



LAB REPORT

- ▶ Possibly as a result of the 'lively' centre cap fitted to both Castle's carbon-fibre drivers, the speaker has a slightly exaggerated midrange output between 750Hz-2kHz, followed by a dip till the 28mm soft dome tweeter gets into its stride above 3kHz or so.
- ▶ At 88.2dB, the forward sensitivity of the Howard is close enough to its 88.5dB specification, but this increases to around 90dB once the upward-firing driver is taken into account.
- ▶ Offset by 90 degrees, the upward-firing bass unit has a 'peakier' roll-off, which can have the effect of adding an extra subjective 'wack' to the bass.
- ▶ This model borrows its twin-pipe quarterwave bass loading from the Harlech, though the close coupling of the pedestal serves to short much of its 35-85Hz output. Bass distortion, however, is far lower at around 0.5-0.6%.
- ▶ With a 12ohm average impedance and an 'easy' 5.9ohm minimum, the Howard S3 is a doddle to drive.

CASTLE HOWARD S3 £1,350

Castle Acoustics 01756 795333 www.castleacoustics.co.uk

Castle's kingly floorstander delivers a spacious musical presence

Best known for its high class real wood veneers, Castle also uniquely makes loudspeakers with quarter-wave-loaded main drivers, operating in pairs pointing upwards as well as forwards to give a semi-omnidirectional effect.

That's the basic recipe behind this £1,350 Howard S3, big brother to the Harlechs which have been carrying *Choice's* Best Buy accolade for the past five or more years. Indeed, put the designs in separate rooms and the only way you'd tell them apart would be to use a tape measure. In reality the Howard stands 5cm taller, is 1cm wider and weighs an extra 3.5kg over its smaller brother. It also uses slightly larger diameter main drivers, and all this puts a serious extra chunk of extra cash on the price tag.

The enclosure is attractively slim, with radiused edges all round, plus a separate veneered plinth which ensures a very stable spike footprint. The main drivers are classy affairs, with 160mm (6.5-inch) cast alloy frames, and carbon-fibre cones 120mm in diameter. One is

VERDICT	
SOUND	★★★★☆
EASE OF DRIVE	★★★★☆
BUILD	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★☆
<small>The Howard costs £350/pair more than the Harlech, which is difficult to justify on performance grounds. That said, it looks gorgeous, and is a solid all round performer too, with uniquely spacious imaging.</small>	
CHECKLIST	
FLOORSTANDER?	✓
CLOSE TO WALL?	✗
WIDTH	21cm
HEIGHT	99cm
DEPTH	32cm
BI-WIRABLE?	✓

placed conventionally on the front of the speaker, the other fitted into the top surface, and both are 'quarter-wave' loaded – a technique with some similarities to horn loading – by two pipes which exit in a precise slot created between enclosure and plinth. Said plinth is deep, and fitted with chunky 8mm spikes, ensuring fine mechanical stability. High class WBT terminals are fitted, two pairs permitting bi-wire/-amp operation.

The enclosures are made as mirror-image pairs with the 28mm dome tweeter offset from the centre line and mounted beneath the front main driver. The in-room measurements are rather uneven through the bass region, and would seem to favour free-space siting.

PERFORMANCE

Inevitably, the Howard's 'semi-omni' main driver disposition has considerable sonic implications, especially in its impact upon the imaging. The additional upward-facing driver has the effect of diluting the focus precision to a significant degree – but that isn't

necessarily bad news for the listener.

Precise stereo is good at creating a believable 'window' onto the recording session, but the Howard's main strength comes in its superior ability to generate an illusion that the musicians are actually there in the room, delivering a spaciousness and solidity that's its own reward.

The tonal balance is very satisfactory, with a slight forwardness that brings a pleasing openness and projection to voices, with no obvious attendant harshness and only modest coloration. And while I had noted some hardness and aggressive tendencies with the Harlech S2, I wouldn't apply such criticisms to the Howard S3.

However, there is a slight 'thickening' of textures in the upper bass/lower midrange, and the bass proper could maybe go deeper, and with greater authority. But this speaker has a natural agility and freedom from overhang through the bass region that's often more musically informative than the more resonant bass character often encountered elsewhere. **C**