

## EQUIPMENT REPORT



## Harbeth Super HL5plus Loudspeaker

British and Beautiful

Paul Seydor

possessing, even modest in presentation and appearance. As the photograph shows, it's a two-cubic-foot box with a bass/midrange, a tweeter, and a supertweeter mounted on the front baffle. Apart from its wood veneering, which is handsome and flawlessly matched within each pair, there would be no reason why it would stand out from any number of other similar-looking boxes. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the depth and sophistication of thinking, science, research, engineering, and technology that has gone into this and other Harbeths. Shaw was trained in the ways of the British Broadcasting Corporation and he is proud to be one of the very last speaker manufacturers whose designs both uphold and extend that tradition. What this translates into is original and innovative thinking; formidable knowledge of drivers, driver behavior, crossovers, and materials both theoretically and practically; scrupulous laboratory work, including live-versus-recorded comparisons; and fanatical measurements and record keeping. To these Shaw adds extensive use of computer-generated models and simulations; genuinely groundbreaking work with new materials; and quality control that is second to none and equaled by only a few (the sample-to-sample uniformity and consistency of Harbeth speakers are nearly legendary—once again, the comparison to Quads suggests itself). After all the laboratory work is completed, the final voicing of the speakers involves live-versus-recorded comparison of speaking voices he knows intimately—those of his immediate family. He is wary of using only music because he believes there are far too many uncontrollable variables, including everything from one's emotional associations with it, to not being able to know the sound at the source of recordings. And he performs the final listening evaluations of every design in stereo because the “tweaking of the crossovers has to be in stereo and in the final cabinets.” (See *The Absolute Sound's Illustrated History of High-End Audio: Loudspeakers* for a brief history of the BBC monitor [pp. 293-94] and for more about Shaw's philosophy and methods of speaker design [pp. 147-48].)

The SuperHL5plus has one of the longest lineages, if not the longest of any speaker in the Harbeth lineup—indeed, I can think of few current models from any manufacturer that can boast one that's lengthier or has been improved more consistently. It's the ninth generation of the HL Monitor, the loudspeaker with which Dudley Harwood launched the inaugural Harbeth upon his departure from the BBC in 1977. Ten years later, when Shaw bought the company from Harwood, the speaker was in its fourth iteration, the relatively short-lived HL Monitor Mk4; before long, he introduced the HL5, which has encompassed five models, including this latest one, introduced in 2014. Although

**P**ut simply, Alan Shaw's new Harbeth SuperHL5plus is one of the most beautiful-sounding speaker systems I've heard since the original Quad electrostatic. The comparison is not stated lightly: This transducer has the same musical authority, naturalness, midrange beauty, and really extraordinary top-to-bottom coherence that I've heard from very few dynamic speakers of any type, persuasion, or expense. The SuperHL5plus may lack the Quad's ultimate transparency, but so do most speakers; yet it's as transparent as just about anything I've heard this side of Quads, and it more than compensates with superior top- and bottom-end extension and dynamic range. Allow me to anticipate my conclusion: If I were closing up shop tomorrow as a reviewer, the only speakers I'd be inclined to add to my Quads (57s and 2805s) would be these new Harbeths because of how they make almost anything played through them sound gorgeous in a way that is completely musically natural.

At a time when each month seems to bring products trumpeting this or that breakthrough, the 5plus is commendably unpre-



the bass range. The danger of the latter approach, according to Shaw, “is that only a tiny amount of energy in the music can set off a high-Q resonance. We know from resonant systems that the higher and purer the peak, the longer it takes the resonance, once excited, to decay. But when resonances are pushed downwards in level and, critically, downwards in frequency, the ear cannot identify them as bass tones from the music, the cabinet, or the woofer: it becomes a homogeneity, and inaudible means inaudible. So yes, we still use that method because the cabinet’s midband contribution—which is where the ear really can pick out box resonances if they exist—is so clean.” The proof is in both measurements and listening: All Harbeths are outstandingly clean, clear, and high-resolution—and the new 5plus is no exception. Even at uncomfortably loud playback levels—

among American audiophiles Harbeth is better known for its consumer versions of its professional monitors, Shaw informed me that the several versions of the SHL5 have consistently been the company’s best sellers—and worldwide, the new version is flying off the shelves so fast that some reviewers have been unable to get speakers because the company can’t spare them. Of any speaker he has ever authored, remarks he has made suggest this may be considered a statement offering.

According to Shaw, the 5plus is a complete, ground-up redesign, with particular emphasis upon the bass/midrange-to-tweeter crossover, “made possible,” he told me, “by a little serendipitous luck in hitting upon a combination of components that I’d not tried before and recognizing immediately that a genuine step forward in sonics had become possible.” Also pertinent here is a newer version of the company’s innovative RADIAL polymer material for the bass/midrange driver—now called RADIAL2—but Shaw credits the new crossover with really “opening up the sound of the 5plus.” The tweeter and supertweeter remain constant from the previous versions, as does the cabinet.

Speaking of the cabinet, also preserved from the previous models, and a hallmark of all Harbeths, are the thin walls of half-inch MDF. When Harwood was at the BBC in the Sixties, he initiated considerable research on materials and construction using an accelerometer. His research revealed that large, heavy, extremely rigid cabinets were not the only path to reproduction free from the resonant contributions of the enclosures—and perhaps not even the best way. No matter the materials involved, play something loud enough and enclosures will resonate—the trick is to control them. Harwood’s findings indicated that multiple very low-level or inaudible resonances at lower frequencies, where the effects are benign, are preferable to (or at least as desirable as) pronounced, i.e., high-Q resonances in a narrow band or even at a single frequency, especially at higher frequencies above

too loud to listen for very long—in my 2600-cubic-foot listening room, the speaker remained unperturbed, the reproduction superlatively clean, composed, and controlled.

Setup is straightforward, requiring stand-mounting with the tweeter (not the supertweeter) at ear level. A pair of superb dedicated stands by the Canadian company Skylan was used for the review. The flattest, most uniform response is on-axis; though dispersion is good enough that head-in-a-vise syndrome is avoided. Sensitivity is 86dB, impedance an easy-to-drive 6 ohms, and recommended minimum power 25 watts (though consider-

## SPECS & PRICING

**Type:** Vented 3-way loudspeaker

**Driver complement:** 8"

RADIAL2 polymeric composite cone mid/woofer; custom 1" ferro-cooled aluminum dome tweeter; 0.75" titanium-dome, neodymium magnet, waveguide face supertweeter

**Frequency response:** 40Hz-20kHz +/-3dB

**Sensitivity:** 86dB 1W/1 meter

**Suggested power:** 25-150W

**Nominal impedance:** 6 ohms

**Power handling:** 150 watts

**Dimensions:** 12.5" x 25" x 12"

**Weight:** 35 lbs.

**Price:** \$6890 (Skylan Stands, \$485)

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ably more, i.e., 100 watts or greater, is preferable, especially in larger rooms). In common with all Harbeths, the 5plus proves in use to be a straightforward, uncomplicated speaker. This is because Shaw does such a thorough job voicing them for real-world, in-room performance. Put them on sturdy stands at the recommended height; get them out from the walls a few feet; and they just work without a lot of hair-pulling, tweaking, fussing, or agonizing.

When I singled out the speaker's coherence in my opening paragraph, I was referring not only to the integration of the three drivers, which makes the presentation appear as if it's coming from a single source, but also to the way the drivers themselves, though of different materials, seem to speak with one voice. I've heard more than a few box speakers with multiple drivers that sound coherent in the sense of producing what sounds like a solid wave-front, while at the same time the drivers in those same speakers each have audibly different sonic signatures. This doesn't happen with the 5plus. Shaw is known for selecting his drivers very carefully, and his RADIAL ones are all made in-house, so this gives him a tremendous leg up when it comes to coordinating the individual drivers within a loudspeaker. Although the 5plus is technically a three-way owing to the supertweeter, in a practical sense it functions more like a two-way with top-most octave augmentation—extension would be a more accurate word—from the supertweeter. The Harbeth's eight-inch driver handles bass (the -3dB point is 40Hz), midrange, and lower-treble frequencies, crossing over to the tweeter at 3.3kHz, which is augmented by the supertweeter above 12kHz. The supertweeter thus serves to confer a subtle sense of airiness and definition in the uppermost octave without calling any undue attention to itself. On the contrary, the top end here is as smooth and as detailed as you please without any apparent rise, peakiness, or raggedness. That indeed characterizes the response of the 5plus all across the spectrum. It's an exceptionally well-behaved speaker system.

This includes the very bottom end, even below 40Hz, where room reinforcement provides a bit of oomph down into the high thirties. As loud as I cared to listen, including even some very extended organ recordings, such as Kei Koito's Bach program on the Claves label (the best organ recording I know), I was unable to push the RADIAL2 cone into doubling or make the port chuff. But people who really enjoy deep, deep bass with a strength equivalent to what you'd hear in a church or concert hall will want to add a subwoofer (I'd recommend an REL because they mate so well with BBC-type speakers).

During the review period, I happened to hear Gustavo Dudamel conduct the Los Angeles Philharmonic in Walt Disney Hall in Mahler's Sixth Symphony, arguably the composer's most

devastatingly expressive work, with an augmented orchestra and those notorious hammer blows in the last movement. Mahler himself specified no instrument for these, only that he wanted a sound that should be hard yet flat, i.e., as non-resonant as possible, rather like a gigantic axe blow. He tried experimenting with an exceptionally large bass drum, but that was a complete bust—the skin couldn't be stretched tight enough. The L.A. Phil uses a 105-cubic-foot box with an 18-inch hole cut into it; the hammer consists of an axe handle topped with a cylindrical head weighing about 25 pounds. The box is three feet deep, seven feet wide, and five feet tall, which means that in order to strike it effectively, the percussionist has to climb a set of three stairs. (The hammer's head is made from pieces of wood laminated together and

wrapped with metal bands to keep, says percussionist Perry Dreiman, from "breaking apart and flying into the audience.") Augmented by timpani and bass drum, the effect of all this is almost quite literally cataclysmic. (I was sitting dead center in the second row; thinking back on the concert later, my heart went out to the musicians sitting immediately in front of that box!)

The next day I played Benjamin Zander's Telarc recording, which has the best sonics of any recording of this symphony I'm familiar with (that includes most of them), with the description of a box for the hammer-blow that suggests it resembles L.A.'s, and a sonic impact that sounds very similar. Adjusting for the circumstances of home listening, the 5plus rendered it sensationally. My playback levels were as loud as I could stand, and at no time did this speaker fail to rise to the demands of the music, presenting the spread and depth of the Philharmonia Orchestra with a rare impression of realism—adjusted for scale, of course, and a domestic room as opposed to a concert hall. (I alternated between the Quad 909 and the new Benchmark AHB2 [review in progress] amplifiers, both solid-state, with Zesto Audio's all-tube Leto preamplifier. Digital sources were my Marantz SA8004 SACD player, with a Benchmark DAC for Red Book sources; vinyl an Ortofon Windfeld, Basis 2200 turntable and Vector 4 arm, Zesto all-tube Andros or Musical Surroundings solid-state Nova II phonostages.) I've heard bigger speakers in bigger rooms scale an orchestra bigger, but I've rarely heard one reproduced more convincingly with greater musical authority, naturalism, and beauty.

The midrange is everything we've come to expect from a Harbeth: drop-dead gorgeous and so seamlessly integrated to the top and bottom ends of the spectrum that it's an exercise in artificiality to discuss them separately. To play voice or any kind of acoustic instrument either solo or part of an ensemble is to bring a smile to your face—so easy, beautiful, and effortlessly



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natural is the reproduction. Perceptive readers may notice that I'm using the word "beauty" and its variants quite a lot in this review. This is because beauty is the overriding impression this speaker makes—that and a wholesale absence of any sort of listening fatigue. The musicality of this speaker is second to none, but it does raise an issue: Is its tonal balance completely accurate? The only deviation I hear from absolute neutrality is a slightly forgiving quality throughout the presence range, from around 1k–2kHz all the way up to 8kHz–10kHz. The effect of this is not gross or crude—as noted, the response overall is exceptionally smooth—but in my room and to my ears, it is there and it is audible, especially by comparisons to speakers that don't have it, like either of my Quads, the Martin Logan Montis, or the Spondor SP1/2 (which I used to own). When I shared this impression with Alan Shaw, he told me that the 5plus is the flattest-measuring loudspeaker he has ever made—a bold statement when you consider the original Monitor 40. I'm inclined to trust him on this because I have immense respect for his expertise and integrity, and some knowledge of how thorough his measurements and testing are—he even goes to the effort and considerable expense of measuring his speakers in the BBC's anechoic chamber. Yet my subjective impression remains, and I know from both measurements and the variety of speakers I've evaluated here over the last fifteen years that it doesn't owe to any characteristic of the acoustics of my room (which is by no means over-damped by plush furnishings or heavy drapes, quite the opposite in fact).

Now I shouldn't want to overstate this. The effect is quite mild to my ears and does not result in any sort of laid-back, recessed, or distant sound—nor is it in any way lacking in life, lifelikeness, or vitality. And it is certainly capable of resolving fine differences in any components upstream. (For example, the Harbeths revealed all of the Quad 909 amp's smoothness and, by design, avoidance of wideband frequency response; by contrast, the Benchmark amp was punchier and crisper with exceptional bass articulation. I liked both presentations, but my point is that the 5plus let me hear their differences in no uncertain terms.) One reason is that it's very transparent, another that it is so very cannily balanced from the bass throughout the midrange. It has an upper bass/lower midrange that does not exhibit the almost ubiquitous floor bounce of far too many floorstanding speakers that have a valley in the two octaves between a 100 and 400Hz, robbing music of its warmth and body. The 5plus reproduces voices and instruments with a warm, vibrant, and tactile impression of presence, whether it's Marni Nixon dispatching Gershwin tunes, Grumiaux playing Bach, or Argerich blazing through Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* (the clicking of her fingernails audible, thus allaying any fears of compromised resolution).

One reason why I like the tonal balance of this speaker is that so many recordings are so closely miked they can't possibly sound realistic or even remotely natural; and this is of course exacerbated when they're played back through the vast majority of contemporary speakers with rising top ends. My favorite performance of *Appalachian Spring*, the Bernstein with the New York Philharmonic on Sony, illustrates the real-world effect of this. Starting with the original vinyl and proceeding to any of the CD releases, including SACD, this recording has always been very brightly lit, with violins unnaturally brilliant, fierce, and even searing. On most contemporary speakers with their rising

top ends, the effect is usually not pleasant. Even on my Quads (which do have a soupçon of juice in the presence region), there is more glare than I care for, and I often try to equalize it out with the preamp (when the one I'm using allows me to). Over the 5plus, the recording is still obviously bright, but it is more listenable, much less unpleasant, and much less excessive. Sonny Rollins' sax on *Way Out West*, another favorite of mine, has some bite and aggression in his tone; you hear this on the 5plus, only ever so slightly buffed off. How important this is to you I can't decide. Inasmuch as I've already stated that the 5plus is one of three speakers I'd choose to live with were I to stop reviewing tomorrow, my answer is obvious: It's precisely the musically right tonal balance of the speaker that I love and that makes it, in my view, uniquely valuable for those who love classical music, jazz, traditional pop, folk, world music—indeed, any kind of music that is acoustically, as opposed to electronically based. And it also allows many recordings to sound better than they do in tonal balance.

What about rock, heavy metal, rap, hip-hop, etc.? Well, little of this music appeals to me, but I made it a point of listening to some favorite rock recordings to see if I could catch the speaker out in any way. I think it sounds quite sensational with Jagger at his most aggressive, Paul Simon at his most dynamic and powerful on *Graceland*, and Pink Floyd at their most outrageous. This owes in part to the speaker's remarkable transparency, clarity, and dynamic range. But it is also due to its full tonal balance in the lower midrange and upper bass—the warmth region that a great many rock producers and performers really like to get into their recordings. The 5plus is fully competitive with anything I'm aware of out there when it comes to kick, drive, pace, and rhythm, and it manages to achieve these results while sounding completely natural. To state it differently: Although the 5plus is a direct descendant of the BBC monitor school of design, it by no means mimics the politeness, the gentility for which the school is—to some extent validly—famous. In common with all Harbeths, within the constraints of power handling and size, this new speaker is, in addition to being smooth and refined, also formidably robust in its ability to play loud, cleanly, and powerfully, reaching down into the foundations of the orchestra.

Allow me to conclude with an anecdote. I have a close friend who often joins me for listening evaluations. He is not a professional musician but he is a good amateur pianist, he goes to orchestral concerts, operas, and organ recitals weekly, and he has developed an exceptionally keen ear for what instruments sound like. He has a very neutral, very accurate, truly high-end sound system. During one listening session with the Harbeths, after several CDs of orchestral music, which gave him (and me) much pleasure, he put on the Endymion String Quartet's version of Dvorák's *American Quartet*. Within seconds a smile broke out on our faces—that happens all the time with this speaker—and by the end of the first phrase, my friend said, "These are just breathtakingly pretty." When he got home, he played the same quartet again on his setup and e-mailed me, saying that his speakers—which are truly superb—"are not in the same league as the new Harbeth. They sound good, nothing wrong, but lack the almost indefinable musical quality of the HL5. A true epiphany." He's now arranging to audition a pair in his own home. Give them a listen yourself and I think you might, too. **tbs**