more times before the end of the show. I awarded a podium finish to Harbeth & Art Audio as being one of my top three favorite systems at CES and THE Show. That's quite an accomplishment for a system at any price, and an enormous accomplishment for the \$3195 Harbeth Monitor 30 and \$3495 Harbeth Super HL5 loudspeakers, which I thought performed "in show" better than loudspeakers costing many times their price. And I wasn't the only show goer so impressed: Joe's and Walter's room was so packed with visitors that one had to be patient to get in for a good listen. Joe's and Walter's room was an audio oasis in the desert of Las Vegas.

One of the things that you have to keep in mind when cruising the halls of CES or THE Show is that it can be a daunting task to get a system sounding good in the crappy sounding hotel rooms that are used for listening rooms in Las Vegas. It is true that a bad sounding system at the shows doesn't condemn the equipment being shown, because an owner would likely be able to get it sounding good in a superior home listening environment. However, it's also true that if folks can get gear sounding really good in those same crappy hotel rooms, it is likely to be a breeze setting it up and getting it to sound great in your listening room at home. Given the great sound I heard in Las Vegas from Harbeth, I wanted to find out more about their loudspeakers. I contacted Walter Swanbon, and he arranged for a pair of the \$3195 Harbeth Monitor 30 loudspeakers for a 6Moons review.

For those of you who aren't familiar with Harbeth, they've been around for over 25 years, quietly and prolifically making loudspeakers in the BBC tradition at their headquarters in Lindfield, England. Harbeth makes loudspeakers for professional monitoring applications and home hi-fi use. The Monitor 30 reviewed here is part of the home hi-fi series and is a wood veneered version of the Mastering Series pro monitoring speakers. The Monitor 30 is a ported two-way, and uses the same RADIAL™ woofer and SEAS Excel tweeter as the top of the line Monitor 40. The Monitor 30's cabinet measures 10^{7/8} x 10^{7/8} x 18 inches (w x d x h), and they need to be mounted on stands that put the tweeters at ear level in the listening position. Walter also provided a pair of the superb \$500 Atlantis Reference 24XL speaker stands to use during the Monitor 30 review. The Atlantis stands are of very sturdy metal construction and worked perfectly to put the tweeters at ear height in my somewhat

taller than usual listening seat. The 24XL's are made from high-carbon steel and have four three-inch by three-inch pillars that can be shot or sand filled to reduce resonances. They come with spikes that can be inserted into the bottom of the stands to secure them to the floor after you get the positioning sorted out.

I ended up evaluating the performance of the Harbeth Monitor 30s in two amplification contexts. Originally I had just planned on using just the Naim NAC 112 preamplifier (\$1250) and the 50 watt Naim NAP 150 power amplifier (\$1550) for the review, which you can read about in the Naim 112/150 review here at 6Moons <http://www.6moons.com/audioreviews/naim/prepow.html>, and which you should rightly consider to be part one of the Harbeth Monitor 30 review. However, in a wildhair moment I also tried hooking up my 3 watt Fi 2A3 monoblock SET amplifiers (\$2950) with Tom Evans Design Vibe preamplifier (\$5200). Normally I wouldn't even think of hooking up a 3 watt SET amplifier to an 85 dB sensitive loudspeaker. It seems to be a rather absurd pairing, but with the words of Vu Hoang - owner of Ddja vu Audio - echoing in my memory, "you just never know until you try an SET-speaker combination whether it will work or not - and the results can sometimes be surprising" I decided to give it a try. Guess what? The Fi's and the Harbeths work fine together - but more on that in a minute. For both systems I used the same source components: a Meridian 508.20 CD player both in stand-alone mode and as a transport for the mighty Audio Logic 2400 vacuum tube DAC, and the impressive Magnum Dynalab MD-90 Triode FM tuner from Canada that I had in for review.

Ok, let's start with the absurd by talking about the Harbeth's in the context of the 3 watt Fi 2A3 monoblocks, the Tom Evans Design Vibe preamplifier, the Meridian 508.20 CD player used as a transport for the Audio Logic 2400 vacuum tube DAC, and all wired together with Cardas Golden Reference interconnects and speaker cables. I really thought hard about whether I should even report on my results using the 3 watt Fi amps with the 85 dB sensitive Monitor 30's. I mean it seems rather absurd, at least until you listen to them together, and at which point you say "Wow, that really sounds good," which was exactly the reaction of visiting TAS writer Stephaen Harrell. But be forewarned: my present listening room is of moderate size, and Stephaen and I both tend to listen at lower volume levels than a lot of people. The average listening levels during Stephaen's visit were in the mid-700 range, with which I am perfectly content. If you listen a lot louder than that, look elsewhere for an amplifier with more muscle, like the afore referenced Naim.

Do you have a favorite classical performance? One of my favorites is The Royal Ballet Gala Performances under the direction of Ernest Anserment (Classic LDSCD 6065). It's got some grand old chestnuts: The Nutcracker Suite Op. 71 a, La Boutique Fantasque, Coppelia, Giselle, Swan Lake, Carnaval, The Sleeping Beauty, op. 66a, and Les Sylphides. There isn't a clunker on the two discs. Take the Nutcracker, the great Tchaikovsky ballet, as an example: About a minute and a half into the piece there is an electrifying contribution from the strings that sweeps from right to left across the soundstage. That little number is repeated numerous times in the piece and never fails to raise goose bumps on me! It's the musical equivalent of an adrenalin rush - swoosh!

The Harbeth's capture the tone of strings in exemplary fashion, with just the right amount of rosin texture being present to make recordings life-like in the musical sense, and that's a treat. No steely and wiry strings here, they're the real deal - classical lovers take note - you'll be hard pressed to find better string tone anywhere.

The Monitor 30's let the full thrill of a performance come straight through with a musically natural level of resolution intact. However, if you listen closely you'll notice that the Monitor 30's don't pass on the last little bit of detail, air and space that the FiVibe combo is capable of. It doesn't impact the message of the music, and actually makes long listening sessions both relaxing and refreshing. As a case in point, as I was working on the draft for the review 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 the fricking sound or equipment the entire time. I was just grooving to Chris singing and playing his Collings acoustic guitar, and I totally forgot about the sound and the equipment, which is one of the greatest compliments you can bestow on any loudspeakers. I was focused on Chris's guitar playing and the meaning of his lyrics, and thinking about how much I like his take on life's absurdities, and how well he communicates that in his music. I really wonder if most hi-fi buffs have ever listened to an album all the way through, let alone three times in row. If you've never done that, it probably means the `sound' of your gear is screwing up the message of the music, and you should donate it to Wiley Coyote for explosives practice, and then get something that can draw you into the music.

Just for kicks I thought it would be fun to directly compare the little 85dB sensitive Harbeth's with the big 110dB sensitive Avantgarde Duos - about as different in sensitivity and speaker size as you can get! It was an interesting exercise, and the outcome was a little unexpected. Take image size and dynamics for example: Avantgarde's are known for their life-size images and dynamic prowess, which you would expect given the size of the speakers and the fact they are highly efficient horns. What was unexpected was that the little Harbeths have an image size nearly the equal of the big Duos! Not! Yes it's so! The image size of the Harbeth's is a little smaller, but not by much. It is quite a feat for a small two-way monitor loudspeaker to sound like a big speaker. The Duos kicked the Harbeth's fanny in dynamics as you would expect, but that is not a criticism of the Harbeths per se, it's the same outcome with any box enclosure loudspeaker when going up against the Duos. Having said that, if you don't have a pair of Duos in your listening room to compare to, you'll likely think the Harbeths dynamics are just fine, which they are.

The Duos bring the performance a little closer to you in perspective than the Harbeth's, and they are both smoother and more detailed sounding overall. The Harbeths sound more extended in the high frequencies, and they are according to the results I got with a Radio Shack sound level meter and the Stereophile Test CD 2: The Duos' tweeters sign off above 16 kHza somewhere (the next frequency step on the CD is 20K at which the Duo's tweets don't register at all), and the Harbeths keep on sailing up to 20 kHz It's another story with the low frequencies, as the Duos can go flat down to 20 Hz, whereas the Harbeth's start rolling off pretty quick after 50 Hz, and are down 16 dB at 20 Hz. But think about that for a minute, the Harbeth's still go down to 20 Hz, and with the 3 watt Fi amplifier! I guess that sort of amazes me, but that's not all: the Harbeth's are down only 10 db at 31.5 Hz. What that means is the deep bass is not MIA, but rather peeking out at you discreetly from a distance. So here's the take home story: the Harbeths do well in terms of bass extension for a small two-way speaker, and when you are listening you never notice anything missing.

I really like the fingerstyle guitar album *LJ Plays the Beatles* (Solid Air Records SACD2001) by Lawrence Juber, former Wings lead guitarist. LJ was asked by Paul McCartney to play lead guitar for Wings back in 1978. So you could say that next to one of the Beatles themselves - or in this case Paul McCartney - LJ may have more insight into the `feel' of the Beatles music than any other guitar player around. On this all acoustic set of fingerstyle guitar solos, LJ plays fourteen Beatles gems in inspired arrangements of his own. LJ uses DADGAD tuning on most of the songs, CGDGAD on two songs, and standard tuning on four of the songs. i,j's playing is spectacular. Through the Harbeths the artistry of Juber's

fingerstyle guitar technique is full of life and musical color. There is a percussive nature to LJ's playing, and a note-by-note dynamic reactivity that keeps me in continual state of surprise and awe as I listen. The Monitor 30s slightly soften and round the sound of the guitar, warming it up a little in comparison to real life, albeit in a way that is entirely consonant with the music. Every time I listen to "Let It Be" I am in awe at the emotiveness that LJ is able to evoke with his playing. Listening to "Let It Be" through the Monitor 30s is the auditory equivalent of viewing a beautiful sunset: there is a cheering warmth of color, a beautiful interplay of light and dark elements, and a sense of awe and reverence at a wondrous moment of beauty.

I experimented with several speaker placements during the review period. I placed the speakers about 6 to 7 feet apart depending on their distance from the front wall, and at positions approximately 24, 36, and 59 inches out into the room, toed in to the listening position so that only the front baffle could be seen. The Harbeths sounded good and transmitted the musical message everywhere I placed them in the room, but they were at their best when placed further out into the room at 36 or 59 inches. With the Fi & Vibe combination they were impressive in a near field listening setup with the rear of the cabinet 59 inches from the front wall with the speakers 7 feet apart, and with 7.5 feet to the listening position. When using the Naim NAC 112 preamplifier and NAP 150 amplifier, I placed the Harbeths 36 inches into the room from the front wall and the soundstage really opened up over the 24 inch position to give a nice layered effect from front to back with well localized and solid life-like images.

Let's talk about the Fi-Vibe combination versus the Naim 112-150 combination for a moment. There's no question in my mind that the Fi-Vibe combo *sounds* better than the Naim combo through the Harbeths, and it plays music very well too. When played through the Avantgarde Duos the Fi-Vibe combination is spellbinding: the added resolution, soundstaging, dynamics, and expanded palette of tonal colors make it the most satisfying system I have ever owned. Yet in terms of the Monitor 30s, the Naim plays music better through them, and in a more engaging fashion than does the Fi-Vibe combo. There are some combinations of gear that are magic together, where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts: ProAc 2.5 loudspeakers and Cary 805C amplifiers, Merlin loudspeakers and Joule Electra amplifiers, and Cain & Cain loudspeakers and Art Audio amplifiers to name a few. Add to that list the Harbeth Monitor 30 loudspeakers and the Naim 112-150 combination - its magic!

You really ought to go read the Naim 112-150 review (<http://www.6moons.com/audioreviews/naim/prepow.html>)_here at 6Moons when you get done reading this review to get the full scoop on how well the Naim gear works with the Harbeth Monitor 30s. TAS-meister Stephane Harrell described the Harbeth-Naim combo as soft, warm, and propulsive during a recent visit. He's exactly right. And believe me it can be an addictive combination. There were times during the review process when only a Harbeth-Naim fling could assuage my musical desires. Then after a bit I would go back to my Duo-Fi-Vibe combo and be carried away to musical bliss by its charms. Oh, the sweet torture of it all.

The character of the Harbeth Monitor 30's is to the warm side of neutral, and they are slightly dark sounding. This effect is more pronounced with the Naim components than it is with the Fi & Vibe combination, which is more brightly lit. Whether paired with the Naim components or the Fi & Vibe, the Harbeths are a bit soft sounding. In Harbeth's marketing brochure the Monitor 30 is described as being warm, involving and having "super resolution". I would say that they are indeed warm and involving, but as for super resolution I

would say not really. Good resolution yes, super resolution no, as they don't allow all the information to come through that the Fi & Vibe are capable of displaying.

Paired with the Naim components the Harbeths have a tremendous melodic and rhythmic sophistication that bests what I have heard from any other hi-fi rig. Stephaen was a little troubled by the Harbeth's bass response, thinking it was a little over blown. "Definitely out of balance with rest of the spectrum" says he. "There's an emphasis that calls attention to itself and becomes fatiguing." "Also, I like my bottoms ... erm ... my bass tighter and leaner than many." Me, I wasn't bothered by the bass response; instead feeling it gave a little extra oomph to the rhythmic drive of the loudspeakers. We were able to minimize what was troubling Stephaen by spiking the stands and adding small rubber pads to each corner for the speaker to rest on, and we did this without compromising their rhythmic prowess. I think filling the stands with sand probably would have minimized it even further, but I thought they sounded so good I didn't bother.

Harbeth had very specific design goals for their monitoring loudspeakers like the Monitor 30. They want their monitoring speakers to have a high level of clarity, a sense of spaciousness, and low coloration. They also want them to be natural sounding and easy to live with during long sessions in the studio, and to be balanced across the frequency spectrum. Finally, Harbeth wanted their monitors to have high value for their price. That's a pretty ambitious list of goals. So how does the report card turn out? I'd say Harbeth largely accomplished their design goals. The Harbeth's possess clarity, but perhaps not über alles levels of resolution. They are slightly colored in that they are somewhat warm sounding, which serves the music and beats lean sounding every time in my book. They are also easy on the ears in long listening sessions. As an important bonus you get the entire musical message portrayed convincingly at low listening volumes, something few loudspeakers seem to be able to manage, and something that is an important factor for me. You'll have to listen for yourself to decide whether or not you think the Monitor 30's are truly balanced across the frequency spectrum. They can put out a prodigious amount of bass for what is essentially a small two-way loudspeaker. I would tend to say the Monitor 30's are cannily balanced in the bass, and you can get them dialed into your tastes with a little careful positioning and setup. They also sound really good in off axis listening, so they are user friendly from a listening perspective, and don't force you to listen with your "head in a vice" like some loudspeakers do. Price is a subjective thing, and \$3195 for loudspeakers and \$500 for stands isn't chump change in real world terms, but I'd say the Monitor 30's have a lot of value for their price. They are of course a bargain when compared to the ridiculous price of most "high end" loudspeakers.

Who should consider buying the Monitor 30's? People who know what music sounds like and spend a lot of time listening to music are first on the list. Also, those in audiophile burnout with gear that is designed to emphasize "sound" should consider the Monitor 30 a good place to stop and get off the "high end" merry-go-round. The truth is that a lot of "high end" equipment is really expensive, poorly designed, and bad sounding crap that can't play music as well as a clock radio. The Harbeth is the antithesis of that: it is relatively affordable, and is designed to an extremely high standard, with a pro-level build quality that will last as long as you will. It also sounds great and plays music believably well. In the Naim review I worried that the hi-fi sound freaks wouldn't get the Naim gear, and I wonder the same thing about the Harbeth Monitor 30. But I get it. And music lovers will get it. So will musicians. Like Naim, the Harbeth Monitor 30 is hi-fi gear designed for people with more in their life than just audio.

The Harbeth's make music a no-fuss part of life, allowing the listener to enjoy a wide variety of music at varying levels of recording quality and still get the full musical wallop. During the

review period they delivered the musical goods every time I called upon them. They are also surprisingly amplifier tolerant for their sensitivity rating, so if you want to experiment with SETs you can. **Highly recommended for grownups everywhere!**