

TRANSLATION OF THE REVIEW AS APPEARED IN SEPTEMBER 2014 ISSUE OF HXOS
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GRAHAM AUDIO LS5/9

CLONING!!

AND YET, THERE ARE STILL MANUFACTURERS WHO ARE AWARDED THE OFFICIAL LICENSE FROM BBC TO BUILD LOUDSPEAKERS THAT ARE IDENTICAL TO THE ORIGINAL MONITOR OF THE GOLDEN AGE. AFTER STIRLING AND THE LS3/5A, BEHOLD GRAHAM WITH THE BIG LS5/9.

The British company Graham Audio is situated at South Devon where it designs and builds the LS5/9, the only modern production monitor of this type that carries the license of BBC with pride. The company is involved in professional sound for over twenty years and the production of genuine copies of the legendary speakers of the BBC school is a relatively recent development. The LS5/9 is only the start.

In the recent Munich High-End Show, Graham Audio presented the bigger model LS5/8 (with a 12 inch woofer) and there will be more models to come. The production of such speakers is no easy task, since the original parts, such as the woofers by Rogers, are no longer produced. Graham Audio took it very seriously and searched high and low in order to succeed with the production, so that the end product could earn the official approval from BBC, which means that these new loudspeakers are sonically exactly the same as their predecessors.

BBC PHILOSOPHY

Every monitor speaker that was used in BBC studios had to satisfy certain specifications in laboratory conditions. The main idea behind the philosophy of such speakers was, above all, the correct reproduction of the midrange, with a full-body sound, revealing details, and a balanced soundstage, without any coloration and artifacts. In other words, the goal was that of high resolution. The frequency response at both ends of the spectrum and the maximal sound pressure (spl) that each model could deliver was of secondary importance. That's why there were the smaller, the medium and the larger monitors with different capabilities in those areas. The LS5/9 does not have the same legendary appeal to music lovers as the LS3/5A had, but in essence is the same concept, only in bigger dimensions. It is a loudspeaker capable of fill a typical living room between 20-30 sq. meters thanks to its good power handling and its ability to energize the listening room with its big 8 inch woofer, accomplishing more than 100db at 2 meters away. Nowadays we find small stand speakers in the market that advertise frequency responses even below 40 hz together with high sensitivity, so, the 50hz@87db offered by the LS5/9 seems to be "light-weighted" but in reality it differs from the logic of just numbers. You see this loudspeaker is designed to perform in free space and the low end extension does not rely on its position in the room, although it could be influenced if the speaker is moved very close to the adjacent walls. Every section of the frequency response of the loudspeaker is calibrated at the fullest in all BBC models, both in level, phase, and in dispersion, so it is very difficult to alter this harmonic completeness. In other words we are talking about speakers that will not surprise the listener negatively and are not relying in some specific brand of speaker cable or accessory to alter their performance and reveal their hidden virtues. The same

applies to the ancillary equipment with any decent solid state power amplifier between 50 to 100 watts to be enough, without the need to spend some thousand Euros to convince the prospective buyer. It could be said that this kind of logic opposes the one that the current high-end scene has us accustomed to, and it matches more the pure era where the BBC monitors dominated as Reference loudspeakers.

UP CLOSE

The Graham LS5/9's build quality is outstandingly good and looks more "real" next to most lifestyle high end speakers of its category. The fit and finish is really flawless and the speaker units convince absolutely of their quality and expected performance. The company was happy to find the famous Audax tweeter still in production with code HD13D34H and its large fabric dome at 34mm diameter, even though it has evolved in some areas from the original one. The metal mesh covering the dome was an addition by BBC and it is constructed to match the original. For the woofer, the company turned to the British company VOLT, and the 8 inch woofer with the polypropylene cone is a new construction with better reliability characteristics, which also respects the original's basic specifications. The procedure of selection and matching of the two drivers is of course exhausting. Micro-differences naturally exist in the new drivers compared to the original ones, so the crossover filter had to undergo some alterations, which were carried out by no other than Derek Hughes (son of Spencer Hughes, the BBC engineer and founder of SPENDOR) who has also helped other British companies that aim at the rescue of the famous monitor's philosophy. Central point in this crossover filter that is realized with its 24 components is the main equalization of the two drivers with the help of an autoformer instead of the usual array of resistors. The filter allows a micro-correction of +/- 1db at tweeter's output level with an external adjustment at the front panel's posts of the speaker, not by the end-user, but only in case of repair such as a damaged tweeter which can be replaced without altering the tonal balance of the speaker. There are two points on the speaker that differentiates it from the original although they are welcomed: firstly the front panel is covered with real wood veneer and it is not painted black as the original. Secondly, the internal cabinet damping material is not bitumen but Rockwool 30mm thick lined with quality clothing. The company reports that this change does not alter the sound but it is preferred since it maintains for longer periods in time the same characteristics of damping.

IMPRESSIONS

I set-up the speakers on massive stands made of oak tree, 60 cm high, away from the walls, slightly toed-in and driven by numerous power amplifiers ranging from 10 watts to 120 watts. The company mentions that the toe-in angle is a matter of taste and depends on the listening area, as is usually the case, and does not encourage placing the speakers near the walls. I would say a distance of some 80 cm to 1 meter is necessary for the LS5/9. The speaker has flawless tonal balance at a very wide sonic window around its main axis. The thin walls made of 9mm birch plywood do not allow their own timbre to snick-in the overall sound, thanks to the damping panels, but allow the deep bass to get free from the cabinet which might be due to the special crossover filter; there is no usual beaming past the middle frequencies, but instead it sounds like an open baffle loudspeaker. No matter how hard I tried I could not detect the slightest coloration, hardening, confusion, compression or any grain in sound. This loudspeaker is really very easy-to-the-ear. It's attack is spot-on, it does not become bright or aggressive, it is not too fast, the voices are full bodied and yet are crystal clear and always comprehensible. Its timbre is always naturally warm and has no harmonic texture of its own; it simply projects the correct timbre of the musical instruments, which is quite rare for a loudspeaker. I tried very hard to find if the 16 Khz upper frequency response misses out any resolution, but in vain! Details are more than enough in all frequency range and I am talking about three-dimensional high definition sound, with full body images right next to the

speakers and not just “thin” and far away cut-out images with an overblown sense of depth that try to pass as delicate projected sound. Although the Graham has a sudden cut-off below 50hz, as all bass-reflex designs have, the low bass has the virtues of a closed box design. There is an exceptional portrayal of each note and its harmonics, and it lacks the over-blown phenomenon around the deep bass with the suck-out response of the mid-bass section, a characteristic that some floorstanding loudspeakers suffer that makes them sound like a bad design of a satellite-subwoofer combination. The dynamics are excellent for normal listening levels, and I never felt any lack of power or body either at the low, middle or high frequencies.

In retrospect, I have sweated a lot in the past just to approach this kind of sound quality with different loudspeakers, amplifiers, cables etc, and now that I have heard how complete an original BBC monitor speaker sounds in controlled environment, I tend to believe that the modern speaker designers are more concerned with the looks and that they leave the job half-finished.

GRAHAM LS5/9

FOR:

- BASS BODY AND DYNAMICS SAME AS THAT OF A LARGER LOUDSPEAKER
- NATURAL TIMBRE, MUSIC FLOWS IN A SEAMLESS AND COHENSIVE STATE-OF-THE-ART WAY
- EXELLENT IMAGING CAPABILITIES WITH PRECISION AND THREE DIMENSIONAL

AGAINST:

- NEEDS SPACE TO SET-UP CORRECTLY

COMMENT:

FANS OF THE BBC SCHOOL WILL REJOICE SINCE GRAHAM IS A 100% PURE LS5/9. THIS SPEAKER CARRIES OUT ITS TASK CORRECTLY, WITHOUT ASKING ITS OWNER TO DO ANY ADJUSTMENTS, AND THE LATER ONLY NEEDS TO PROVIDE SOME SPACE AND SOME QUALITY WATTS TO MAKE IT SHINE.