



The LS3/5A
wannabees

Ken Kessler rounds up five aspiring, high-quality baby speakers

Which comes closest to matching the classic BBC LS3/5A?



AVI Positron

PRICE	£699
SUPPLIER	AV International Ltd
CONTACT	01453 752656
WEBSITE	www.avinternational.com



Blue Note A-3

PRICE	£750
SUPPLIER	Eminent Audio
CONTACT	01746 769156
WEBSITE	www.eminentaudio.co.uk



Harbeth HL-3PES-2

PRICE	£999 (some finishes extra)
SUPPLIER	Harbeth
CONTACT	01444 484371
WEBSITE	www.harbeth.co.uk

John Bell nailed it. 'What you have here, Ken, are two completely different issues. Are we listening for the speaker that sounds most like an LS3/5A? Or are we trying to find the best alternative to the LS3/5A?' Ten seconds with a pair of single-wire, 15 ohm Rogers LS3/5As of 'middle vintage' answered that one: not a single loudspeaker we could muster even came within spitting distance of the BBC classic. Thus, we were looking for the latter of John's two options. Or, as Carrie Bradshaw would have asked, had she been an audiophile, 'What do you do when there are no more LS3/5As?'

Let's back up exactly three years ago. When we compared all of the LS3/5A variants we could assemble in June 2001, we were in essence bemoaning the loss of a classic that should never have gone out of production. According to the mythology, even in its final year, the public was buying more pairs (circa 3000) per annum of LS3/5As than they were many of the so-called best-sellers. What company would argue with 3000 sales per year of a circa-£650 speaker?

Let's back up exactly three years ago. When we compared all of the LS3/5A variants we could assemble in June 2001, we were in essence bemoaning the loss of a classic that should never have gone out of production. According to the mythology, even in its final year, the public was buying more pairs (circa 3000) per annum of LS3/5As than they were many of the so-called best-sellers. What company would argue with 3000 sales per year of a circa-£650 speaker?

For reasons that we won't go into here, the speaker ceased production. But, at the time of the Great LS3/5A Shoot-Out, there were rumours of

competing/collaborating parties interested in bringing it back. Some reached the stores, including a limited run from Doug Stirling. Then... nothing.

And so it looked like the only way to get a pair of The Finest Small Speakers Ever Made was to go eBay-ing at the moon. Prices shot up to silly levels, then settled back down to a £400-£700 range for 'normal' LS3/5As, or sky's-the-limit for special editions and coveted models like the Chartwells. And while there are tens of thousands out there, many people simply do not wish to own secondhand equipment. Or bid on-line not knowing what will arrive. Suffice it to say, LS3/5As don't hang around long at audio jumble sales.

So, in the interests of performing a Public Service for the music-loving public, we decided to gather together most of the team from three years

ago – a handful of LS3/5A veterans – to assess a group of loudspeakers fitting the following requirements: They had to measure within 20 per cent or so of the LS3/5A's volume and dimensions of 305 x 190 x 160mm or 12 x 7.5 x 6.3in (hwd). They had to be two-way designs. They also had to retail between £600-£1000, thus encompassing the last price of LS3/5As and what an expert believes a circa-2004 LS3/5A would cost if it went back into production.

There were only two tiny exceptions to the homogeneity of the group. All used multi-way binding posts that could be 'knackered' to accept banana plugs except for the Blue Note A-3, which had non-removable screw caps on the end of the binding posts; however, the plugs could be inserted from the sides. And all fit into the same format of a speaker that's taller than it is wide or deep except for the Pen Audio Rebel 2, with a form like an LS3/5A turned on its back.

We did not want LS3/5A clones, although two of the manufacturers were former licensees and one speaker – the Spondor – actually uses what is effectively an LS3/5A cabinet rotated 90°. We weren't fussed about origins and we didn't even insist on sealed enclosures or driver type: just size, number of drivers and price. What we assessed were the AVI Positron V6.2 (£699), the

As Carrie Bradshaw would have asked, had she been an audiophile, 'What do you do when there are no more LS3/5As?'

Blue Note A-3 (£750), the Harbeth HL-P3ES-2 (£999 in cherry, eucalyptus, maple; extra for other veneers), the Pen Audio Rebel 2 (£995) and the Spondor S3/5se (£850-£975 depending on veneer). Of course, there are dozens of speakers that probably fit the bill, but we only have a few lifetimes at our disposal.

Special note: Missing from the group is one of the genre's most highly-regarded best-sellers, the ProAc Tablette, because ProAc didn't want to



Pen Audio Rebel 2

PRICE	£995
SUPPLIER	RT Services
CONTACT	01235 810455
WEBSITE	info@rtsaudio.co.uk



Spendor S3/5se

PRICE	£850-£975 (various finishes)
SUPPLIER	Spendor Audio Systems
CONTACT	01323 843474
WEBSITE	www.spendoraudio.com

submit a pair. You might ask why didn't we simply borrow or buy a pair, but we have to respect a manufacturer's request. There could be any number of reasons why it chose not to participate. Let's just say that maybe the speakers were in short supply or maybe they think I'm an asshole and leave it at that. But whatever you do, do not shop for small two-way speakers in this price category without listening to the Tablettes. Plenty of music lovers swear by 'em.

Anyway, I managed to coerce four listeners into suffering through hearing the same four selections six times. Andy Whittle is the Managing Director of Exposure, but he's also the man who designed the Rogers AB1 subwoofer for LS3/5As and probably knows more about the speakers than any man alive. John Bell is an industry veteran with manufacturing and retail experience and a penchant for LS3/5As; he's also been a close observer of the sorry-ass saga of the attempts at an LS3/5A rebirth. Jim Creed and Peter Roberts are civilian LS3/5A owners with keen ears and no industry prejudices, and both are intimately familiar with the sound of my listening room and system.

For the tests, the system consisted of the Marantz CD-12/DA-12 CD front end feeding the McIntosh C2200 pre-amp and MC2102 power amp in balanced mode, with Transparent Reference interconnects. Speaker wire was also

from Transparent, while the stands were Roger Stone's super IF supports. All the loudspeakers on test were burned in for at least 24 hours, but, as Jim Creed put it, 'The reason your LS3/5As sound so good is because they have about 10 years' usage on them!'

For review material, we used Stravinsky's *Marche du Soldat* on the CD layer of the SACD by the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, conducted by Paavo Järvi [Pentatone Classics PTC 5186 046] for its 3D acoustical space and impressive dynamics, Alison Krauss's 'Down To The River To Pray' from the *O Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack for its sonic purity, for deciphering massed voices and for the way it drives sibilant speakers into overload, Stevie Ray Vaughan's 'Tin Pan Alley' from *Couldn't Stand the Weather* for thunderous bass and transient attack, and the Judds' version of 'Don't Be Cruel' from their *Greatest Hits* collection for midband purity and vocal nuance. And so on to the speakers...

AVI POSITRON V6.2

AVI's Positron V6.2s are 'hand-made and calibrated monitor-type loudspeakers and they use what we believe to be the best drive units available,' says the company. It's a two-way system in a 6-litre ported enclosure, aligned 'to give the best possible midrange, acceptable low frequency extension and good power handling.

AVI uses closely matched pairs of tweeters chosen for exceptionally low resonance and smooth amplitude response to 'over 35kHz.' The long-throw woofer has a 32mm voice coil and uses a well damped curvilinear paper diaphragm. AVI tells us that 'because its amplitude response extends way beyond the 2.4kHz crossover point, phase behaviour in this region is excellent. Sound quality is smooth, seamless and the stereo image of the highest order.'

AVI uses the same basic crossover circuit for all its loudspeakers and every internal component is silicon-glued to prevent unwanted vibrations; the internal speaker wires are wrapped in the acoustic wadding that fills the void.

BLUE NOTE A-3

Italian manufacturer Blue Note's A-3 was 'conceived to integrate professional demands and state-of-the-art musical performance. The A-3 (in pro use) enables sound technicians and artists to benefit from a production devoid of distortions and "colouring".' This, of course, makes the A-3 the only speaker in the group that, like, the LS3/5A, is explicitly designed with professional users in mind. Of course, Spendor and Harbeth both boast long experience with the pro sector, and I wouldn't be surprised if AVI's Ashley James lurks around the odd studio or two, but it's interesting to note that the LS3/5A's prime function has been addressed by what strikes us otherwise as a domestic product.

Its crossover network modules are hard-wired and clamped to a plywood surface to reduce vibration interference to a minimum. The components are selected with tolerances of 0.01% to optimise performance, including 'extremely expensive capacitors' made from polypropylene wrapped in aluminium foil, with connections in OFC copper. The resistors are made of ceramic to handle high power.

Drivers consist of 30mm silk-dome tweeters and 130mm woofers with cones made of cellulose pulp treated with polymer resins; both drivers are manufactured to Blue Note's design and specification. The Italian Walnut or black cabinets use a mix of MDF and real wood panels of varying thicknesses, to allow for fine-tuning and control of cabinet resonances.

HARBETH HL-P3ES-2

Like Spendor, below, Harbeth has supplying the BBC with speakers in its CV. The HL-P3ES-2 is, quite genuinely, 'the direct descendant of the engineering behind the Harbeth BBC LS3/5a. Cabinet construction, panel damping and response shaping are all the products of critical analysis and much tuning.' Like its larger siblings in the Harbeth range, the HL P3ES-2 employs the company's SuperTunedStructure, SuperGrille and

Basic specifications	AVI Positron	Blue Note A-3	Harbeth HL-P3ES-2	Pen Audio Rebel 2	Spendor S3/5se
Sensitivity (for1W/1m)	86.5dB	87dB	83dB	85dB	84dB
Nominal Impedance	6 ohms	8 ohms	6 ohms	8 ohms	8 ohms
Crossover	2.4kHz	2.8kHz	n/a	4kHz	3.5kHz
Power requirement	50-250W	15-100W	25-150W	30W min	15-125W



overall design philosophy, which explain, 'the commonality of sound – as it should be and quite independent of size, across the Harbeth range.' The HL P3ES-2 is a sealed two-way design, using a custom-made 110mm woofer with shielded magnet and a custom-made 19mm ferrofluid-cooled, shielded aluminium dome tweeter.

PEN AUDIO REBEL 2

Because of its layout, this Finnish-made speaker was 'the odd one out' in a fairly consistent group. Picture this: its dimensions are only 5.5in wide and 9.5in tall but a speaker-stand-top-plate-defying 11.25in deep. And unlike the others, with their cloth grilles, the Rebel2 uses metal mesh. The Rebel was also the most demanding when it came to positioning, requiring a severe toe-in so that the cabinets' axis crossed in front of the listeners like certain Sonus Fabers. The others, despite some instructions to the contrary, worked best in LS3/5A mode, firing ahead. Hence, the Rebel 2 elicited the most divergent responses, dividing the quartet of listeners into two camps. All of which makes this more fun and less headache inducing than creating a pecking order for a dozen LS3/5As.

The Rebel 2 is a two-way stand-mounted loudspeaker with crossover and internal wiring 'selected after long listening tests in the actual listening conditions.' Its hand-made and features a 20mm ferrofluid-cooled cloth-dome tweeter with a 120mm 'specially treated' midrange/bass driver with a 26mm voice coil.

SPENDOR S3/5se

As we expected, this was the speaker that was most like an LS3/5A in many ways. After all, its

sealed cabinet is the same as that on an LS3/5A rotated 90°, modified slightly to accept the new tweeter. Its driver complement consists of a 19mm treated-fabric dome Spondor-Scanspeak tweeter along with a specially-designed Spondor 140mm homopolymer woofer.

Of all the surviving companies that once produced LS3/5As, Spondor works the hardest to keep the tradition alive. The S3/5se is the latest in a run of LS3/5A-like descendants that began with the S3/5 in 1998, the variants offering different 'voicings' and levels of power handling, better to suit, for example, home cinema

scored 240, making for a Spinal-Tappish 100 out of 10. The table below shows how each design fared, though these numbers, of course, need some 'referencing'.

What is so blatantly obvious is that the Blue Note A-3 is a clear 'victor', preferred by every single listener on the panel. It sounded smooth yet lively, possessing the richest bass, though the Harbeth tied with it in the lower registers and bettered it by one point for imaging.

Other than that, the Blue Note was the top in each category. It sounded bigger, fuller and more realistic in terms of soundstage and scale than

THE RESULTS

	Bass	Mid	Treble	Transients	Imaging	Overall
AVI Positron	27	29	27	30	31	144
Blue Note A-3	31	32	34	32	31	160
Harbeth HL-3PES-2	31	27.5	28	27	32	145.5
Pen Audio Rebel 2	26	27	28	29	31	141
Spondor S3/5se	29	31	31	30	30	151

The scores: the four listeners on the panel were asked to provide scores 'out of 10' on each parameter, giving a possible maximum of 40 points for each parameter, or 200 points overall

applications. This speaker is the 'purist' edition, certainly aimed at finicky audiophiles and LS3/5A veterans. Note that lucky Hong Kong enthusiasts can purchase a stunning 'Signature' version finished in gorgeous ebony macassar.

THE RESULTS

John and Andy formed one group, Peter and Jim the other. First, they heard all the tracks through the LS3/5A, then through the five contenders. The speakers were given a score between 1 and 10 in five categories, meaning that a perfect score would be 50, and the perfect aggregate score would be 200, that is 4x50. The LS3/5A

any of the others. After that, it was a free-for-all, with three speakers finishing within a 141-145.5 point spread and the Spondor achieving 151 – not least because all agreed it was the most LS3/5A-like... but it still wasn't an LS3/5A.

Pen Audio's Rebel 2 was liked by both Jim and Peter, while Andy and John didn't like it very much. All agreed that the imaging was pretty damned fine. The AVI was felt to be the most system-specific design here. It was certainly punchy and exciting sounding, but it was the most likely to find a mismatch with amplifiers tending toward brightness. My personal votes? I agree with the overall pecking order as the panel voted it, but I'd add another couple points to the Pen Audio Rebel 2 – it's a cracker if you take the time to tweak it.

Most importantly, two things emerged from the listening sessions. The first is that all the loudspeakers in the group were certainly worth considering – no pups in the litter – and it spoke volumes for what is available to today's shopper in the small-monitor-for-under-a-grand sector. But the second realisation to emerge was that the Rogers LS3/5A is still so vastly superior to the current crop in every area bar maximum output levels that I'm afraid it's business as usual: back to eBay, fellas. ■

WILL THE LS3/5A RETURN?

However much I hate being coy or melodramatic [Give me a break! – Ed], I really do have to be evasive about the LS3/5A that arrived chez Kessler in time for the tests; I simply cannot name names. It is a prototype LS3/5A built in February... 2004. A team of audio guerrillas is currently working feverishly at getting the speaker back into production. It will involve KEF's willingness to start up manufacture of

both the drivers and crossovers; the prototypes used new-old-stock drivers and crossovers, but in all-new, wooden (not MDF) enclosures.

Despite being only a week old, they sounded sublime. All four listeners heard them against my Rogers 15 ohm single-wire pair. All four said, 'Yes, please.' So this is an open plea to KEF: if you put the drivers back into production, I'll even shake hands with Andy Giles.

