

Harbeth Monitor 40

Review by Bob Neill

There was a time, which may still be the time for many of you, when I believed that the escape from the cruel hyperbola of rising expense & expectations outstripping real progress toward the Y-axis of the absolute sound was either the Spondor SP 1/2 or the Harbeth Compact 7. Harbeth speakers are not as well known in the US as Spondors but the knowledge gap is closing rapidly now that they once again have a North American importer.

The Spondor offers the pleasures of polypropylene - which are very real. The SP1/2's may be the most affecting and solicitous speakers available for under \$5,000. This wins friends easily. The only price you pay for their appeal is the predictable loss of absolute articulateness through the mids, rolled off highs, and the lack of true bass foundation - the combination resulting in a slight sense of reserve which Mr. Riekert has assured us can be mitigated with the right sort of push-pull amp. Many folks happily pay this price and who could blame them? The Spondors were the first speaker to win my heart. And yes, I have heard BC 1's and yes, I believe that the SP 1/2's are better. BC 1's play viola to the SP 1/2's violin.

The Harbeth offers, in lieu of comeliness, the equally compelling appeal of truthfulness - and not starchy, lab coat truth but concert hall/jazz club truth. Harbeths are not analytic sounding speakers. They are wonderfully natural, clear, and warm through the midrange. This quality is especially noticeable on the human voice which these speakers were designed to reproduce. They have what may be the most articulate and authoritative bass available in a 21-inch monitor. And they have great dynamics and energy. Price? A trace of dryness in the upper mids. If this "blemish" is a problem for you, you may have to try the Monitor 30's which have a better tweeter, are less sensitive, and cost another \$600-700. (I have not heard the 30's and they will not be available in the US until autumn, at the earliest.)



Upsides

Truth or beauty, beauty or truth. If you like the BBC monitor sound - if that is 'the sound you do not hear,' that to your ears has no voice of its own - and if you want (or have) to fight the good fight against the inverse ratio of increasing costs and true value added, these are your speakers. Take 'em home, stands and all, for under \$3,000 a pair.

But if you want to trump the truth/beauty dilemma, have around \$6400, a big room (mine is 5000 cubic feet), and at least 100-150 serious watts, here I got the speakers for you! Allan Shaw's current top-of-the-line is the three-way Harbeth Monitor 40, his premier studio monitor in domestic garb. It is LARGE (30" x 17" x 16"), heavy (88 pounds), and (relatively) difficult to drive (84 dB/6 ohms). It is also the best sounding BBC monitor I have heard. It is the best speaker I have ever heard, period. It has full and authoritative bass, thanks to a 12-inch woofer that crosses over at 200 Hz. It has the most naturally clear, articulate, and tonally accurate midrange I've heard, thanks to a patented material called "Radial" which Shaw himself has designed to replace polypropylene. (This material is also used in the midrange/woofer of the Compact 7's.) "Polypropylene eats detail," says Shaw. The highs are gorgeous, thanks to SEAS top of the line Excel soft dome tweeter (also available in the Monitor 30, which is essentially the top 2/3 of the 40). In addition to these specific virtues, the 40's are utterly coherent and produce a realistic sense of scale - that only a large room can do justice to.

The overall presentation of the M40's is realistically warm, full, smooth, detailed, and slightly laid back. With the right electronics, there is plenty of spatial immediacy but the music is out in the orchestra where it belongs and essentially between the speakers - though, to be fair, I tend to place my speakers wide apart and aim them that directly at me. If you are accustomed to a speaker that has more reach out into the room - the ebullient ProAc 2.5's or the almost surround sound Audio Physic's Virgos - you may find the M40's too reserved. If you remember the extraordinary if somewhat unrealistic pinpoint imaging qualities of the active Meridian M2's with their small, narrow faced cabinets, you would find the M40's adequate but undramatic as imagers. All of this said, what makes these speakers engaging despite their lack of dramatic spatial display, is their extraordinary tonal accuracy, which can be uncanny. Have you ever been abducted by a clarinet? I have. Spondors engage us by a general overall lyrical quality that seems to bless everything that passes through them; the Harbeth Monitor 40's engage us one instrument at a time, building a sense of confidence that what you are hearing is absolutely what went on before the microphones. A very interesting difference which tends to grow on you. Harbeths do not take you by storm. They play no tricks, they 'feature' no one aspect of the performance or its reproduction. To me, this is clearly the way it is supposed to be, but which, until now, it has never quite been.



Downsides?

Again, you must have at least 100-150 solid watts of power AND a very good preamp - one with a serious power supply, or the M40's can be too bassy. I find that electronics are more critical in this area than room position and stand height, though they do perform best away from boundaries and at least 12-16 inches off the floor. Twelve-inch woofers are twelve-inch woofers, as any Spondor SP 100 owner will attest to. When I switched from a Blue Circle BC 3 Despina preamp (smaller of two available power supplies) to the new AG 3000 with a huge one, low end clarity improved dramatically.

Also, if you like speakers with a little personality - if, even as a BBC monitor lover, you still want to hear your speakers, as many of us do, you may well find the M40's too unassuming. A friend of mine was reluctant to put it this way when he finally chose Spondor SP 100's over the Monitor 40's, but finally conceded that the Spondors' subtly affecting personality was definitely a factor. 'Ah, the irresistible joys of polypropylene bounce!' crows a friend in Northern Ontario. The Harbeths have their beauty - in fact, that was the characteristic I noticed first - but it is more knowing beauty. As Professor Greene will tell you, it is the 'beauty of reality,' not some other kind. And it tends to stay with you. (Greene's is the first and still definitive review of these speakers: *TAS*, #116, February, 1999.) Also, it is a beauty that must, in my experience to some extent, be conjured out by its accompanying electronics. Greene and Shaw both prefer all solid state electronics with their M40's but mine did not truly sing to me until I hooked them up to Blue Circle's latest tube/solid state hybrid monoblocks, the 150 watt AG 8000's. They were very decent on Blue Circle all solid state (and more powerful) BC 8's, but also a bit patrician. When the AG's went into the system, things truly began to happen. They sunk immediate and deep roots into my house - which sits on a cement slab!

I have not listened to many speakers that cost much more than the Monitor 40's retail \$6,400 (Dunlavys, B&W Nautilus 801s, some big Thiels, an Avalon or two), so I have no idea how well they'd stand up against richer competition. As I said earlier, I have yet to hear their equal in performance.

For the record, here is the system with which I am driving them.

Naim CDX/XPS CD player.

Blue Circle AG 3000 tubed preamplifier (true balanced)

Blue Circle AG 8000 hybrid 150 watt monoblocks (high biased A/B, balanced)

IC's are currently Nordost SPM; speaker cable is currently Staigtwire Virtuoso bi-wired. (Both Greene and Shaw insist single wiring is sufficient.)

Power cords are Electraglide; all components sit on Blue Circle isolation cones.

Monitor 40's sit on 12-inch Sound Anchors, "decoupled" with Blue Tak.

Note on Numerical Rating System: Enjoy the Music's rating system presents a challenge to a new reviewer, but I will try to meet it. One problem is that these speakers in particular resist this approach and it takes a great effort to attend to individual sonic parameters. Another problem is that when you score a component what you are really doing is creating a profile of its character; that is, adding up the points won't tell you which is best because some characteristics can only be optimized at the expense of others. Also, some are more important than others. Finally, looking over my new colleagues' score sheets, I sense great... well generosity. I am a former professor who considers a 90 a hellova good grade. And if a numerical scale is going to accommodate everything from Eidolons to Boses, we do need to make use of some numbers below 70. Cramming all gymnasts' performances between 9 points and 10 points is not a good model.

Okay, end of speech. To introduce the numbers in prose, M40's at \$6,949 are superb in tonality, more than adequate in sub bass, excellent in mid bass, superb in mids and highs. Their attack is natural: not so fast as Wilsons, which to my ears make everything sound like snare drums, but comparable to Quads, which a visitor compared them to. Their decay is superb if the electronics allow. Inner resolution is excellent. The soundstage, as I've said - if you place the speakers wide apart and sit at the apex of an equilateral triangle - is also realistic rather than spectacular - numbers are especially hard here. I would also call imaging realistic - not so hyper-exact as active Meridian M2's nor even as dramatic as some mini-monitors. Fit and finish are excellent: they strike me as well and handsomely made - in the conservative 1980's tradition; and their removable grills are state-of-the-art. I could complain about the recessed speaker hook-up bay which is nearly inaccessible to spades and about the plastic lugs. Even Compact 7's have brass lugs.

Tonality	100
Sub-bass (10 Hz - 60 Hz)	80
Mid-bass (80 Hz - 200 Hz)	90
Midrange (200 Hz - 3,000 Hz)	100
High-frequencies (3,000 Hz on up)	100
Attack	85
Decay	95
Inner Resolution	95
Soundscape width front	85
Soundscape width rear	85
Soundscape depth behind speakers	85
Soundscape extension into the room	65
Imaging	85
Fit and Finish	90
Self Noise	100
Value for the Money	100

Company Information

Harbeth Audio Ltd.
 3 Enterprise Park
 Lewes Road
 Lindfield
 Haywards Heath
 W. Sussex, RH16 2LH,
 United Kingdom

Voice: 01 444 484371
 Fax: 01444 487629

Website: www.harbeth.co.uk
e-mail: sales@harbeth.com

North American Distributor:
Voice: (902) 454-9253
Website: www.wintertreeaudio.ca
E-mail: harbethna@hfx.eastlink.ca