



Rogers LS3/5A Classic 15 Ohm

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It's nearly fifty years since the first embryo of what's become one of the most talked-about audio products, and still new editions of the infamous BBC mini monitor are being born. Has there been another audio component to have provoked so much emotive comment, or given rise to so many myths and misunderstandings as the LS3/5A loudspeaker? So I asked in my March 1990 feature 'The Little Legend' for Hi-Fi News magazine.

Referred to as a shoebox-sized monitor, the BBC's baby speaker was never intended to be, of course. It started life as simply an eighth-scale model, built by the Corporation's audio boffins at its Surrey research establishment. These acoustic scaling tests led to the rapid development at Kingswood Warren (inside a week, by all accounts) of the LS3/5 which met an immediate requirement for programme monitoring in confined spaces, notably within outside broadcast (OB) locations. The '3' in the model name refers to OB use. Studio-grade speakers sported a '5', as in the two-way LS5/8 and smaller LS5/9.

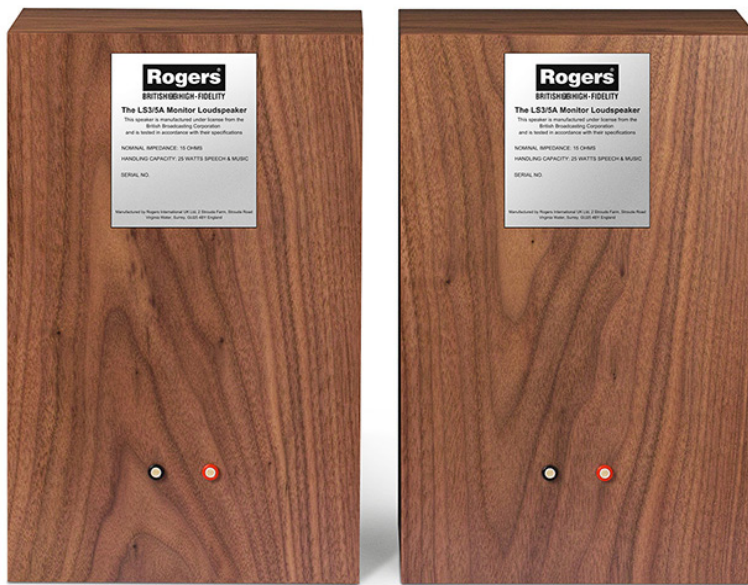
The national broadcaster soon realised that it did not have the manufacturing capacity to build all the mini speakers it needed and offered companies the opportunity to make them under licence. One of the first to respond, in 1974, was Rogers, a firm created by Jim Rogers. I owned a pair of his circular, wall-mounted speakers in my youth – much to the chagrin of my parents (whose bedroom was the other side of the wall) and, I suspect, to our neighbours although they never complained; they were more concerned by my sizeable antenna array atop a 40-foot rotatable mast planted in our garden.

To cut a long story short, since this is supposed to be a review and not another history of the speaker's pedigree, a /A variant had to be created when the characteristics of the KEF-made B110 mid/bass unit changed so as to alter the speaker's response and the ubiquitous model was created complete with dual-layer bitumen pads as damping panels on the inside of the cabinet, and a PVC edging to decouple the baffle among other modifications such as the trademark thick felt strip around the tweeter. There was a re-assessment in 1987 and the original 15 Ohm specification was updated, with future units created as 11 Ohm but Rogers has chosen to stick with the 15 Ohm impedance that is favoured by connoisseurs of this evergreen design.

Rogers is building this speaker at its facility in Virginia Water, Surrey using a 12mm birch ply cabinet sourced from Southend. Former Rogers Technical Director (1992 – 98) Andy Whittle has returned to his roots and heads up the engineering department where they are been building other BBC designs as well as the E20a/ii integrated valve amplifier.

Sound quality

I first encountered the LS3/5A while working at my local BBC radio station in the school holidays of 1978. Admiration for what this little box, atop the mixing console, could achieve made me reappraise my own audio system at home. The sound from the '5A seemed so close to what the presenter sounded like 'in the flesh' when I went into the studio with record requests or cups of tea. Other loudspeakers in use at the station were enormous by comparison, like pieces of furniture.



When I began working at Broadcasting House in 1984 I enjoyed using the same speaker in front of my mixing desk and snapped at the chance to purchase one of the staff kits which were made available for considerably less than a completed speaker. I grew to love the trademark 100Hz boost and that 1kHz lift, although it was less prominent than is the case in the original form re-created here.

Unpacking the Rogers' speakers and handling the LS3/5A brought back evocative memories of those times, and soon I was enjoying everything that these magical little boxes can produce. Connected to my trusty Hegel H190, the first notes to emanate were of Mozart's Laudate Dominus, courtesy of Radio Three via satellite. The vocals came through clearly and cleanly in a most natural way, without chestiness or nasality, as I recalled the design's raison



d'être: that sublime midrange, the very thing that made it such an ideal studio speaker. Initial positioning proved slightly more complex than the straight-out-of-the-box installation that I had memories of. Eschewing the spikes supplied with the matching stands, and applying some Blu tack between cabinet and top-plate improved matters considerably. Knowing the limited bass response of the design (a -3dB point of just 70Hz) I placed the speakers rather closer to the rear wall than was ideal; the result was some phasiness (due largely, I think, to my oversized TV monitor between them) and a resulting loss in the presence region which I wasn't expecting given that it is this speaker's hallmark.

In a more free-space setting and the Rogers units began to sing as I recalled they could. Just to test the LF response, it was a quick re-tune to both Radio One and Radio One Extra to sample some synthetic music in the form of Aaliyah's *More Than a Woman*, Protoje's *Switch It Up*, and Block Boy from Pa Salieu. Goodness, there is bass available from the '3/5A and, even if not in huge dollops, in delightful quality, as my known room resonance around 53Hz revealed all too clearly. And these little boxes were more than okay when it came to pace and timing as well, my foot tapping involuntarily to the basslines of tunes I had not heard before. The fact that the entire frequency response from about 600Hz up to 19kHz deviates by only +/- 3dB, before dropping off sharply, and that those highly-damped thin-wall cabinets push the resonances out of the critical audio band, means that we can enjoy a beautifully smooth sound rather than a loudspeaker which is trying to impose its own character on the sound.

Back to my usual genre, and Radio Three was now in the middle of a Met recording of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* from 1961, I was in my element as the delights of the gypsy's Anvil Chorus filled the room. The soundstage was wide, well beyond the confines of the cabinets, with plenty of depth and adequate height as well to fully enjoy the cantabile and cabaletta arias.



The LS3/5A's pronounced peak at around 1.2kHz came into its own here as the vocals were projected well into the room with the rest of the performers placed behind in a most believable way. After a very short while I became accustomed to that pronounced HF response which did reveal some sibilance on poorly recorded material that other speakers would merely mask with their lacklustre treble response. This may be an ageing design but it has stood the test of time remarkably well.

After dinner I was treated to piano, courtesy of Mitsuko Uchida and Schubert's expansive *Sonata in G (D894)* from an albeit empty Wigmore Hall in these pandemic stricken times. The homely charm of the composer's andante was captured vividly while the rondo finale simply sparkled with due freshness. I had forgotten how remarkably well the BBC design could render piano, and to hear this maestro at the keys was a joy to behold. I became immersed in the performance, closed my eyes and was transported to the venue. What more can we ask of a loudspeaker?

The following day it was the turn of music streamed, via the Hegel, from my own collection. Beginning with Schubert's dramatic and searching *Piano Trio No.2 in E-Flat Major (D929)* on Erato from 2007, the immense HF detail that the album reveals came through with clarity and conviction via the Rogers speakers with the BBC design's [slightly] rising treble response adding weight and sparkle to the performance. I had, until this point, felt that the speakers preferred AAD and ADD recording to anything digitally originated, but further listening to contemporary recordings proved me wrong. A change of emphasis and era, allowed me to

wallow in Tony Christie's upbeat Avenues and Alleyways, this track had both feet tapping away, demonstrating that these little two-ways can certainly keep up with the pace.

It was a sad day when Andy Whittle came to take the speakers away. He and I had first met when he originally joined the firm after the sad passing of their previous designer Richard Ross. To want to retain a review product probably says more about it than mere description of how it sounds. Needless to say, I believe that Rogers have managed to re-create the old masterpiece with great accomplishment and it stands up well in this digital era.

Conclusion

Here is the chance to buy into, literally, a piece of audio history and with the added authenticity of being badged by one of the original LS3/5A licensees. Yes, loudspeaker development has moved on since these were originally designed, but that is to miss the point and miss it entirely. There is something very special about what the LS3/5A can and does achieve, and Rogers has (once again) managed to capture this.



One can question the price since this reincarnation is now in a fiercely competitive area of the market. It has to be remembered that the BBC imposes a 10 per cent levy on the ex-factory price of each and every pair, a hike on the previous percentage as our national broadcaster becomes much more commercial in its old age. Those delightful cabinets are crafted in Essex, rather than being some cheap knock-off import. They are extremely complex in their construction as well. The drive units have had to be specially re-tooled, since KEF long ceased making, or wanting to make the B110 or T27 now that it is part of an international conglomerate. Rather than a minimalist crossover network, the circuit board inside these beauties is extremely complex and features three coils (audio transformers) and a myriad host of inductors, capacitors and resistors, as per the original specification. That authentic Tygan grille is also not the easiest to source. All this costs money.

What we have here is a gem from the brand which originally bought into the concept. Top marks to Andy and all at Rogers for taking on this project and delighting us with the results.