

EQUIPMENT REPORT

Harbeth SHL5 Loudspeaker

Robert E. Greene



There has always been magic in the BBC-inspired two-cubic-foot box. Thirty years ago, when TAS was new, Harbeth's sister company Spondor (both companies were derived from BBC research) had already brought out the BC-1, a speaker offering unprecedented neutrality in a two-cubic-foot box. (HP dubbed the BC-1 "the one and only.") No mid/bass driver of decades ago had the performance of Harbeth's custom mid/bass for the SHL5. Progress has been made. But the basics of acoustic loading do not change, and it is reassuring that here this new driver technology is appearing in the traditional one foot by one foot by two foot box. And once again, there is that old midrange magic, more than ever.

The SHL5 even has the same two-tweeter configuration of its ancestors, although in this case the top tweeter doesn't just extend the response to 20kHz but actually considerably into the ultrasonic region to accommodate the extended top end of the new digital formats (and incidentally of analog vinyl). The SHL5s are part of the Harbeth line intended for home use, as opposed to the M series, which is a line of monitor speakers (though the M series are admirable for home use themselves). The difference is that the SHL5s have a certain relaxation in the region between 2kHz and 4kHz, with a return to level above that, whereas the M series are

essentially ruler-flat across this region.

This dip in the region of maximum hearing sensitivity tempers aggressive recordings, and arguably makes the speaker more agreeable over a wider range of material, though I personally prefer the M40's behavior in this regard. In any case, the dip gives the SHL5's sound a certain character in the treble.

The SHL5 naturally does not plumb the deepest depths of bass, but with a 3dB-down point of 40Hz, it goes deep enough to provide orchestral music with a good foundation. And if you feel the need for subterranean bass, a super-system could be made by adding a subwoofer crossing over around 50Hz or so.

The midrange of the SHL5 is its glory. To my ears, the Harbeth mid/bass driver, made of its proprietary RADIAL material, is the best dynamic midrange driver there is, and it surely sounds that way here. (This is actually a new generation of the RADIAL material, which is supposed to be even smoother than the driver in the original Compact 7, and it surely is smooth, indeed.) Human voice is triumphantly reproduced, and instrumental midrange timbre is close to flawless. The RADIAL driver material is intended to minimize materials-based coloration. Metal drivers tend to sound metallic, ceramic drivers ceramic (think of tapping on a plate), and so on. RADIAL is supposed to sound like nothing at all, and that is exactly what it sounds like to my ears. I would like to think that everyone already knew about this from my earlier reviews of the Compact 7 and Monitor 40 Harbeths. But considering that a recent review of the Compact 7 in another magazine repeatedly stated that it had a polypropylene driver, I thought that a reminder might be in order.

The midrange of the SHL5 is not only uncolored but also very articulate without being in the least aggressive. "Articulate" can all too often be a sort of audiophile euphemism for forward or even nasty, but not here. The sound is just clean and clear by nature with no price being paid in any excessive bite. And like other good speakers, the SHL5 has carefully controlled cabinet radiation and minimized diffraction so that it sounds very unboxy. Properly set up the SHL5s do a superb disappearing act.

If you have never heard a Harbeth/RADIAL speaker, then what I have been saying may sound a bit like audiophile boilerplate: clean, uncolored, unboxy, neutral midrange, blah-de-blah. But there is a very real

difference here from other carefully designed mid-sized box speakers. The SHL5 is itself very well designed in every sense, with Harbeth's usual attention to detail and its flawless quality control. In addition, the SHL5 has something that other, non-Harbeth speakers do not: this remarkable mid/bass driver. No matter how good one's crossover design and how well-made one's cabinet, the sound you hear is ultimately the sound that the drivers make. And the Harbeth /RADIAL driver makes music all but uniquely well.

Harbeth is getting an extensive dealer network in the U.S., and you probably can hear the SHL5 without an excessively long trip. It is well worth the effort. Even if you're not in the market for a speaker of this particular size and price, you ought to listen to it just to explore one direction of the boundaries of the possible. And if you are looking for a middle-sized box speaker, then an audition is doubly indispensable. The SHL5 may look a bit old-fashioned—and, in a sense, it is the continuation of a long and honorable tradition—but what comes out partakes of the old-fashioned not at all in any negative sense. With a good enough mid/bass driver, there is life left in the conventional box two-way. And the driver here is at the top of the heap. The world is full of middle-sized box speakers. But only Harbeths can sound like this.

Specifications

Driver Complement: 8" Harbeth RADIAL bass driver, 1" SEAS aluminum-dome tweeter, 0.8" Audax titanium dome tweeter

Frequency response: 40Hz–24kHz

Sensitivity: 86dB

Impedance: 8 ohms

Dimensions: 12.6" x 25.1" x 11.8"

Weight: 39 lbs. each

Manufacturer Information

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Price: \$3895/pair