



BBC too

You know retro is back on trend when Musical Fidelity takes on the hallowed BBC LS3/5A. **David Vivian** judges the result

If you're looking for a classy standmount and happy for your search to be snagged by the current retro trends in hi-fi, perhaps there's never been a better time to consider buying the genuine, copper-bottomed icon sometimes referred to as the best small speaker ever made – the one and (if) only LS3/5A.

Out of the handful of British speaker makers licensed to build the BBC design back in the Seventies has grown more than 40 LS3/5A-badged choices today according to Falcon Acoustics boss Jerry Bloomfield, including Falcon's own highly regarded, BBC-licensed, authentic Gold Badge edition (HFC 470). Not all are so invested in the idea of

absolute verisimilitude to the 1976 original, even if the ambition is to produce a small, near field-optimised loudspeaker with ace midband transparency, tonal precision, vocal purity and soundstage realism.

But whatever the weight of importance given to historically correct driver/cabinet/crossover provenance, it seems there's always room for one more, and this time it's Musical Fidelity, which should have the experience and wherewithal to get it right. Had the once British (but now Austrian-based company owned by Pro-Ject since 2018) not decided to revive its own hall of fame celeb – the seminal Class A A1 integrated amplifier launched in 1985 – the new MF 3/5A might not have happened.

DETAILS

PRODUCT	Musical Fidelity LS3/5A
ORIGIN	Austria/Czech Republic
TYPE	2-way standmount loudspeaker
WEIGHT	4.9kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)	190 x 305 x 165mm
FEATURES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19mm dome tweeter • 110mm mid/bass driver • Claimed sensitivity: 82.5dB/1W/1m (15ohm)
DISTRIBUTOR	Henley Audio Ltd.
WEBSITE	musicalfidelity.com

But since the two made such a lovely couple in their day, Pro-Ject CEO Heinz Lichtenegger felt it only right they should renew their vows.

Why all the fuss over a small, ancient, two-way, sealed box standmount anyway? The LS3/5A was created by the BBC to fulfil a closed space, outside broadcast brief to reproduce the human voice as faithfully as possible. This it did so well, it wasn't long before the audiophile community cottoned on and took the 3/5A to its collective bosom as a standmount deity capable of midband sorcery beyond the reach of others. Yes, the cult status has been sustained over the decades by the myriad examples produced under licence to a (theoretically) baked-in BBC spec, though some have had to use 'close enough' drivers after KEF stopped making the T27 tweeter and B110 mid/bass unit in 1990.

Only Falcon Acoustics, a long-established drive unit specialist founded by Malcolm Jones (who designed, developed and engineered the T27 and B110 when he worked for KEF) can truly claim to get within a gnat's whisker of stone-cold authenticity with its Gold Badge edition by re-manufacturing the

original drivers precisely as they were. The gnat's whisker bit? On the otherwise exact replica of the transformer-style FL6/23 crossover, polypropylene capacitors are used in place of the virtually impossible-to-source polycarbonate type originals. But that's it. As ever, the Falcon's services will be called on during my assessment of the MF's sound quality.

There's little hope of drilling down to crossover component minutiae with Musical Fidelity's 3/5A. We're not in full disclosure territory, here. But this is what MF is prepared to say about its new baby. Contrary to some rumours, it's not assembled in China but a factory in Litovel, Czech Republic, next to one of Pro-Ject's SEV turntable manufacturing plants. No BBC licence either, or branding come to that. MF says it simply adheres to the original LS3/5A spec

The Musical Fidelity has more bass than you'd anticipate from such a bijou box

(BBC R&D design 1976/29), which is not protected by copyright. It all boils down to a nominal impedance of 15ohm, 82.5dB sensitivity, 19mm dome tweeter, 110mm mid/bass driver, a thin-walled (12mm) birch ply cabinet and a claimed frequency response of 80Hz–20kHz +/- 3dB.

As for driver specifics and the all-important origin and grade of birch, all MF will say is that they are carefully sourced from all over the world by speaker designer and LS3/5A expert Joseph Szall. The finished article certainly looks the part, is well finished in a rich Palisander real-wood veneer, but weighs less than the Falcon Gold Badge.

Sound quality

It seems only fair to set the bar with the high-flying Falcon and Michael McDonald's *I Was Made To Love Her*, a track that presents his uniquely soulful yet cuppy vocal, a couple of sassy Stevie Wonder harmonica breaks and a spatially expanded crescent of female backing singers that balloons the soundstage way outside the walls of the room. It's something of a litmus test for what are traditionally held to be the LS3/5A's remarkable tonal and imaging talents and hits exquisite expression with the Gold Badge in play. The front end, here, is a Marantz SA12 SE Signature CD/SACD player which converts any PCM input, CD or streamed, to DSD and a Hegel H120



If you're in the market for a latter day LS3/5A, there are more than a few to choose from. Apart from Falcon Acoustics, add Rogers, Sterling and Grahams Audio among others. All produce designs that stay close to the original BBC recipe. Spendor and Harbeth still have skin in the broader market, too, though their current efforts are more conscious updates of the 3/5A rather than faithful replicas of the Seventies design and, if you're not so much of a purist, are certainly worth giving an audition.



(HFC 460) integrated amplifier. There's a perplexing convention that no two pairs of 'identical' LS3/5A sound the same and it's obvious within seconds of switching to the MF. The presentation is a little softer and darker, giving the impression the tweeter's contribution has been dialled down, though it could be the Falcon allows the T27 tweeter to have a little more say in the tonal character.

This means Stevie's harmonica, while just as fluent and expressive on the MF, lacks some of the Falcon's steely leading-edge bite – which adds to the impression of clarity and presence. That said, the MF clearly has the core LS3/5A genes and the immaculately rendered structure, timing, expansive soundstage and precise imaging are easily identified, albeit in a slightly warmer setting with a small but perceptible drop off in transparency.

It's much the same story with Taj Mahal and Jools Holland whipping up a storm on *Outskirts Of Town* or Bruno Mars dripping with *Finesse*. There's a sense of precision, focus, speed and fine detail resolution portrayed by the Falcon the MF can't match. As for bass, there isn't much, but both pull off the trick – mostly through tunefulness, agility and articulation – of having more than you'd anticipate from such a bijou box. Here, again, the Falcon serves up marginally more grip and texture.

Summing up, I'd say the Falcon Gold Badge is the more revealing speaker – brighter, cleaner and more alert, better able to track qualitative improvements in the front end. The MF, on the other hand, is warmer and more forgiving, perhaps better suited for inclusion in systems with mid-market electronics.

Conclusion

Without hearing Musical Fidelity's LS3/5A hooked up to its re-born Class A A1 amp I can't say, but I'd be surprised if the combination wasn't tonally a tad too cuddly. Even so, here's yet another shade of LS3/5A that preserves the legacy and does things beyond the reach of other small speakers. That can't be bad ●



OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★★	LIKE: The usual fabulous LS3/5A assets with a slightly more forgiving tonal balance
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★	DISLIKE: Some might want more pep
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★	EWE SAY: Maybe not quite the last word in authenticity, but a great performer nonetheless
EASE OF DRIVE	★★★★★	
OVERALL	★★★★★	

