

# The Graham Chartwell LS3/5

## The Student Exceeds the Master

By Jeff Dorgay

Even though they won't go to 11, it seems fitting to start breaking in the Graham LS3/5 speakers with Spinal Tap's black album. Originally doing duty on my desktop, between a 27" iMac, streaming a lot of Tidal tracks, powered by the Nagra 300i, this was an intimate way to listen to music, in a small room, nearfield. After having this experience, I don't think I can listen to headphones terribly seriously anymore – the LS3/5s in tight quarters feel like being inside a pair of headphones that should be on one of the heads at Mount Rushmore – the presentation is massive. "Heavy Duty" never sounded better or more fun.

In the middle of my giddiness, Mr. O'Brien popped by to pick up a few things and being overzealous with the volume control on Keith Richards' "Wicked as it Seems" he nods his head saying, "yeah, that's where you would have blown the originals." No kidding. If you're a fan of the LS3/5a, you know the originals definitely can't go to 11. The new Chartwell LS3/5s get close to ten in a small room. This is no small achievement.



For those of you that just think these speakers look like a mega overpriced pair of little monitors, they are not only special but worth every penny asked. And they come with a rich history. In the service of keeping this review brief, here's a link to nearly everything you need to know about the mighty mini British monitor: <http://www.g4dco.uk/ls35a/library.html>

**Why no "A"?**

Originally developed by Dudley Harwood (who would eventually go on to start Harbeth) and his BBC team in the mid-70s, the goal for the LS3/5 was to produce what was essentially a portable, console top monitor offering reasonable dynamic range with an emphasis on vocal neutrality. Unfortunately, once the design was finalized and orders placed for the second batch, the drivers had changed slightly, and the speaker had to be adjusted accordingly. Hence, the LS3/5a was born. But Graham has reproduced the early LS3/5, offering the increased extension and dynamic range of the original, non-A version.

Comparing it to a few early LS3/5a examples, thanks to Kurt Doslu at Echo Audio, it's easy to see that the contemporary version is a winner. While I haven't heard the original BBC 001/002 pair that Ken Kessler discusses in his comparison from 2005, I had held the original prototypes when on a tour of the now demoed Kingswood Warren BBC facility, as well as being able to pour over some of the research that led to its final design. A tremendous amount of work went into bringing this diminutive and precise monitor to life.



**The little speaker that can**

To get the most out of the LS3/5, you need to play to its strengths. First, the better quality of the electronics driving them, the better the sonic result. This is a high quality, high-resolution speaker. Faithful to the heritage of the original, the Graham speaker is assembled with extreme care and attention to detail. Don't let the small size fool you.

Small it is. Barely a foot tall, a little under seven inches wide and just a bit more than 7 inches deep, this is the speaker that defined "mini-monitor." Sporting a 4.3-inch woofer and .73-inch dome tweeter

in a tight configuration, fans of the speaker will immediately notice the difference in construction from the originals. Where the front panel on original LS3/5as are blackish with a big felt square surround around the tweeter, today's Chartwell looks more like current Harbeth designs with front and rear panels that screw in. However, they keep to the BBC standard (and these are fully licensed BBC editions) of the thin wall cabinet for sound that is faithful to the original.

Out of respect, we did not push the Rogers 15 ohm LS3/5as

on loan from Echo, because the original tweeters are now unobtainable and this pair had a \$2,400 price tag. Cranking them would be disrespectful.

The horns at the beginning of Thomas Dolby's "Dissidents," from *The Flat Earth* are just sublime, the way they float, gently off to the left of the soundstage, as the typewriter bell, pops in from time to time. Where the original is slightly rolled off and soft, the Chartwells have all the allure of the originals, yet both ends of the frequency spectrum are better resolved and extended. *(continued)*



A similar result is achieved with long-time favorite *The K&D Sessions*. While there are not a lot of acoustic references to check for tonal correctness, this Dub classic paints a large acoustic space, and the LS3/5s deliver a surprising amount of LF energy as well.

### Desktop

As hinted at earlier in this review, the Chartwell LS3/5s are beyond holographic in tight quarters on a desktop. If you can strike the perfect balance between room and desk gain, the amount of bass will fool you. A high-quality amplifier goes a long way at bringing more bass to the mix as well. Jacking the new iMac Retina through the USB port on the Simaudio NEO Ace delivers incredible results, and its high-current solid state amplifier section takes control of the Chartwell woofers with authority. It feels like I've taken my Quad ESLs and shrunk them down to desk size and added more dynamic punch.

Listening to David Grisman's *Hot Dawg* is an otherworldly experience, with texture and nuance that you don't always get in \$50k/pair speakers. Upgrading the system from the already excellent Ace to my reference Robert Koda K-10 preamplifier and the Nagra 300 power amplifier cabled with Cardas Clear, the sound blasts off to another galaxy entirely.

While horribly counterintuitive using a \$3,000 pair of speakers with nearly \$50,000 worth of



ancillaries might seem a little wacky, but it proves one thing: the amount of music these speakers reveal is nothing short of amazing.

### Small room

Using the Graham LS3s nearfield in a small room is equally breathtaking. Placed well out in the middle of a 10 x 12-foot room in a tight equilateral triangle with the listening chair is only slightly less intoxicating from a depth perspective than it was in the desktop system. Now with walls about three feet from the speaker edges, left to right imaging becomes wider, along with the front to back. While the sound field created is slightly more diffuse, it is considerably bigger.

Placed solidly on a pair of filled Sound Anchor stands, coupled with a bit of blu-tack, bass response remains charming in this small room. The layered vocals in Aimee Mann's *Batchelor no.2*, combined with the rest of the instruments in the mix is so precise, I feel as if I'm sitting at a recording console. So I guess the BBC engineers were pretty clever after all. On the same note, swapping speaker cables between Cardas, Nordost, Tellurium-Q and a few others instantly reveals the character of each, making the LS3/5 a contemporary tool for anyone trying to get a read on how a particular component or cable changes the sonic picture of their system. (continued)





*“In the end, everything is subjective, but in my humble opinion there is no better brand out there for innovative design, military spec like build quality and outstanding sound performance. In this case, if you also consider the astonishing value realized when compared to the best, we have something very very special.”*

Robert S. Youman

INT-60 Review  
Positive-Feedback Issue 79

Pass Laboratories  
13395 New Airport Rd. Ste G., Auburn, CA 95602  
(530) 878-5350 - [www.passlabs.com](http://www.passlabs.com)

**Possible heresy**

While some LS3/5 owners might object to the idea of adding a subwoofer to these miniature marvels, I can understand in the context of a pair of vintage originals – they don’t have nearly the amount of dynamic oomph of the Grammys. Should you think about going down this path, the smallest sub you can find, carefully integrated into the sound will surprise you. I used an older 8" REL and the full system was spectacular.

At moderate volume, the amount of low end this adds to popular and rock recordings will probably outweigh whatever issues you might have about subwoofers. As with the amplification and cables, this isn’t about size; it’s about quality.

**In the end**

Whether you use the LS3/5s as intended (without a sub) or take the plunge in a small room or desktop system, I suspect that they will be the start of a very long musical love affair. Few speakers match the sheer musicality that these speakers offer. Much like the Porsche 911 or the Eames Lounge Chair, a product with this kind of longevity is indeed special.

Regardless of where you are on your audio journey, even if you don’t plan on buying a pair of these, I recommend giving them a listen. The LS3/5 is a big part of audio history. And they just might reel you in... ●



**Graham Chartwell LS3/5**  
MSRP: \$3,200/pair

**MANUFACTURER**  
Graham Audio USA

**CONTACT**  
[www.grahamaudiousa.com/l335/](http://www.grahamaudiousa.com/l335/)

**PERIPHERALS**  
**Analog source**  
Technics SL-1200G/Gold Note Machiavelli

**Phonostage**  
Audio Research PH9

**Preamplifier**  
Audio Research LS-28

**Power amplifier**  
Audio Research VT80, Nagra 300i, PrimaLuna DiaLogue HP

**Cable** Cardas Clear

**Power** Equi=Tech 1800