

ANDREW QUINT

Nothing But the Truth

MOST card-carrying audiophiles understand the BBC developed the LS3/5A loudspeaker in the early 1970s and, early on, licensed the design to several manufacturers. What they may not be aware of is that, British engineers being British, the nomenclature for BBC-designed equipment was anything but arbitrary. In the case of the iconic LS3/5A near-field monitor, “LS” stands for “loudspeaker” and the “3” that follows indicates that the transducer was for “outside” use, a non-critical application designated as Grade I by the Beeb. They were intended for monitoring a non-studio performance from a broadcast van or some other location where listening with headphones might not be ideal. The “5” after the slash is the model number and the “A” indicates the one and only revision this long-lived design has ever had. Take ten minutes at a holiday party to explain the code to a stranger who didn’t ask. It can be pretty much guaranteed that you won’t be invited back to that party next year.

This information isn’t especially hard to come by, but it was new to me when explained by Andy Whittle, for the past four years the head design consultant at Rogers Audio, historically the most prolific licensee of BBC loudspeakers. Whittle had worked at Rogers as technical director in the early 1990s. When, under new ownership, manufacturing relocated to Asia, Whittle moved on, most recently to a nearly 13-year stint at Audio Note, UK. After the production of Rogers speakers overseas petered out, Andy Whittle was recruited to re-introduce the BBC designs, and with the stipulation that the loudspeakers would again be manufactured in Great Britain, he agreed. For several years, Rogers has been building Classic and Classic Special Edition versions of both the LS3/5A and the larger LS5/9 loudspeakers. Priced at \$7495, the SE version of the latter, is the subject of this review. (The standard Classic is a thousand bucks less.) An updated version of the active LS5/8 is also in the works.

The LS5 designation indicates that the BBC considers the speaker suitable for Grade II applications, such as determining microphone placement and balances; the LS5/9 model was

introduced in 1983. While the LS3/5A is a sealed-box design with acknowledged low-frequency and loudness compromises, the two-way LS5/9 Classic and Classic SE are bass-reflex loudspeakers with a front-facing port. The speakers will not be winning any international design awards; they won’t be mistaken for a product from Estelon or Sonus faber. But the “fit ’n’ finish” (an endearingly quaint term favored by some audio writers) is top-notch. The cabinet is meticulously fabricated from pieces of 9mm Russian birch plywood, the standard veneer finishes being olive and amazique—that last one a beautiful African hardwood. The inner walls of the enclosure are damped with bituminous damping panels. The grille fabric is black Tygan, a heavy-weight woven material used largely for audio products that further adds to the utilitarian appearance of the speakers. These loudspeakers are designed to be played with the grilles in place, but tugging firmly on rather indiscreet fabric handles will remove them if you’d care to experiment. Around back, the only thing to see, other than a metal plate identifying the product and providing the serial number, is a pair of 4mm silver-plated receptacles that accept banana plugs—your only option when it comes to speaker-cable connection. “We tend to shy away from big, chunky terminals made from pot metal as they don’t sound any good,” Andy Whittle explained matter-of-factly during an email exchange.

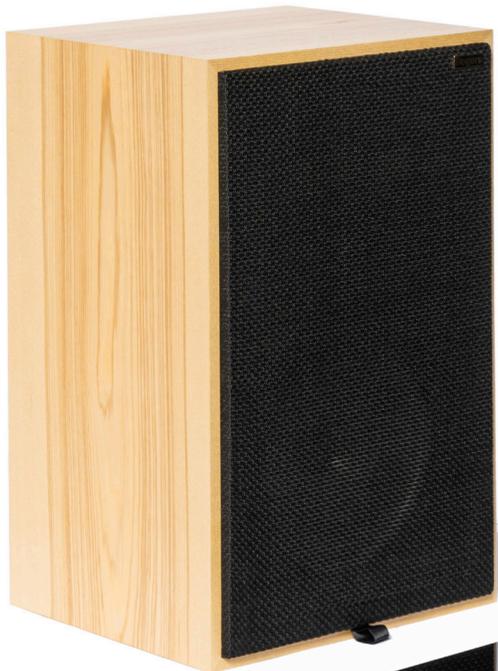
With the grille removed, you’re looking at what is probably the most important upgrade implemented in the LS5/9 Classic SE, as compared to the LS5/9 Classic. That’s the front baffle, which in the SE is made from Panzerholtz, also known as tankwood, as in “built like a...” Panzerholtz is a composite of hardwood and a phenolic resin that can be used as a metal substitute. It offers some definite advantages over metal materials, both in its electroacoustic behavior—there’s less potential for hysteresis—and its mechanical properties, which are also leveraged by

Rogers with the Panzerholtz stands available for both the LS3 and LS5 models. Panzerholtz is notoriously difficult to work with, which helps explain the surprisingly high price of the stands, \$2195 for those made for the LS5/9 models—nearly 30% the price of the loudspeaker itself.

So long as we have the grille off, note the front-firing port in the baffle’s upper left corner and the two drivers themselves. The tweeter is a Rogers-modified version of a 34mm Audex dome that incorporates a phase-correction plate to provide more even dispersion (in a studio setting, LS3 and LS5 speakers were typically placed

ROGERS LS5/9 CLASSIC SE

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In general, if part of the pleasure you derive from listening to recorded music comes from understanding how a song has been realized in the studio, how it's been shaped into something of lasting value, the Rogers speakers could be just what you're after. I really don't especially *like* mainstream country music but somehow found myself listening all the way through Brandy Clark's *12 Stories*, unexpectedly captivated by the totally predictable narrative and musical tropes. This could have been because the Classic SEs, while never "analytical," presented the singer's heartfelt delivery and the every-note-in-place support from her accompanying players with a sense of soul-satisfying completeness. We're not being honest with ourselves as audiophiles if we can't own up to the truth—that the ability of our gear to effectively deliver the engineering values of a good recording can sometimes eclipse the importance of musical substance.

firing directly forward). The original design of the LS5/9 woofer was a joint effort of Rogers and the BBC. "What is special about it is the cone profile, developed by the BBC, that uses a PVC material for the surround," Whittle told me. "The PVC gives the correct termination for the polypropylene cone, vital for natural vocal/midband performance. Practically all woofers these days use rubber or foam surrounds which don't terminate correctly." Whittle himself reverse-engineered the woofer from the original; a third-party manufacturer produces the drivers for Rogers.

One last element visible on the front baffle is a vertically oriented tag strip that, in the original studio application, allowed for adjusting tweeter sensitivity. In this version, there's no user-adjustability, so that precise pair-matching is maintained. Both LS5/9 Classic models employ a third-order crossover for woofer and tweeter, with the handoff centered at 3kHz. The network for the Classic SE version represents an upgrade over the Classic's, with a wax-dipped, iron-dust-core inductor.

With the two speakers set up to form a nine-foot-per-side equilateral triangle with the listening position in my 225 square foot room, I was ready to rock 'n' roll. And rock 'n' roll I did.

During the six weeks the Rogers LS5/9 Classic SEs were the only loudspeakers I listened to in my system, the Tom Petty documentary *Sometime, You Feel Free* was released for streaming on YouTube after a brief theatrical run. The film, which utilizes recently discovered, archival, 16mm footage shot during the creation of Petty's highly regarded 1994 *Wildflowers* album, is a poignant tribute to the great singer/songwriter/guitarist who died in 2017. The soundtrack naturally includes lots of Petty and his musical collaborators playing in a recording studio. Via the Rogers loudspeakers, the unadorned acuity of this artist's musical and production style comes through clearly. No surprise here: When heard through the kind of speakers that have served engineers and artists so well for so many years, the sonic character of a movie about the making of a great pop record is bound to register as authentic.

My more usual reference selections—orchestral recordings with an especially rich tonal palette, such as the Haitink/Concertgebouw performance of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 15 on the RCO Live label—were reproduced in their full glory. The entire point of *Tone Poems*, the 1994 collaboration of Tony Rice and David Grisman playing 17 duets on 17 different pairs of vintage guitars and mandolins, is that a receptive listener can learn to distinguish among the instruments. The LS5/9 Classic SE facilitated this quite well. Perhaps most critically, reproduction of the human voice across the board—individual singers, small groups, small choruses, large choruses—was exceptional. For *1865: Songs of Hope and Home for the American Civil War*, Anonymous 4 was joined by multi-instrumentalist Bruce Molsky, who also episodically contributed his bass voice as a foundation for the hymn-like arrangements. The album's first track, "Weeping, Sad and Lonely" is typical, composed of four verses and four iterations of the chorus. The melody is unchanging, but the four women (plus Molsky) keep things interesting by varying the harmonization and registration. The Rogers speakers reveal all the

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subtle changes in blend and density as clearly as I've ever heard.

So long as your demands as a listener are reasonable—no railroad trains or lightning strikes, please—dynamic musical sounds possess an immediacy reminiscent of the real thing. Well-recorded electric bass plus kick drum, as with Kevyn Lettau's *Songs of the Police*, has gratifying punch, if not the gut-wrenching impact you'd get standing 30 yards away from the stage at an outdoor concert. Piano music of all sorts fares quite well. With exceptional recordings like "Professor" Keith Johnson's *Nojima Plays Liszt*, the most thunderous passages are rendered with authority and, when the soloist is playing quietly, nuances of touch are exquisitely resolved. Extroverted music for *two* pianos—Christian Ivaldi and Noel Lee performing Darius Milhaud's *Scaramouche*, for instance—is reproduced by the Classic SEs with complete intelligibility.

The Rogers LS5/9 Classic SE presents detailed spatial information when it's on the recording. With one favorite example, Paavo Järvi's reading

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of *L'histoire du soldat* for PentaTone, each member of the septet occupies his or her own specific real estate on the capacious stage of the Großer Sendesaal in Stuttgart; yet, they are clearly playing together in real time, breathing the same air of a large room. The scaling of the seven disparately sized instruments is entirely believable. With the RCO Live Shostakovich symphony recording noted above, the continuity of the soundstage from one side to the other is as good as I've experienced, and depth was also good.

Viscerally experienced bass is not to be expected from relatively small boxes, and miracles do not occur with these Rogers stand-mounts. In a medium-sized room, at sensible playback levels, low-frequency information of consequence rarely seems to be missing. You can, of course, try adding a subwoofer, which I did (a Magico S-Sub), but this must be undertaken with care. With popular music and jazz, where "bass" usually means an electric bass or acoustic double bass, complementing low frequencies with a subwoofer does risk creating a jukebox-at-the-corner-bar sort of bass that isn't terribly appealing. Often, I left the sub off with these musical genres. On the other hand, with classical music, the subwoofer was very helpful in restoring orchestral weight and providing more of a sense of a large venue. If the musical program is orchestral "power music," full-bore Romantic organ repertoire, or grand opera, dialing in a good sub could be a very worthwhile undertaking.

A word regarding amplification. For most of my listening, I employed a pair of Pass XA 60.8 monoblocks, the amps I know best, and certainly got good results. But I felt I should also attempt powering the Classic SEs with electronics that were more suitably priced for use with \$7500-per-pair loudspeakers and borrowed a Bel Canto REF 501S, a Class D design you can carry with one hand that retails for \$2200. Honestly, I expected to leave the REF 501S in the system for a day or two, mostly so that I could say I'd tried it. Well, forget all your preconceptions about Class D amplification: The LS5/9 Classic SE's performance was so impressive with the REF 501S—the bass may have been better than what I realized using the 60.8s—that I listened quite happily to the Rogers/Bel Canto combination for two solid weeks before returning to my reference amplifiers. And then, blown away as I was by the little REF 501S's performance, I recognized the Pass's superiority when it comes to musical detail, and its ease of spatial presentation. The point is this: The Classic SEs *will* sing when driven by a carefully chosen amplifier that doesn't cost twice as much as the speakers do. But they will reward an advance in the quality of the power sent their way, should that occur.

Be advised. If your history as an audiophile has taken you down a whack-a-mole path of constantly compensating for colorations of your electronics or cabling, the Rogers LS5/9 Classic SE's won't save you; in fact, they could make things worse. In terms of the timbral character of voices and instruments, these speakers will only dutifully report on what's upstream in the audio chain. They can't fix anything.

There's an old saw advising that any deficiency of a piece of audio gear should be subtractive in nature—something that isn't there—as opposed to an obvious distortion or coloration that you can't get rid of. It's sound advice. In the U.S. and throughout much of the rest of the world, witnesses testifying in court are required to swear that what they'll say is "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." The audio universe is not a court of law, and it's only that third descriptor that holds for the Rogers LS5/9 Classic SE loudspeakers. If you really need bass that will loosen your fillings and undistorted volume levels that will pin your ears back, you may need to consider spending your \$7500 elsewhere. But you might come to regret that decision. These loudspeakers deliver the essential character of a recording honestly, without editorializing, as well as some other far more expensive transducers. Give the Rogers LS5/9 Classic SE a good long listen. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

TYPE: Stand-mounted, two-way, bass-reflex loudspeaker

DRIVER COMPLEMENT: Audax 1.3" dome tweeter, Rogers 8.3" midrange/woofer

IMPEDANCE: 8 ohms

SENSITIVITY: 87dB

DIMENSIONS: 10.8" x 18.1" x 11.2"

WEIGHT: 26.5 lbs.

PRICE: \$7495

LS5 CLASSIC LOUDSPEAKER STANDS

PRICE: \$2195

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