



The Harbeth Audio Compact 7ES-2 is one of the best-sounding speakers I have had the pleasure of reviewing over the past 20 years. It is also a speaker with a past. No, not a dark past. I mean a history that goes back half a century and more.

Originally introduced in 1988, the 7ES-2 is something of a classic. Unfortunately, for most of the time since, Harbeth has been unavailable in the US. That's now changed, and I can finally review the product.

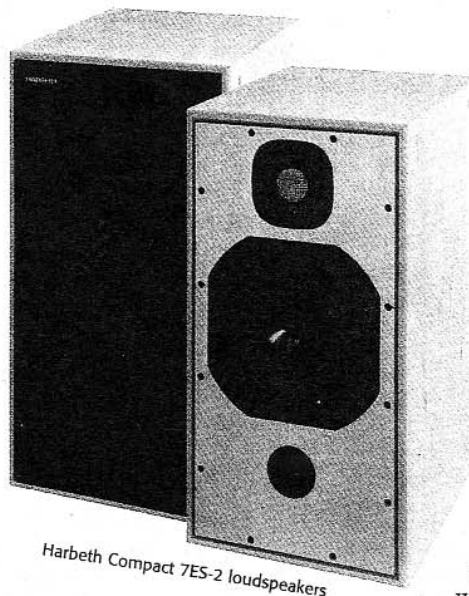
The re-appearance of Harbeth in the US—and of the Compact 7ES-2 in particular—is very good news, especially to those who like classical music and jazz, and who are keen on what came to be known as “the BBC sound.” When you buy a Harbeth, you buy a piece of history.

But before we go back 50 years, I should take you back a mere 26, to 1977, when Harbeth was founded. The name stands for Dudley Harwood and his wife, Elizabeth: Har+Beth. Undoubtedly, Mr. and Mrs. Harwood were inspired by Spen+Dor, aka Spencer and Dorothy Hughes, who established Spondor in 1969.

The 1970s were good times for British hi-fi. Loudspeakers, anyway. The Spondor BC1 epitomized the BBC sound—accurate, pure, clear, and free of colorations. Few other speakers could touch the BC1, except, perhaps, the original Quad ESL electrostatic and the BBC-designed LS3/5A minimonitor. In the late '70s, Bowers & Wilkins (B&W), not directly connected with the BBC, introduced their famous DM7 loudspeaker, which has a similar civilized sound. British loudspeakers ruled.

There was a reason for this.

Beginning in the late 1940s, the BBC's Loudspeaker Research Department conducted serious studies of what was wrong with most commercial loudspeakers. As it turned out, there was plenty. “Hi-fi” did not yet exist as a concept. Speakers were not “high-fidelity”—many people played records through their radios. Those few who had more serious sound systems typically made their own—good sound was a do-it-yourself affair. Loudspeaker drivers were drilled into baffles larger than



Harbeth Compact 7ES-2 loudspeakers

the drive-units themselves, and mounted in open cabinets. Some sound enthusiasts built drive-units into their walls.

I remember a family friend—Mr. Dutton of Seekonk, Massachusetts (you can't make this up)—who, in the early 1950s, had a home theater. Mr. Dutton acquired an Army-surplus 16mm movie projector, and not the silent sort. (Most home-movie enthusiasts owned silent 8mm projectors.) He owned an assortment of discarded newsreels, Three Stooges shorts, and a few Woody Woodpecker cartoons from Castle Films. Unfortunately, Mr. Dutton was starved for software, and 16mm feature films were expensive to rent. His speakers—horns, I believe—were built into the walls.

In a way, I'm surprised there wasn't home theater in the 1950s. This was, perhaps, a failure of imagination among those in the entertainment industry. If 16mm feature films had rented for \$10–\$20 instead of \$50–\$100, more people might have bought projectors. Yes, it would have been pricey—but still possible to sell. The economy and home construction were booming, after all.

Sorry for the digression.

High Fidelity—the concept more than the products—came along at about the same time Elvis did, in the

early to mid-1950s, spurred in part by the popularity of the long-playing record, introduced in 1948. And so did the idea of putting speaker drivers in enclosed cabinets.

The BBC was interested in loudspeaker sound quality for a simple reason: quality control. How do you know your broadcasts—especially your live concert broadcasts—sound good if you don't have proper loudspeakers? And maybe minimonitors at that—something you can actually take on location.

Under D.E.L. Shorter (the British did love initials back then), the Beeb's Loudspeaker Research Department identified what was right and what was wrong with loudspeakers. Quite unintentionally, perhaps, Shorter and his colleagues helped create the British loudspeaker industry. Shorter was head of the Beeb's LRD from the late '40s until 1971. His successor was Dudley Harwood, who ran the department from 1971 until he co-founded Harbeth, in 1977. Harwood is one of three people given credit for the final design of the LS3/5A minimonitor. (The other two are M.A. Whatton and R.W. Mills.)

About 20 years ago, the Harwoods sold Harbeth to Alan Shaw, who has kept the firm small, British, and very much in the BBC loudspeaker tradition. If you really want the BBC sound, your choices are two: Spondor and Harbeth. Recently, Derek Hughes, son of Spencer and Dorothy and designer of many superb speakers in his own right, joined Harbeth. He is said not to be twiddling his thumbs.

When Dudley Harwood left the Beeb in 1977, he carried with him a patent for the use of polypropylene in loudspeaker cones. This led to what Harbeth says was the world's first polypropylene-cone loudspeaker, the original Harbeth HL monitor. To this day, “polyprop” cones are a defining characteristic of Harbeth speakers. (It's fair to note that Spondor was using plastic-cone drivers, featuring

the proprietary Bextrene material, before Harbeth was founded.)

Not everyone sings the praises of polypropylene cones. It's not accidental, perhaps, that polyprop cones came into being at about the time the hi-fi industry was switching from tubes to transistors. (Well, most of the industry, anyway.) There was a loss of sensitivity compared to doped paper cones. The Harbeth Compact 7ES-2 is rated at 87dB/W/m. Its nominal impedance is given as 8 ohms.

But, according to proponents of polyprop—none more passionate than the red-headed Alan Shaw—there is nothing quite like this material for bass/midrange cones. (Apparently, polyprop is not suitable for tweeters.)

There are other materials. Feverish minds, in France and elsewhere, keep coming up with this or that, always with the aim of making a cone lighter and stiffer. Popular in some quarters is Kevlar, the material used in bulletproof vests and briarproof outdoor trousers from Eddie Bauer and L.L. Bean. Kevlar pants. Haven't tried them.

As for Kevlar speakers, listen to Mr. Shaw. You can hear different cone materials, he wrote for his website: "I can't stress this point enough: Kevlar sounds like Kevlar; polypropylene sounds like polyprop; aluminium/magnesium sounds like ringy metal, which it is.

"You have a guide to how a competitor's speaker will sound just by consideration of the cone material from which the bass/mid driver is formed," said Shaw. "You really don't need to hear the speaker once your ears have developed a 'taste' for the different cone materials."

"We are about engineering, not marketing," sniffs Alan Shaw on the Harbeth website. Well, that's for sure.

Enter the original Harbeth Compact 7, in 1988. (The Compact 7ES-2 was not born yesterday.) The Compact 7 was the first model to use Harbeth's proprietary Radial™ cone driver. The cone consists of an injection-molded polymer with a glass microsphere fill, terminated by a nitrile rubber surround. The entire 8" driver is built on a reinforced injection-molded chassis and produced in-house by Harbeth.

"Two-way speakers are a good way to stay out of trouble."

—Henry Kloss

The Compact 7ES-2 also uses a 1" ferrofluid-cooled, magnesium-alloy dome tweeter custom-made by SEAS, of Denmark. The tweeter is protected by a wire mesh. Just two drivers, crossed over at 3.3kHz.

"Two-way speakers are a good way to stay out of trouble," the late Henry Kloss once told me. Most of his designs for Acoustic Research, KLH, and Advent used just two drivers and a single crossover. "You can get better integration, dealing with just two drivers," said Henry.

Another word is "coherence."

Many of my favorite speakers have been two-ways. The Spendor BC1 (though it did use a supertweeter). The Sonus Faber Minima FM2. The B&W DM7 (passive radiator instead of a port). Having the Compact 7ES-2 in my listening room reminded me, once again, that a lot of "progress" probably isn't. I am especially skeptical of moving-coil speakers with lots of drivers. What could their designers possibly have been thinking? And who are those designers, anyway? Sorry to be a snob, but I like loudspeakers with a pedigree. With a past, if you will.

The "Compact" part of the 7ES-2's name is a misnomer. "Compact" compared to what? Not to the typical stand-mounted minimonitor, that's for sure. The 7ES-2 is 20.3" high by 10.6" wide by 12.3" deep and weighs 30 lbs, but it is small in comparison to larger Harbeth monitors and to the classic Spendor BC1 and SP1. It goes on stands from 16" to 20" high, which add about another \$200 to the cost per pair. Lightweight, open-frame stands are fine, and possibly preferable to heavy, lead-filled stands.

And it's biwireable, if spending more money on wire is your thing.

Why not build a floorstander?

Why, reflections from the floor—a muddying or muffling of the sound. Fashion be hanged! Get those speakers up on proper stands. Floorstanders might look nicer and be easier to sell, but do they *sound* nicer?

The Compact 7ES-2 is unfashionable in another way. Harbeth hasn't gone in for a thin cabinet, where the driver baskets are sliced off to achieve a narrow profile and, supposedly, superior imaging. I laugh my head off about this. Few speakers can touch the Compact 7ES-2 when it comes to creating and maintaining a believable soundstage.

Be unfashionable yourself and leave the 7ES-2's "edgeless" grilles in place. These slide into a groove that goes all along the edges of the front of the cabinet. The speakers look better with the grilles, in my opinion, and sound a little better too. Especially with the grilles in place, I did not suffer from metal-dome tweeteritis.

For that matter, be unfashionable in paying only \$2200 for a pair of loudspeakers (plus \$200 for stands, of course). But you might already own suitable stands. Hell, you could be *really* unfashionable, in audiophile terms, and put these up on some kind of architectural pedestal. Just spike the bottom of the pedestals.

"You paid only \$2200 for your loudspeakers? You can't be a serious audiophile."

But who wants to be? Being a serious audiophile creates angst. The life of my late friend Lars might have been shortened, in part, because he took hi-fi so seriously and never lightened up.

Rock fans and others looking for excitement can go elsewhere, and no doubt will. Those looking for musical involvement with more serious—or, let us say, traditional—musical genres might be thoroughly enchanted by the Compact 7ES-2. I was. This was one of the few speakers with which I did not get the constant itch to substitute my reference Quad ESL-988 electrostatics.

No, I'm not going to make the mistake of giving up Quads again. I still love electrostatics' speed, their stunning clarity, the total absence of cabinet colorations, having no crossover, etc. But a pair of basic Quad ESL-988s now costs \$6500—a very good value, to be sure, at a time when many speakers sell for wacko prices. Those who love Quads but who have less money to spend, or for whom electrostatics might pose place-

Contacts

Fidelis Audio/Video, 303 S. Broadway, Salem, NH 03079. Tel: (603) 894-4226. Fax: (603) 894-4471. Web: www.fidelisav.com.

Harbeth Audio, Ltd., 3 Enterprise Park, Lindfield, Haywards Heath, W. Sussex RH16 2LH, England, UK. Tel: (44) (0)1444-484371. Fax: (44) (0)1444-487629. Web: www.harbeth.co.uk.

Parasound Products, Inc., 950 Battery Street, San Francisco, CA 94111. Tel: (415) 397-7100. Fax: (415) 397-0144. Web: www.para-sound.com.

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Unfortunately, there is a misunderstanding here about the cone material used in the HL Compact 7ES2. Whilst it is true that Dudley Harwood, founder of Harbeth discovered and patented polypropylene as a loudspeaker cone material, Harbeth's UK Govt. funded R&D programme resulted in RADIAL, an advanced cone material that is superior to, and replaces polypropylene.

ment problems...well, those folks can look to the Harbeth Compact 7ES-2.

In fact, even if you have only \$1000 or so to spend, give the Harbeths a listen. They're that good. And this is not the UK or Europe, but America—if you don't have the money, borrow it. Some things are worth going in hock for.

The 7ES-2's standard finishes are eucalyptus and cherry; both are fashionably light. Other finishes are available for extra money and a longer wait. And speaking of cabinets, that's another defining characteristic of Harbeth speakers. Sorry to turn historical again, but...

Part of the joint tradition of D.E.L. Shorter, Dudley Harwood, and the BBC was some hard thinking about the role of speaker cabinets. Remember, in the late 1940s and early '50s, most drivers were mounted on baffles fronting open cabinets. The idea of trapping air to enhance bass was a new one.

The cabinet works for you or it works against you.

D.E.L. Shorter and Dudley Harwood didn't say that, so far as I know; but Franco Serblin, of Sonus Faber, told me something like it. You tune the speaker cabinet like a musical instrument. Speaker designer Renaud de Vergnette, of Triangle, believes much the same thing, although he's a little less in love with cabinets as furniture. His aim is to let the energy escape.

As it turns out, this is the classic BBC approach. No so-called "acoustical suspension" speakers here, where the entire speaker is sealed—sometimes with something like Mortite—and bass response is constipated inside. The problems with acoustical-suspension speakers, to my ears, are not only less sensitivity but also a muffling, muddying, and slowing of the sound. When did you ever hear an acoustical-suspension speaker described as "electrostatic-like"?

Good sound has to do with the way you release sound from the cabinet. Quickly is good. But the cabinet should live and breathe, according to the BBC tradition. To that end, it should flex. And be ported.

In the mid-1960s, BBC engineers developed a technique for a model called the LS3/4. The idea was to screw the front baffle and rear panel into a wooden sub-frame by means of "lossy joints." This created the least resonant cabinet. The speaker could "breathe"—sound could escape. This is why the walls of the Harbeth Compact 7ES-2 are so thin.

The lossy cabinet became a feature of many British loudspeakers, including the LS3/5A and various models

from Spendor, Harbeth, Epos, and others. Undoubtedly, the cabinet design is part of why the Compact 7ES-2 sounds as it does.

And the sound?

As I've hinted, glorious. If I were a music reviewer instead of an audio reviewer, and if I could neither afford nor accommodate a pair of Quad ESL-988 electrostatics, the Compact 7ES-2 is a speaker I might choose. It's for sure a speaker I shall recommend. And who knows? This pair might go in our living room. The problem is, I don't exactly need another pair of speakers. But you might.

If I were a music reviewer Harbeth's Compact 7ES-2 is a speaker I might choose.

Granted, the frequency response is given as 48Hz–20kHz, ± 3 dB in free space, with the grille on and listening off-axis. (By the way, I found the speakers sounded best when toed-in ever so slightly, maybe 5°.) Bass freaks can go elsewhere and get the sound they deserve, perhaps. Or they can add a subwoofer with all the attendant matching problems.

"They need a subwoofer," opined my friend Marc, who is very much the subwoofering sort.

"The hell they do," I exclaimed.

Deep bass is almost always more trouble than it's worth. You shake the floor. You excite room resonances. You muddy the sound. You slow the presentation. I won't put a subwoofer under my Quads, either.

Not that you'll get much approval from any audiophile-nerd friends for having a pair of Compact 7ES-2s: So (relatively) inexpensive. So old-fashioned. So *déjà vu*.

I laugh my evil laugh.

If you like classical music and jazz—or any music that isn't electronic—you really should audition the Harbeth Compact 7ES-2, even if \$2200 is a stretch. This is one of the finest-sounding loudspeakers I have encountered in 20 years of scribbling.

For most of my listening, I used my full Mac system. Well, almost full: the McIntosh MCD 205 CD changer, C2200 tube preamp, and MC 2102 power amp. Even though McIntosh has

recently changed hands—they're now owned by the Denon and Marantz group—you don't see *them* closing the factory in Binghamton, New York, and shifting production to who knows where. Mac should be around for at least as long as I am, and for very good reasons: Engineering. Good sound. Value. Service. Actually, the new ownership bodes very well for McIntosh, which is a national treasure...like Harley-Davidson. (Sorry. I had to get in the plug. And the dig.)

Have I told you how good the full Mac system sounds? It sounds sensationally great with great loudspeakers, and the Harbeth Compact 7ES-2s qualify.

What did I hear? Well, in the traditional BBC sense, nothing. Nothing irritating or off-putting, that is. There is that relatively low sensitivity—perhaps unavoidable. There is that missing deep bass—again, unavoidable. Otherwise, the 7ES-2s sang and imaged like crazy.

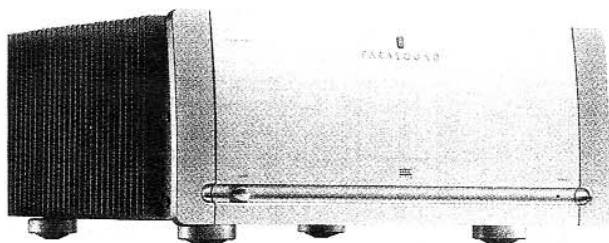
What I noticed most of all was a total freedom from listening fatigue—even on my beloved 1920s and '30s popular music recordings and historic classical CDs. (Now more than ever, I listen for content, not for sound. But good sound is nice.) This is not to say the treble was rolled-off or closed-in. It wasn't, especially not after the speakers had run in—a process that took about 200 hours, give or take.

I was enchanted. Instruments were so full, so ripe, so lush I could almost pinch each musician's ass. I'm thinking female musicians. (My wife, Marina, tells me to behave myself and be politically correct.) When the recording was good, there was a voluptuous quality to the sound. Yet I detected no artificial sweetening. There was no cloying quality.

Quite the contrary. Where Bruckner's brass blared—as in the late Georg Tintner's cycle of the 11 symphonies, in a Naxos "The White Box" 11-CD set (Naxos 8.501101)—the horns positively brayed. As they should.

The Harbeth Compact 7ES-2 is one of the 10 or so finest speakers I have encountered in more than two decades of reviewing—up there with such classics as the original Quad and the ESL-63, the Spendor BC1, and the LS3/5A. The fact that the speaker is relatively affordable is a bonus. The only downside, outside of bass extension, is that sensitivity rating. Harbeth recommends 25–150W of power. I don't know about 25W in most North American listening rooms, but 80–100W should serve you just fine.

I did hie the speakers into our living room, where I drove them with the



Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblock amplifier

Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblock amplifiers: a mighty 400W each into 8 ohms.

Heh-heh-heh. *That'll* teach them polypropylene cones!

While not taking back what I said above about my (mainly) tube Mac system, the Parasound amplifiers were superb—grabbing the bottom-end ass (oops! 'scuse me) while retaining a level of sweetness and delicacy I can only dream of achieving in real life.

All kidding aside, these are wonderful speakers. And now Harbeth Audio has a dedicated, determined US importer. Hats off to Walter Swanbon, proprietor of Fidelis Audio/Video, in Salem, New Hampshire. Walter wanted to sell Harbeth in his shop, so he became the importer himself.

Sam's Product of the Year

Actually, it might have been the Harbeth Audio Compact 7ES-2. Not eligible this year, alas, having been reviewed later than October. So my pick for 2003 is the Parasound Halo JC 1 amplifier, a pair of which I own.

I know—the magic of tubes. But for a reviewer, especially, it's nice to have a pair of unimpeachably powerful (I've been reading too many music reviews) solid-state amps. These are rated at 400W into 8 ohms, twice that into 4 ohms. Apparently, according to John Atkinson's measurements in the February 2003 issue, the Halos are capable of more than 1000W into 4 ohms. Amps of this power do suggest the need for a dedicated line, which I now have.

"These amps take a long time to break in," Richard Schram, president of Parasound, warned me.

Boy, was he ever right.

It wasn't that the Halos failed to please after 100 or so hours of use. They did, with a surprisingly sweet, seductive sound that I don't usually associate with solid-state. But it took many more weeks—months, even—and hundreds more hours before the JC 1s came into their full glory, which is...glorious. Until the amps were broken in, they lacked some immediacy and transparency. They needed to develop.

For a brief time, I had a very expensive

pair of amplifiers in house. Even though the Parasound JC 1s were not yet fully broken in, I preferred their sound, in some respects—for about a fifth the price. There was, right from the start, a cer-

tain ingratiating quality. Truth of timbre. Smoothness. You get the picture.

The remarkable things are the build quality, the looks, the price. Before you blow \$10–\$20k or more on some amps that were recommended by a reviewer who didn't buy them, give a listen to the Parasounds, which this reviewer *did* purchase. I am not saying they're the best amps ever. I don't know. But I'm floored by what's on offer for \$6k. Kudos to John Curl (the "JC" does *not* stand for "Jesus Christ"), Bob Crump, and Carl Thompson, who collaborated on the design; and to Richard Schram for bringing it to market. Don't buy an amp without hearing these, even if you can't afford them.

Several things:

For all the power, the Halo JC 1 sounded delicate. Perhaps it's better to think of it as a 25W class-A amplifier (which it is) than as a class-A/B power-house (which it also is).

It does run hot. But you can turn down the bias, via a switch on the back, to the point where it runs about 10W in class-A, though it still runs warm. Interestingly, the sound changed very little. Yes, it was perceptibly better, especially over time, with the juice goosed. But not dramatically so. Lower bias is useful for casual listening, or on hot nights in summer. In fall and winter, I like the extra heat.

Another thing: The Halo JC 1s were fine with solid-state preamps or with my passive Purest Sound Systems P500, but the Parasounds' protection circuits did not take well to two tube line-stage preamps I used. I don't want to get into naming names or trouble-shooting—tube preamps do sometimes lead to problems with solid-state amps. If there's any vestige of DC at its inputs, the Halo JC 1 will, apparently, protect and protest, clicking and eventually shutting down. You may want to go passive yourself, or use a solid-state preamp.

Rethink my devotion to tubes? Well, once again—as with the Pathos Classic One last month—yes.

By the way, Parasound's Halo T3 tuner is a winner, too. But I've run out of space. ☒