

# HOWARD'S

Noel Keywood listens to Castle's latest 'speaker in the Classic series, a revamped version of an old friend.

**T**he arrival of Castle's new Howards in the office was greeted with anticipation by me. The Howard is one of those long standing designs with a set of qualities I like. Each new iteration is not only a welcome chance to reacquaint myself with this entertaining floorstander but also an opportunity to see just how Castle might have moved the game on. Castle are obviously happy with the design too, since it's now up to version three, full name Howard S3.

It was stimulus I needed to spend a few hours sorting out my much loved but slightly feared 300B valve amplifier, because the Howard is something of a 'perfect load' as far as amplifiers are concerned. As such it's a great match for a valve amplifier, but equally perfect for transistor amplifiers too - just one of its strengths. It will get the best from any amplifier and is one of the few loud speakers currently available that can do so. The Howard might not look radical, but underneath its conventional exterior Castle have built a clever and advanced loudspeaker that in the past has delivered fine results. I looked forward to testing this new version.

At 992mm the Howard is tall. Luckily it is narrow at 210mm and not too deep either, at just 320mm. So it doesn't loom large in the room and consumes little real estate. Behind a small front grille lie just two drive units in a normal enough arrangement comprising bass/midrange and tweeter. But there's a grille in the top panel too and here things get interesting. The top unit handles most of the audio range

and fires up at the ceiling. Bouncing sound off the ceiling adds some height to the sound stage, making it seem more expansive and also more solid and plausible, I found. But that's not all. This upward firing unit also drives a long bass line that ports onto the floor beneath the loudspeaker. This novel arrangement is responsible for the Howard's fine bass and excellent load characteristics.

In a nutshell then, the Howard is a high quality two-way, with augmented bass and stereo imaging. It might sound simple but there's a lot of special cabinetwork that you become aware of when unpacking: these 'speakers are heavy, weighing 25.5kgs (56 lbs) apiece. Each cabinet has a large port in its bottom face that exhausts onto a plinth. The plinth must be screwed to the bottom of the loudspeaker spacers holding the two apart by around 4mm to allow the port to 'see' the outside world. Large spikes can be screwed into the base to aid stability.

Two sets of shielded heavy duty terminals cater for bi-wiring. There are no links to allow the use of a single cable. The crossover networks use a couple of very large iron-cored inductors, high quality capacitors glued down and hard wiring. Castle solder all connections, even to the drive units. It's a high quality crossover thankfully not so complex as to be riddled with components. The cabinets are beautifully finished, in keeping with the high overall standard of quality adopted for the Howard, since this is their flagship model in the Classic range.

I measure loudspeakers before listening to them - and measurement



says a lot. Castle tell me their carbon fibre drive units are a new design over which they've spent a lot of time. Working with a soft dome tweeter the new drivers give an exceptionally flat frequency response and doubtless Castle are proud of this. It's an approach fast becoming popular amongst U.K. manufacturers - if they can boast extreme accuracy, why not? My observation on this, drawn from my own experiences designing our kit loudspeakers, is that it gives a glassy bright tonal balance. Orchestral strings are moved forward and given a more prominent role in a performance, with some edginess at times creeping in, probably from a 5kHz peak attributable to the 'whizzer cone' Castle use. However the Howards have real transparency and stage depth. From the Righteous Brothers singing You've Lost that Loving Feeling through to Toni

# END?

Braxton's Spanish Guitar vocalists come over as full in body and healthy in voice. Instruments are layered backward in the mix and choirs fill the room convincingly. The upward firing drivers help embody singers by strengthening central images, whilst also lifting the sound stage. They also fill the room with sound, making the Howards sound equally good whether you're sitting, standing - or even out of the room! Apart from being very insightful and detailed the Howards paint an expansive picture that conveys an impressive sense of scale. This is uncommon and a feature of the 'speaker that sets it apart. From Rock through to Classical these loudspeakers sound nothing other than impressive; there's little like them.

Creating a sense of scale demands good, deep bass too. The Howards have this in plenty. Their quarter wave transmission line gets low and notes step down with real authority. It's always a treat to hear a good, large speaker almost breathe bass into the room, bass so low you feel it gently moving the fabric of your surroundings. Cesar Franck's intriguing Choral No2, played on the organ of the Basilica of Saint Sernin, Toulouse, through these 'speakers had the sort of grandeur that makes this work complete, the organ majestically stepping down to its 16ft pipes which the Howards reproduced as a 32Hz rumble that seeped through the building. Impressive stuff. I knew from measurement though that there was likely to be some box colouration from a broad peak in the output of the upward firing driver and this was so. Modern digital recordings in particular like George Michael's Roxanne from Songs from the Last Century sounded a little box bound. From Eddy Grant's Electric Avenue, spinning at 45rpm, to the very clean, close-miked and powerful digital recording of the Overture of Wagner's Reinzi from Teldec, kick

drum to kettle drum had the Howard sounding a trifle coloured. It can be over excited, Mission's Cyrus 7 solid-state amplifier getting more power out of the low impedance bass section than my valve 300B amplifier producing a fruitier sound as a result. As loudspeaker cabinets get bigger and loading arrangements more complex, colorations like this tend to creep in. It's a small price you pay for the Howard's complexity. Castle have pursued an interesting design aim with the Howard. This is a loudspeaker wrought to present music with a sense of scale; it's not just a bigger box with more drivers,

like so many top of the range models. Using quality components in a beautifully made and finished cabinet, the Howard S3 was better than ever. It remains one of the most accurate, entertaining and revealing of the large loudspeakers. ■ ▲

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## World Verdict

£ ●●●●●  
 Tuneful deep bass, see-through clarity and spacious imaging mark out the Howard S3 as a first class loudspeaker. It produces music on an impressive scale and is hugely entertaining.  
**Measured Performance**  
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