

Speakers

## Harbeth M30.1

**Price:** (in Poland, per pair): 11,100 PLN | 12,300 PLN in Rosewood veneer finish

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**Product provided for testing by:** Audio System

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### 35TH ANNIVERSARY OF HARBETH - 1977-2012!

THE Monitor 30 (or M30) was developed in 1997 to work in the BBC studios. Its first, "home" version was called the Monitor 30 Domestic. The speaker was designed to be a successor to the BBC LS5/9 studio monitor. This year we celebrate its 15th anniversary!

The original M30 shared the tweeter with the flagship M40.1 and had a mid/bass drive unit of the same diameter as and looking similarly to the mid-woofer in the top Harbeth model. The diaphragm in the M30, however, was made of the first version of the RADIAL plastic material patented by Harbeth while the mid-woofer cone in the M40.1 boasts its newer version called RADIAL-2X (according to Alan Shaw on the manufacturer's online forum). Although the driver in the M40.1 looks almost identical to the one in the M30, it has been optimized to work as a midrange driver in a closed chamber.

The launch of the Monitor 30.1 Domestic coincides with the 35th anniversary of Harbeth – wish the name had been changed to the M35... As could be expected the new model features a new very sturdy RADIAL-2 mid/bass woofer. The tweeter has also been upgraded. Harbeth manufactures most of their driver units in-house, except for tweeters. The latter are manufactured by SEAS from Norway, to Harbeth owner Alan Shaw's required specifications. A new, refined crossover has been redesigned with the latest sophisticated computer-modelling software.

#### Design objectives

My primary goals - says Alan Shaw - were to improve the integration of the two drive units for a wider listening experience



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and to optimise the frequency response. Both of these were solved with a comprehensive review of the crossover network.

Improved computer simulation since 1997 has definitely allowed me to push the audio boundaries, and truly the M30.1 is a great all-rounder at home and in the studio.

From the outside, the new model looks almost identical to the previous one. The only exception is that now it sports a single pair of speaker terminals in place of a previous double pair and that's a good move. It is still, however, a two-way front-vented design. The vent is very short, which makes it close to a lossy cabinet design.

The speakers are beautiful – I received for a review a model in Rosewood veneer finish, the same as my M40.1 being part of my reference system. I'm deeply in love with my M40.1, like all my family. I have had them for almost two years and each time I sit down to listen I'm glad that they are with me. However, it is the M30.1 that swept us off our feet – they look like a child of the M40.1, as if they sprouted out of the bigger model – very similar, but even cuter looking...

The speakers are designed, manufactured and packaged as pairs, with a serial number bearing encoded information about which one is left and right. It is all about the best pairing of the speakers. The manufacturer has every single copy stored in a database in case the speaker needed driver exchange.

Although the speakers are paired, they are not a mirror image of each other. The vent in both speakers is on the left side, above the tweeter. Only the front grilles mirror each other; each sports a Harbeth logo so the logos can be either to the inside or the outside of the enclosures. The speakers should have their grilles on – that's how they're designed and measured. Except that they lose then some of their incredible beauty.

The Harbeth stands are a whole subject on their own that applies to all models. I have written before about associated problems and how they can be solved, discussing the stands for my M40.1 custom made by Mr. Ken Ishiguro, the owner of Acoustic Revive. I will only say that except for this one spectacular example, the Japanese use exclusively wooden, light, open stands looking like stools (tabourets). In other countries it is different, but there's something to it... What's important is that the tweeters are at ear height.



www.harbeth.co.uk

## A SELECTION OF RECORDINGS USED DURING AUDITIONS:

*Assemblage 23, Bruise. Limited Edition, Accession Records, A 128, 2 x CD (2012).*

*Carol Sloane, Little Girl Blue, Sinatra Society of Japan, XQAM-1036, HQCD (2010).*

*Dead Can Dance, Anastasis, [PIAS] Entertainment Group, PIASR311CDX, "Special Edition Hardbound Box Set", CD+USB drive 24/44,1 WAV (2012).*

*Depeche Mode, Enjoy The Music...04, Mute, XLADBONG34, maxi-SP (2004).*

*Diary of Dreams, Panik Manifesto, Accession Records, EFA 23452-2, CD (2002).*

*Elgar*

*Delius, Cello Concertos, wyk. Jacqueline Du Pré, EMI Classic, 9559052, 2 x SACD/CD (1965/2012).*

*Ella Fitzgerald, Joe Pass, Take It Easy, Pablo/JVC, JVCXR-0031-2, (1973/1987).*

*Hilary Hann, Hilary Hann Plays Bach, Sony Classical, SK 62793, Super Bit Mapping, 2 x CD (1997).*

*Imogen Heap, Speak For Yourself, Sony Music [Japan], SICP-1387, CD (2007).*

*Novika, Tricks of Life, Kayax, 013, CD (2006).*

*Pat Metheny Group, Offramp, ECM, ECM 1216, CD (1982).*

*Portishead. Dummy, Go! Disc Limited/Universal Music [Japan], UICY-20164, SHM-CD (1994/2011).*

*Radiohead, The King Of Limbs, Ticker Tape Ltd, TICK001CDJ, Blu-spec CD.*

*The Montgomery Brothers, Groove Yard, Riverside/JVC, JVCXR-0018-2, XRCD (1961/1994).*

*This Mortal Coil, HD-CD Box SET: It'll End In Tears, Filigree & Shadow, Blood, Dust & Guitars, 4AD [Japan], TMCBOX1, 4 x HDCD, (2011).*

*Vangelis, Spiral, RCA/BMG Japan, 176 63561, K2, SHM-CD (1977/2008).*

*Yo-Yo Ma & Bobby McFerrin, Hush, Sony Music/Sony Music Hong Kong Ltd., 543282, No. 0441, K2HD Mastering, CD (1992/2012).*

Every speaker I review is primarily driven by my reference amplifier which for me is a reference voltage and current source with high damping factor, ultra-wide frequency response and minimal distortion. It's sort of a laboratory device to which I hook up the reviewed speakers. The Soullution 710, for that's what I'm talking about, sounds insanely good but its primary characteristic is "disappearing" from the audio path. If, however, I hear that in that configuration given speakers exhibit some - bigger or smaller - anomalies or I simply feel that they need another approach, I try to listen to them driven by something completely different, something that turned its OWN CHARACTER into an advantage. I search, inquire, write emails, make phone calls -

shortly speaking I try to determine what is recommended, what has already proved and why. With the Harbeths I knew right away what they needed. . .

First, however, I took them for a compulsory round with the already mentioned reference amplifier. In that combination the Harbeths immediately showed very colorful, full midrange and surprisingly deep low bass. The latter was strong and full on tracks from the Portishead album. It really rocked. The bass was also low and deep on This Mortal Coil tracks, further accompanied by fantastically sized soundstage that added to the recordings momentum and scale, not resulting from the speakers' dynamics, somewhat curtailed at the macro level.

Treble was slightly but not markedly rounded. The frequency band containing the frequencies of the 'p' and 'f' consonants was even slightly stronger than that of the M40.1, reminding the P3ESR (see HERE). It wasn't a sharpening for the 's' and 'c' were in a good proportion to the rest of the frequency band, but rather a slight "refreshing" of the band. When the speakers appeared on the market, Alan Shaw wrote of their "openness", their better detailness - and that's easily audible.

Midrange is what's most important about these speakers and nobody expected anything else. It is formed in a characteristic way. Upper midrange is withdrawn which, compared with other speakers, makes the M30.1 seemingly darker and less open. However, excellent resolution of all Harbeth designs does not allow any sound muddiness, any dampening - there's still a lot going on there! - even a short demo will show that.

The most energetic sonic range is part of the frequency band between 300 and 800 Hz. Right exactly where human voice is "born". All vocals are accordingly slightly promoted and enhanced. That is, however, achieved by their "perfecting" or "sprucing", not by pushing them forward. These are speakers that allow the listener to enjoy the music, experience it not only on an intellectual but also an equally important emotional level. They don't force anything; hence the absence of instruments thrown right in front of our faces although the speakers can be generally described as "warm".

As I said, the M30.1 has its own recognizable character. One could say that it's a "trademark" character of Alan Shaw's speakers. That's a valid assumption, however one must bear in mind that there are actually two lines in this manufacturer offer - although very similar and both markedly different than other manufacturers, yet distinct from each other. One is a very warm sound. That's it. A good representative of that line was the M30.1 predecessor, the M30 (Monitor 30 Domestic, see HERE) and the Compact 7SE-3 (see HERE). On the other hand, we have more accurate, more expressive speakers such as the P3ESR and the Super HL5 (see HERE). In this company the M40.1 is a separate being, beyond these boundaries. The M30.1 sonics set it somewhere in the middle, between the Super HL5 and the M30.



## Harbeth M30.1 + Heed Audio Obelisk Si/X-2

Listening to the M30.1 we have an impression of their high dynamics. It's not entirely true; after all they are stand mount speakers. That impression, however, is overwhelming and mainly due to excellent dynamics of individual instruments; micro rather than macro dynamics.

The speakers driven by the reference amplifier quite clearly show the modification of the frequency band. There are two peaks – at treble (the 'p' and 'f' sounds) and at higher bass. While I didn't mind the former at all, the latter over time bothered me more and more. Mainly because it resulted in a rather uniform sound. Strong and expressive bass on the majority of recordings was a bit tedious. I had to do something about it.

I could go on describing my quest, coming up with various "inventions", digging through the archives, but it's not necessary. Perhaps it might help my image or something but I won't go there. The truth is more banal: I knew immediately what I should do.

Do you remember Audio system for the mature, an article in which I described my proposition of a system for discerning music lovers that can be had for pretty decent money? If not, I encourage you to have a look [HERE](#) – it will be easier to understand the situation with the Harbeths. In short, there are setups that sound good anytime, anywhere. In that particular



case, I described the Spondor SP1 speakers and the Heed Obelisk Si amplifier (old version). Each of them had its own distinct character, quite similar by the way, but put together they went far beyond the usual sum of the parts. They made beautiful music. It's no different in this case.

After finishing the review for "Audio" of the Heed Audio Obelisk Si with the Dactilus 1.2 DAC card and the Obelisk DT transport I felt unsatisfied. It's not even because of the measurements that showed that the amplifier has very low power margin, high noise and high distortion, since I know all that from tube amps. My primary concern was that the option highly recommended by the manufacturer, i.e. making the Obelisk Si the center of one's audio system, with a digital input and a DAC didn't quite prove itself. Analog inputs make the amplifier sound incomparably better! The review compared a particular system against another similar system (from Cyrus), where the DAC built in the amplifier was incomparably better and there's nothing I could do about it. Therefore, it seems to me that Heed needs to verify its view on the said DAC board. It's a cool little unit but clearly from a much lower league than the Obelisk Si! And you can't put together so equipped amplifier and transport in a system comparable with proposals from the competition. The Obelisk Si must have a much better source!

Therefore, the Harbeth M30.1 came very handy. For the Obelisk

Si is their natural partner, as if tailored to measure. The amplifier costing 5,590 PLN (now available in white - have a look at the photos), beefed up with the X-2 outboard power supply for 3,190 PLN allowed me to bring out the best from the speakers. Yes, that's right: the reviewed speakers sounded now more satisfying, more "appropriate" than with the thirty times more expensive reference amplifier. Of course not because the Heed, even equipped with the X-2 power supply is better than the Souolution 710 and the Polaris III [Custom Version] which I use; that's not my point. It's because the amplifier sounds very synergistic with the Harbeths (not just the M30.1); they make a true SYSTEM.

In such company the Harbeth M30.1 still had rather pointy, somewhat colored higher bass, sometimes a little dull. That's characteristic of these columns, something you need to live with. Now, however, the bass was substantial, so to speak, and simply correct, encased in "soft tissue" that can normally be heard with much more expensive speakers (and larger, to begin with).

Midrange deepened further, gaining even more breath. Although the speakers damp decays fairly quickly, that does not apply to musical instruments themselves or their direct sound that is thick and full, with excellent 3D depth, showing contours, not just a flat image.

Sound volume with the Heed was slightly lower than with the Souolution but still, in comparison to other speakers, its size was insane. It was also true about soundstage - very expansive, large, wide and quite deep. I once already mentioned that – the Harbeths interoperate differently with the listening room than classical speakers. Because their body resonates, playing an important role in generating sound, the sound is emitted in a fairly wide field in a wider than usual range (not only to the front and the higher, the more directional). The result is something like a "sphere" of sound, a rather warm sphere with us sitting in its center. There is no high selectivity or detailness, as they are commonly understood. The sounds are clear; fluid and rounded rather than pointy. I hope that my description is understandable.

Treble was a bit calmer than with the Souolution, but that's what the Heed sounds like, slightly warm. It did not, however, lack resolution nor was it damped. I would even say that it now seemed to be more sophisticated in decays, depth, and richness. Cymbal crashes left afterimage, something like aftertaste; they were not dry.

Actually, 'dry' is the exact opposite of what can be written about the M30.1. It's a rich, full sound, saturated, if not sometimes slightly oversaturated - certainly not dry or thin. Everything is shown in that way, which on the one hand shows that color differentiation here is averaged but which will at the same time be strongly preferred by most participants of this game, i.e. people listening to music, as being closer to what they expect from listening at home. Analytical speakers that lack fullness can sound extremely impressive. However, if they are not refined, if they don't show internal sound structure, just its outline, they become terribly tiring.

The M30.1 will never get us anywhere near that point, unless our eyes close themselves late at night. Their sound is immersive, primarily due to its richness. With these speakers you can listen to the solo violin, as on the Hilary Hann's album, or to electronic music of the likes of Diary of Dreams and Assemblage 23 (it sounded fantastic!), as well as watch movies.

The latter will be a real revelation for many movie lovers. Nothing ruins a home cinema session as much as squeaky, dry, unnatural actors' voices, coming from a flat, low-cost central speaker below the TV screen. People – don't go there! Most 5.1/7.1 surround systems suffer from an inappropriate use of multi-channel system technical capabilities and attribute mono sound to the central channel, without expanding it to the sides. Watching the same movie in stereo, with the M30.1, we can hear the soundtrack much better; the voices are simply natural.

## Conclusion

And that is perhaps the key characteristic of the speaker, although non-musical - its versatility and universality. It is generally believed that Harbeths are speakers dedicated to special occasions, recordings with vocals in the lead role, or chamber music, possibly some electronic music not requiring high sound volume. For one, it's not entirely untrue (that type of music will sound excellent, other types just very good), and two, the M30.1 as well as the M40.1 actually show just the opposite. They are exceptionally versatile designs, slightly warm but also open, with which everything will sound at least good. Everything, with no exceptions. Poorly recorded material will be enhanced and purist recordings will show such micro-dynamics, so fast drum hits and cymbal crashes that most speakers considered to be "fast" and transparent will seem broken in comparison. Their character when it comes to color is slightly different than previous designs from Harbeth and it clearly shows its designer Alan Shaw's attempts to exceed certain limitations that have always been present in his speakers. What we are talking about here is closed sound, dark color and low macro dynamics. You can hear now that the tweeter is more opened and that higher bass is slightly "tweaked". I think that's OK but I wouldn't go any further. In my opinion that particular tweeter, even though it's very, very good, simply can't be pushed further and shouldn't be too much exposed.

Each speaker design is a set of compromises and tradeoffs, usually quite large. It is also true in this case. However, they are so well chosen that the sound is stunning. And surprisingly versatile. It's just that you need to stay alert and carefully select the accompanying components. It won't do to connect the best amplifier available on the store shelf, because it will likely be "fail". Likewise, you can't connect just any tube, because the fail will be even more disastrous. What you need is an amplifier with "character". And it has to be a character agreeing with Harbeth's vision of the world. I have already written a lot about one possible direction - it's the Heed Obelisk Si with the X-2 external power supply. I used the 180i interconnect from the new Explorer line of cables from Siltech, costing 2,190 PLN (1 m) and I'd stick to that. At the time of this review the Polish distributor did not yet have speaker cable and power cord from the same line.

Another obvious choice is Leben. Each version of the CS300

## " Stand-mount speakers from Harbeth belonging to the prestigious Mastering Series Professional Monitor Speaker line."

amplifier will be spot on. Ideally, though, the CS600P (or the CS1000P, but in this case I'd prefer the older model). The third possibility is ASR Emitter I (a review of the Emitter II can be found HERE). I heard the Harbeths driven by these amps in many systems and they sounded great. Surely there are other equally interesting matches, so it's worth experimenting. However, I write about what I know well and what worked not only for me - the above examples are "sure things".

The M30.1 are not ideal speakers, because you can hear color modification and their differentiation, whether of macro dynamics or of color or, finally, of space is somewhat uniform. The Harbeths simply see the world of music through rose-colored glasses. If

that's something we like they may well become speakers for life. If I had enough space (or a second, smaller system) I'd buy them and listen to them, with different electronics, in turns with my M40.1.

## Design

The M30.1 are stand-mount speakers from Harbeth belonging to the prestigious Mastering Series Professional Monitor Speaker line from that manufacturer. The reason is that there are two versions differing only in finish - a home version called Monitor 30.1 Domestic and a professional studio version called Monitor 30.1. In short, the M30.1.

They are stand-mount, two-way speaker design with vented midbass woofer. The vent is located on the front panel, to the side, above the tweeter. The tweeter is a soft dome design with a heavy, cast front and mesh in front of the diaphragm, a large, dual-drive system and a large compartment in the rear, damping in a controlled manner the energy coming from the back side of the diaphragm. The T25-HB tweeter is manufactured by Norwegian SEAS to Alan Shaw's specifications (hence the letters 'HB'). The



tweeter belongs to the prestigious Excel series. Its 26 mm dome is called Sonotex. The LFHAR200S woofer is manufactured by Harbeth. It has a very stiff, heavy, cast basket and a large magnet with a second, small ring (magnetic shielding?). Its diaphragm is made from material patented by Harbeth, called RADIAL-2. It's a form of polypropylene. The front suspension is reverse fold rubber. The tweeter is bolted to the front baffle from the front and the woofer from behind. The new woofer differs from the previous RADIAL version primarily with revised suspension (according to Alan Shaw's blog).

Cabinet design is very characteristic for this manufacturer. The walls are not very thick but they are solid. They are strengthened from within with two wooden braces forming the letter 'T'. Midbass woofer magnet rests at their intersection.

**TECHNICAL DATA** (according to the manufacturer)

Design: two-way, ported  
Frequency response: 50 Hz - 20 kHz (+/- 3 dB in free space, measured from 1 m with grilles on)  
Nominal impedance: 6 Ω  
Sensitivity: 85 dB / 1 W / 1 m  
Suggested amplifier output power: ideally over 45 W  
Maximum power: 150 W  
Dimensions (HxWxD): 460 x 277 x 285 mm  
Finish: cherry, tiger ebony, eucalyptus, maple and rosewood  
Weight (each): 13.4 kg

## Build

The front and rear are not glued but bolted onto the frame with multiple bolts. The crossover board is mounted to the rear panel from within, and the rest of surface is damped with a thin layer of bitumen mat. The crossover is quite extensive - one can see four



Power cables AC (all equipment): Acrolink Mexcel 7N-PC930  
 Power strip: Acoustic Revive RTP-4eu ULTIMATE  
 Stand: Base; under all component - Resonance control: Finite  
 Elemente Ceraball under the CD, Audio Revive RAF-48 platform  
 under the CD and preamplifier, Pro Audio Bono PAB SE platform  
 under Leben CS300 XS [E]

Online review at:  
<http://highfidelity.pl/@main-334&lang=en>

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iron-core coils and eight capacitors (polypropylene). Apparently it features a bass trap to linearize impedance, making the speakers an easier load for lower powered amplifiers. Interestingly, the crossover board comes from an older model, the 2007 version, with mounting space for a double pair of terminals. As you can see Alan does not like to waste anything; it can always come in handy. The interior is damped with thick layers of foam - both on the sides and the rear.

The signal is fed via a single pair of gold-plated terminals, the same as in the M40.1. That is a weak point of this design - the terminals can't be properly fastened and are of quite poor quality. The front grille is spread out on a metal frame that is mounted on the front baffle. The manufacturer recommends listening with the grilles on.

Due to the speaker's unusual size/aspect ratio it is recommended to use a slightly lower than normal stand - I think that the lower edge of the speaker should be about 40-45 cm from the floor, depending on how high we sit. The tweeter should be at ears height.

A beautiful speaker, beautiful engineering, beautiful sound. A true classic.

#### DISTRIBUTION IN POLAND

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 Website: www.audiosystem.com.pl

#### MANUFACTURER: [www.harbeth.co.uk](http://www.harbeth.co.uk)

##### Associated-equipment

CD player: Ancient Audio Lektor Air V-edition,  
 Phono preamplifier: RCM Audio Sensor Prelude IC,  
 Cartridges: Miyajima Laboratory SHILABE, Miyajima Laboratory KANSUI,  
 Preamplifier: Ayon Audio Polaris III [Signature Version] with Regenerator Power Supply  
 Power amplifier: Soullution 710  
 Integrated amplifier/headphone amplifier: Leben CS300 XS Custom Version,  
 Loudspeakers: Harbeth M40.1 Domestic,  
 Headphones: Sennheiser HD800, AKG K701, Ultrason PROLine 2500, Beyerdynamic DT-990 Pro; 600 & #8486; version, Interconnect:  
 CD-preamp: Acrolink Mexcel 7N-DA6300, preamp-power amp: Acrolink 8N-A2080III Evo,  
 Speaker cable: Tara Labs Omega Onyx,

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 beautiful engineering,  
 beautiful sound. A true  
 classic.”**

