

# TONEAudio.

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## A Whack on the Side of the Head

**The Harbeth Compact 7ES-3**

By Jeff Dorgay

Harbeth



**S**ometime back in the early 80's I read a book by Roger Van Oech titled "A Whack on the Side of the Head". It dealt with creative solutions to problems that one might not have considered without being taken outside of their comfort zone. The new Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 is the perfect example of this. This was not the speaker I expected to redefine what I thought a modestly priced speaker would be capable of, but after a few months of listening I continue to be amazed with them.

The first whack on the side of the head came when visiting Acoustic Sounds last October covering the Blues Masters concerts. Listening to the Avalon Sentinels in their main sound room was my top priority, but what I heard in the second room was just as amazing considering the price. No, you can't have the sound of a pair of Avalon Sentinels for 3,500 bucks, but what you can get a very substantial helping of musical enjoyment in these small boxes at a price that should be accessible to most music lovers.



Acoustic Sounds' director of sales, Clark Williams informed me that he had a pair of Compact 7's in his home system, so I made it a point of dropping by to spend a few more hours listening to them in a real world environment that evening. On the drive over, I pondered why a guy who could have anything in his living room would choose these unassuming little British monitors. I was instantly impressed and about 20 minutes into the listening session could see why these speakers were his choice – they do so much right! Used in concert with world class components (SME 20 table, Koetsu Ureshi cartridge and top of the line Croft electronics) those small speakers really came alive in a medium sized room. We must have stayed up until about 2a.m. listening to records, always the mark of a fantastic system.

Before I went back to my hotel, Clark said "Want a pair for review?" I definitely went to bed with a smile on my face that evening, but it got bigger the next day when he informed me that he had already contacted Walter at Fidelis AV (The US Harbeth importer) and a set would be forthcoming.

### All New From Top To Bottom

First, forget any kind of built in prejudice you might have about "The British Sound", just producing good midrange and forgetting the extremes. None of that applies to the new Compact seven. That's not to say they aren't musical, but they are open and dynamic in a way that haven't quite heard from the likes of Spendor, ProAc or any of my other favorite British speakers, even the Compact seven version II for that matter. The great news is that Harbeth has not sacrificed any mid-range magic or tonality, they just added a huge helping of resolution to go with!

Though version three looks the same as version two, it is a completely new speaker from the drivers to the crossover components. The woofer features Harbeth's new Radial 2 technology, used on the more expensive Monitor 30 and 40 along with a new tweeter. We could write pages about all the techie stuff, but suffice to say it works tremendously well. A quick trip to the Harbeth site ([www.harbeth.com](http://www.harbeth.com)) will answer all of your in-depth technical questions.

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### Incredibly Un-Fussy

I was advised by Alan Shaw himself, the designer of the Compact 7 to forget about my 24" Sound Anchor stands and get some 19" ones to replace them. "They couple to the floor and provide much better bass" he told me. My stubbornness got the best of me and I tried the 24's anyway – sure enough, the magic disappeared. Most of the sound was going over my head and they sounded dry and lifeless. So, should you ignore Mr. Shaw and me, you were warned; 19 inch stands are the way to go.

The Compact 7's here for review came finished in eucalyptus and retail for \$3900 a pair. You can get a pair in cherry for \$3750 if you are more budget minded. The Sound Anchor four post stands will set you back about another \$624 but they are essential to getting the most the Compact 7's have to offer. Don't wuss out with three post stands, get the four post model. *(continued)*

After a few hours of checking alternate locations, the Compact 7's ended up sounding the best in my 16 x 24 foot listening room on the long wall, about two inches from where I have my reference MartinLogan Summits. They are exactly eight feet apart with the tweeters 3'10" from the rear wall with about 10 degrees of toe-in. Both speakers are about 8 feet from the rear wall and the listening position is 8'08" from the tweeters. Aren't digital measuring tools awesome?

For the novice audiophiles in the audience, these are incredibly easy speakers to set up. While a little bit of futzing will help the ultimate imaging performance of the Compact 7's, if you just get a massive set of 19" stands, you are 80% of the way there. A bit of time with the tape measure and a little bit of room treatment will give you the last bit of performance they are capable of, but in short, these are not fussy speakers in the least.

I used a pair of Shunyata Orion speaker cables in my reference system, (which actually are worth more than the speakers!) but also had excellent luck with my favorite reasonably priced speaker cable the ED 415. These are about \$450 a pair and are also a fantastic match for the Compact 7. I tried a few things from Cardas, DH Labs and Tara with good luck, again revealing the un-fussy character of my test subjects.

If you are a new reader, you need to be brought up to speed a bit. My reference speakers are MartinLogan Summits, so I'm a panel guy through and through. I like that "walk through" sound that can often be a bit larger than life, so you know my bias going in. Most box speakers drag me in the door with dynamics, but leave me pretty cold in the tonality department and rarely play big enough to hold my interest.

### Tonemasters To Be Sure

Let's get down to business, shall we? The Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 is one of the most enjoyable speakers I've heard in the last few years, regardless of price. I know these are pretty big words, but I've taken forever to write this review, because I just have so much fun listening to them, that I always put my laptop down and got ten more records out!

What the Compact 7ES-3 offers that I value above all else is balance. They only have strong bass down to about 45hz, (according to Harbeth, they have a measured frequency response of 45-20khz with the grilles on) but what's there is solid, accurate and full of detail. The midrange is also very correct; when you listen to a piano, it sounds like a piano. I can listen to someone play a Steinway on the Harbeths, go in the house and plunk around on my wife's Steinway and hear a very accurate resemblance. Interestingly enough, I didn't notice a huge difference with the grilles off, so once the pictures were taken, I put them back on.

In a small to medium sized room they will move a sufficient amount of air that you are getting a good feel of dynamics. This is a very important aspect of musical reproduction that is often overlooked. Push them too hard and they flatten out instantly. The threshold from playing fairly loud to compressing is very immediate; you will know when you've hit the wall. Fortunately, that wall is at a high enough sound pressure level that all but the most crazed rock and rollers will be more than happy.

The Compact 7's also do a fantastic job at having an airy presentation with just the right amount of decay that again, gives that feeling of acoustic instruments sounding correct. Drop your favorite acoustic guitar record on the turntable and you will see what I mean. The image presented by the Harbeths doesn't extend all the way to the side walls eight feet away like my panels, but with good recordings it does extend well beyond the speaker boundaries.

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**I dare you to find a speaker in this price range that is more musically accurate and balanced.**

### Nothing Sounds Overdone

That's the secret of the Compact 7. No, they won't offer up the dynamic contrast of a Wilson floorstander and they aren't as *big* sounding as my MartinLogans, but they are so enjoyable and musically correct, I dare you to find a speaker in this price range that is more musically accurate and balanced. You might find a speaker that has more bass, or plays a bit louder, but you will be hard pressed to find one that has a decent helping of these characteristics mixed in with the phenomenal tonality that the Harbeths do. (*continued*)



After spending a fair amount of time in my reference system, I tried a number of different amplifiers to see if there were other synergies that made good sense. Should you want a bit of that older British sound, look no further than your favorite valve amplifier. Substituting the McIntosh MC275 for my solid state Premier 350 rounded the corners off of the transients a bit, but was very lush and romantic. The Naim Supernait was another fantastic match, with plenty of power on tap, but a little more of a neutral sound.

My personal nirvana with the compact 7's ended up being the Luxman L590A-II that was reviewed last issue. Though only 30 watts per channel (Class-A), the Luxman had the perfect balance of tone and control, with just a few drops of warmth thrown in. Bottom line; these are very easy speakers to drive as well as set up. Unless you have incredibly dry sounding gear, I can't imagine the Harbeths not working in your system. They were also a fantastic match for my ACT2 and Premier 350, but I doubt that the average owner is going to mate almost 30 thousand dollars worth of amplifier and preamplifier up with \$3900 speakers. They would probably go for the Harbeth Monitor 40's. It is worth noting though, that the speakers were up to the task and revealed significantly more detail than they did with lesser electronics, always the sign of good design.

The Compact 7ES-3 is rated to have a 6 ohm impedance and has a very well designed crossover in the sense that it is equally at home with tube or solid state electronics. It is not an easy feat to get a good speaker to work well with both sides of the fence, but again these are brilliant.

**The Compact 7ES-3 does a phenomenal job at just disappearing in the room and letting you concentrate on the music.**

Using the Luxman's built in phono stage with the Rega P9 and the new Lyra Skala cartridge was an analog lovers dream. Listening to the MoFi pressing of Santana Abraxas, the wind chimes on the opening track just float above and around the speakers in a way that makes you suspect there are a pair of surround speakers hidden somewhere.

Vocals are great too, no matter what your fancy, with voices emerging up and out of the soundfield created. The Compact 7ES-3 does a phenomenal job at just disappearing in the room and letting you concentrate on the music. I really had to push myself to actually analyze these speakers, they offered up such a great musical experience, I just wanted to relax and take it in.

### You Can Hear For Miles

The Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 is a speaker without fault. It does everything that I would ever want a speaker in this price range to do; play music extremely faithfully without coloration or fatigue. Granted, you will have to spend a lot more money to get that last bit of bass extension or concert hall dynamics, but these speakers are faithful to the music in a way that is very rare these days. They have certainly changed my thinking! ●

### The Harbeth Compact 7ES-3

MSRP: \$3900 in Eucalyptus, \$3750 in Cherry

#### MANUFACTURER

Harbeth Audio LTD.  
West Sussex  
England  
www.harbeth.co.uk

#### US DISTRIBUTOR

Fidelis AV  
14 East Broadway  
Derry, NH 03038  
603-437-4769  
www.fidelisav.com

#### Peripherals

**Preamplifier:** Conrad Johnson ACT2/Series 2

**Phono Preamplifiers:** Nagra VPS, ASR Basis Exclusive, Rega IOS, ModWright 9.0SWP SE, Audio Research PH7

**Analog Sources:** Continuum Criterion with Copperhead arm and Dynavector XV-1s, Rega P9 with RB1000 arm and Dynavector XV-1s

**Digital Sources:** Naim CD555, Meridian 808

**Power Amplifier:** Conrad Johnson Premier 350, Classe CA-2100, McIntosh MC275, RedWine Audio 30.2 signature

**Interconnects:** Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares, AudioQuest Sub 3 (to subwoofer)

**Speaker Cables:** Shunyata Orion

**Power Cords:** Essential Sound Products The Essence "Reference", Running Springs Mongoose, Shunyata Anaconda Alpha Helix

**Power Conditioning:** Running Springs Dimitri and Jaco

**Vibration Control:** Finite Element Cerapucs and Ceraballs, Pagode Signature Racks (3) and amplifier stand

**Room Treatment:** GIK 242 panels, GIK Tri-Traps, Sonex Classic

