

CASTLE HARLECH S2

SOUND ★★★★★

VALUE ★★★★★

£1,000.00

CONTACT 01756 795333

www.castleacoustics.co.uk

GUARANTEE 5 years

The fact that our Best Buy review of the original Harlech dates back to 1996 is testament to the success of this highly unorthodox loudspeaker. This S2 version reflects Castle's transition to carbon-fibre matrix main driver cones and a change in tweeter, but in nearly every other respect the S2 Harlech looks remarkably similar to its predecessor.

Castle is well known for producing high quality real wood finished speakers at very realistic prices, and while the Harlech S2 now costs £1,000 (against £800 in 1996), it still looks very good value in the test group context. (Our samples actually came in yew, which carries a £200 premium.)

The enclosure is attractively slim with radiused edges all round, plus a separate veneered plinth which ensures a very stable spike footprint. Technically speaking the Harlech S2 is very different from the competition, both in the bass loading technique, and also in the disposition of the two main drivers.

“EXCEPTIONALLY AGILE AND INFORMATIVE, THE HARLECH DEVELOPS GENUINE DYNAMIC TENSION AND GOOD GRIP.”



Said drivers are small but classy affairs, with 5.25-inch cast frames and the aforementioned carbon-fibre cones, 100mm in diameter. One is placed conventionally on the front of the speaker, while other is fitted into the top surface, pointing upwards, and both are 'quarter-wave' loaded, a technique with some similarities to horn loading. The in-room measurements looked very strange, checks revealing that Castle had managed to wire one of our pair out of phase – a most regrettable QC lapse. That rectified, free-space siting is indicated, though the bass is a little dry overall.

SOUND QUALITY

Not surprisingly in view of its 'differentness', the S2 drew a mixed response from the panel, strongly favoured by some but much less so by others. The effect of the upward-facing extra main driver is immediately obvious in the way it radiates sound into the room, increasing the reflected/direct sound ratio compared to forward facing drivers, and so adding spaciousness at some expense in stereo focus.

Where one panellist complained of some hardness and forwardness, another praised its natural bass, good timing and the impressive way it communicated the fine detail of guitar playing, for example. Both were correct. The S2 is a little forward and can become hard and aggressive when pushed, or on the wrong material. Voices are a little cold, pinched and nasal, partly because the bass is both lightweight and a little uneven – but it's also exceptionally agile and informative, developing genuine dynamic tension and grip rarely found elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

A worthwhile overall improvement on the original Castle Harlech, the S2 is also a little less forgiving of aggressive programming or ancillaries. It won't therefore suit every taste or system, but it remains a very interesting loudspeaker, that's also solid value for money.



The Harlech features an attractively rounded, slim enclosure, and a very stable footprint.

THE LAB REPORT

I LAST MEASURED THE Harlech five years ago in *HFC* 160 and the intervening period has witnessed a raft of changes. My comments regarding Castle's distributed, quarter-wave port arrangement have been addressed by adding a plinth with a pre-defined gap between the port output and speaker base. This 'slot' is now reliably tuned to a very sharp 73Hz though there are other modes breaking through at 250Hz and 460Hz, coinciding with notches in the nearfield output of the bass driver itself. If this is untidy then

bass distortion has also increased to some 2.2%. On the other hand, sensitivity is improved to 88.9dB on-axis (closer to 90.5dB with the top-mounted driver taken into account) and while there's still a slight dip in the speaker's response from 400Hz-1kHz, the upper midrange and treble look very smooth indeed provided you remain very close to the speaker's principle axis. Phase angles are kept within +/-30 degrees and the impedance an acceptable minimum of 6 Ohm at 270Hz.