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Harbeth Monitor 30.1 Loudspeaker Ravishing!

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by [Paul Seydor \(/articles/?authors=15\)](/articles/?authors=15) | Apr 10th, 2013

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Alan Shaw's Harbeth Monitor 30.1, which has been released in time to celebrate the company's thirty- fifth anniversary as a manufacturer of high-quality loudspeakers, is the best compact two-way speaker system I have ever heard, regardless of type, cost, or complexity. By this I mean, of course, that it does a better job of doing the things that are most important to me when it comes to the reproduction of music in the home: tonal neutrality, timbral accuracy, cohesiveness, low distortion, and that elusive impression of vitality which makes recorded music come alive. The speaker is an updated version of the Monitor 30, a studio monitor intended for professional applications where high accuracy in a not large enclosure is required. I say "not large" to indicate that the speaker is not a sub-compact, being three to four times the size of mini-monitors like the fabled LS3/5a or Harbeth's own P3ES yet somewhat smaller than the standard two-cubic-foot of speakers like Spondor's SP1/2 or Harbeth's own Super HL5. The size was in fact dictated *a priori*, part of the brief to develop a drop-in replacement for the BBC's Rogers LS5/9, which became unavailable in the late nineties. As befits its monitor status, the 30.1 boasts high neutrality, superb resolution, and a matching of drivers with respect to coherence and sonic character that is equaled by only a small handful of multiple-driver dynamic loudspeakers in my experience. Speaking with a single voice in a way reminiscent of Quad ESLs, it is also of similar seriously low coloration and distortion, high transparency, and musical authority. The Monitor 30.1 is at once a never-ending joy to listen to and highly revealing, its supremely natural tonal balance neither accentuating the unpleasant qualities of bad recordings nor enhancing the pleasant qualities of good ones. This is one speaker for which the cliché rings completely true: You can listen to it without fatigue for literally hours on end.

That said, let me hasten to add that the 30.1 is not a speaker for everyone, nor is it all things to all music. In common with all other compact (and smaller) speakers, it will not, unassisted, reproduce the bottom octave at levels to match the rest of the range, it's practically flat to only about 60Hz, and its specified 3dB point is 50Hz. This means that while it actually does reproduce the 32Hz organ pedal point at the beginning of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, it will do so only at reduced amplitude (thus power) with respect to the rest of the range. Room reinforcement will provide some additional strength, but only some, not least because optimal performance requires placement away from boundaries. Dynamically it's very robust—amazingly so when you consider the size of both the cabinet and midrange/woofer—capable of clean, unstrained levels much too loud for me to listen to comfortably for very long in my plus-2500-cubic-foot (21' x 15' x 8') room. But I wouldn't—nor, I suspect, would its designer— recommend it for very large spaces, say, baronial living rooms or the like. But this still leaves a wide spectrum of settings in which its loudness limitations are effectively nonexistent; and because the response of the drivers integrates so seamlessly and so quickly beyond the plane of the baffle, the 30.1 can be used in very small rooms where proximate seating might be unavoidable. Indeed, few speakers in my experience appear to be this satisfactorily adaptable to so wide a variety of environments.

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Now that I've written an introduction that sounds like a conclusion, allow me to introduce the design and to elaborate upon its performance. The 30.1 is a front-ported two-way with a specified frequency response of 50Hz–20kHz +/-3dB in free space. Its tweeter is a 25mm soft-domed SEAS unit, while the eight-inch midrange/woofer is manufactured in house and made from Harbeth's RADIAL compound, about which more anon. Sensitivity is a low 85dB with a minimum recommended power of 25 watts, though considerably more—I alternated between a Quad 909 at 140 watts a side and a Croft-designed Carver AV705x at 225 watts a side—is advised in anything but a small room. Ideally the 30.1 should be stand-mounted away from walls, with the tweeters around ear height (the Canadian company Skylan makes a dedicated aftermarket stand, available direct or through FidelisAV, Harbeth's U.S. importer).

As a designer and manufacturer, Alan Shaw follows in the footsteps of the British Broadcasting Corporation, where in the sixties and seventies BBC engineers conducted quite a lot of research into speaker design and performance toward developing a range of monitors capable of accurately revealing what was being broadcast. Their primary interest was in voice and music, largely classical, and their investigations involved intensive research on everything from drivers and crossovers to cone materials and enclosures, careful experimentation by both measurement and listening, and meticulous record keeping—all practices Shaw observes to this day. (I refer interested readers to my interview with Shaw in the June/July 2009 issue of TAS, where he discusses his working methods in great detail.) Inspired by Dudley Harwood, the founder of Harbeth and a pioneer in the use of polypropylene for drivers, Shaw's company developed a new synthetic compound, which he calls RADIAL (the acronym derives from "Research And Development Into Advanced Loudspeakers"), a material claimed to retain polypropylene's smoothness without its dulling effect and suppression of detail, Bextrene's consistency without its colorations, and none of the vagaries of paper. All Harbeth woofers and midrange drivers are now made from RADIAL. Apart from this—a big "apart," I should add, as when it comes to vanishingly low coloration, there really is something quite special about that material, at least to judge from all the Harbeths I've heard—neither Shaw nor his company is particularly "innovative." Instead, he draws upon a combination of tried-and-true principles that he implements with rare care, knowledge, and sophistication. He also believes— "passionately," he likes to put it—in the use of computer models to simulate loudspeaker behavior and performance. Of course, critical listening plays an indispensable role, as it did at the BBC, where, according to Shaw, "the designers were in the unique position of being able to walk between the studio and the control room and hear for themselves the differences between the live and the reproduced sound." Shaw once told me that his daughter's voice, the sound of which he obviously knows very well, constitutes some of his most reliable source material. "It's absolutely crucial that the loudspeaker can reproduce the human voice convincingly," he argues.

"For me, speech/vocal quality is the real arbiter because the human voice-box just doesn't produce the sort of colorations that speakers do. It's soft, wet, highly damped tissue and it can't produce spitty, gritty, beaky, wiry, quacky, hollow sound—all those are speaker colorations. Because of its emotional content, music is less revealing of coloration than speech and voice. If you get speech right, the rest falls pretty much into place."

It should hardly come as a surprise, then, that the glory of Harbeth speakers is a near peerless midrange. When it comes to the Monitor 30.1 there's no sense using a lesser word: it's simply ravishing in its warmth, richness, vividness, and beauty. The principal reasons are two. First is the RADIAL material itself, second is how unusually flat across the entire midrange the 30.1s are, notably free from the usual irregularities you find in most speakers. But more is needed than a merely flat midrange. Equally important is that this flatness extends down through the transition from the lower midrange to the upper bass, the two octaves or so from around 300Hz to around 100Hz. If this region has a dip, trough, or cancellation, music is robbed of body, warmth, and the ability to render timbre properly. Yet an astonishing number of speakers exhibit these infelicitous characteristics, including many that are very, very expensive, especially floorstanders and other designs that don't take account of the floorbounce (i.e., a cancellation in the frequency response owing to the first reflection off the floor). The result is an excessively lean balance that robs most instruments and all vocals of their fundamentals. Speakers like this can sound really punchy and "rhythmic" (or "pacey," to use that awful coinage so beloved of our British brethren), but with respect to accuracy and the sound of real instruments and voices, they are also wrong.



The most common complaint by my wife—no audiophile but a fervent music lover—of so many speakers she hear is, "There's no depth," by which Danielle means not imaging depth, but depth of tone in singers she is familiar with. (It's why she typically asks me to bring the Quads back out as soon as possible once I'm through evaluating other speakers.) Sinatra is one of her acid tests, a particularly good one because if the "wood" (i.e., the lower range) in his

very distinctive voice is missing or reduced, then the head tone is accentuated and the nasality is subtly emphasized. But any baritone will do—hell, so will a tenor like Placido Domingo, whose voice has darkened and deepened such that he is essaying baritone roles these days, like Simon Boccanegra.

But the real kicker is that even women’s voices cannot be correctly reproduced if this critical area of the frequency spectrum is deficient. The range of a true contralto voice starts at around 200Hz, that of a soprano around 250Hz. Doris Day, whose *Hooray for Hollywood* album often figures in my evaluations, has an exceptionally clear and light voice, but over too many speakers her timbre often comes out too light and it is robbed of a difficult to define but immediately audible impression of color and body. However, listen to her over a speaker flat throughout the midrange, as the 30.1 is, and you’ll hear that real substance grounds all that lightness. Even more a singer like Ella Fitzgerald: On “Do Nothing till You Hear it from Me” (*The Duke Ellington Songbook, II*) she sounds some startlingly low chest tones. If a speaker isn’t up to reproducing these correctly, the voice just isn’t right.

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